

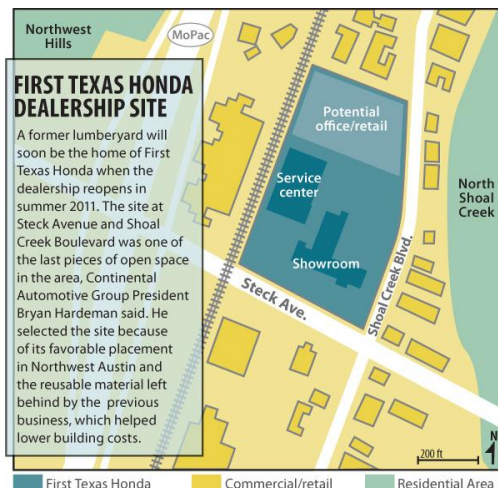
Former lumberyard on Steck Avenue redeveloped

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By Beth Wade Friday, 22 October 2010

First Texas Honda site could have mixed-use development component

NORTHWEST AUSTIN — Next summer Northwest Austin will boast the largest Honda dealership in the nation when First Texas Honda moves into its new home at Steck Avenue and Shoal Creek Boulevard.



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The dealership, which currently sits on a 6.5-acre lot at 1301 W. Koenig Lane, will nearly double in size when it moves to the site of a former lumberyard, said Bryan Hardeman, president of Continental Automotive Group, which owns First Texas Honda. CAG also owns Mercedes-Benz of Austin, Austin Infinity, Austin Subaru, Continental Collision Center and Wholesale Parts Direct.

“Certainly from a fiscal perspective, it’s a positive development to have a useful and productive endeavour on that site rather than have it sit vacant ... and possibly impact other properties around it,” City of Austin Planning and Development Review Assistant Director George Adams said.

First Texas Honda purchased the 18-acre site in Northwest Austin in 2007. Hardeman plans to use about 12 acres for the dealership, including a showroom large enough to display 40 cars and a service area.

“There are about 6 acres on the back [of the property] which we could develop into some kind of retail or office space,” Hardeman said. “We are not really sure exactly what. Right now is probably not the right time to be doing that, but there will come a time.”

The area surrounding the new lot is already developed with professional offices and businesses, including the Lowe's, which opened in 2003. The retail or office portion could add to what is already there or possibly be used for additional space for the dealership if businesses is good, he said.

Construction on the showroom is under way, and construction for the service center is expected to begin in December, with an estimated completion date in summer 2011 for the approximately \$7 million project.

Room to grow

For the past 24 years, the dealership has grown to fill the lot on West Koenig Lane. The location sees approximately 300 service customers a day, which has become increasingly difficult to accommodate in the lot's current space, Hardeman said.

"The biggest problem we face at the site on Koenig Lane is not how big the showroom is. It's not how many new cars you can display," Hardeman said. "Where do you put 300 cars? It's just impossible."

The new lot could allow the business to service about 600 to 800 cars a day, he said.

The relocation could also bring additional jobs. First Texas Honda employs approximately 120 people, but Hardeman said the new location could top out at 160 to 170 employees within 18 to 24 months of opening, creating service technician and sales consultant jobs.

More traffic?

Hardeman said the company completed a traffic impact study in 2007 that showed while the lumber company was in operation there was an average of 1,400 trips per day in and out of the property.

"We think in our world, it will be substantially less than that, and that's even with an increase in our service business and increased car sales," he said. "If I could have 1,400 people coming in and out a day, I think that is more business than I could ever dream possible."

Increased traffic was one concern Hardeman said neighbours had with the project.

"We have been having talks with [Hardeman] about how to encourage his customers to take off driving down US 183 and MoPac when test driving the cars," Upper Shoal Creek resident Mary Arnett said. "He worked with us very well in the past when he built the Infinity dealership [on the east end of Steck Avenue]."

Other concerns included increased lighting and crime, both of which were raised when CAG built Austin Infinity.

"We want to be a good neighbour," he said. "We want them to be our customers rather than be mad at us and go somewhere else."

A greener place

The project will seek a green-rating from the city once it's completed, Hardeman said.

The former lumberyard yielded many reusable and recyclable products once construction began. While renovating the building to be used as the showroom construction crews took the brick walls and, along with concrete once used for lumber bins, ground up the material to be used as ground fill to stabilize the soil for the new 78,000-square-foot service center.

“We put that [crushed material] back in the hole we had dug out. It did two things: It saved us having to buy more material and bring it in, [and] No. 2 it saved us from having to take this material out and dump it somewhere.”

All of the steel and lumber found on the site that wasn't fit for reuse in the project was recycled and a 27,000-square-foot building was left standing on the site for future use.

The project will also include solar panels that could potentially lower the company's energy consumption, Hardeman said.



Courtesy of JB Goodwin