

National Perspectives

## A Slow Taxi to Development



Mark Graham for The New York Times

**THE MUELLER AUSTIN PROJECT** The Robert Mueller airport is being transformed into a town.

By BETH GREENFIELD  
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FOR two decades, a grass-roots effort has been under way in Austin, Tex., to transform the now-shuttered [Robert Mueller](#) Municipal Airport into an urban village.



Residents include Maureen and Jonathan Slocum.

The 711-acre site, three miles from downtown, has many years of construction ahead of it. But the vision is idealistic: environmentally conscientious building practices, a walkable layout, a town center, an elementary school, acres of parkland, and a mix of retail, residential and commercial spaces.

Still, something has been missing from this utopia-in-progress: people. When the very first Mueller Austin residents began arriving in late November — a trickle among construction crews, Dumpsters and churned-up piles of earth — it was a milestone.

“People moving in, that is very significant to me,” said Pam Hefner, a project manager for the city of Austin, who has worked exclusively on the Mueller project for the last seven years. “This year we’ve had multiple businesses move in; we’ve had the children’s hospital open,” she added, referring to the Dell Children’s Medical Center. “But when you have families paying down payments, becoming personally invested in Mueller, that’s meaningful.”

In May 1999, the municipal airport was shuttered because it had become too small to handle Austin’s air traffic. The Austin-Bergstrom International Airport replaced it, opening on the site of a former Air Force base, less than 10 miles away. In the years since, a redevelopment plan for the old site, originally created by a local group of citizens, has morphed into a master plan slowly being put into effect by the Catellus Development Group.

“A lot of things came together this year,” said Gregory J. Weaver, the president of Catellus. The official groundbreaking for the first phase of construction took place last August. Eight of a planned 348 homes have been completed, with 150 under construction. Those homes are expected to be completed by late 2008 or early 2009.

Catellus plans to build 4,000 units in all, a mix of houses, condominiums and apartments. A quarter of all units — both for rent and sale — will be designated as affordable housing. Market-priced homes will range from \$240,000, for a two-bedroom row house, to \$700,000, for a three-story home with more living space and a small yard.

“I liked the fact that, instead of creating more sprawl,” the project is reusing resources, said Dhananjay Joshi, an electrical engineer who moved to Mueller in early December with his wife, Lakshi. He said he also liked the fact that the project is not “displacing thousands of people through gentrification,” and that the site is near to the [University of Texas](#) and downtown Austin.

Mr. Joshi is among a clutch of new residents who are part of Catellus’s “Pioneer Program,” which selected home buyers by lottery. After winning a lottery slot in April, the Joshis, like the other first arrivals, were allowed to choose a house design from one of six builders.

Catellus says it decided to go with several house designs to give buyers plenty of choice in styles and prices. The six home-building companies, contracted by Catellus, are offering a total of 70 home styles, and Catellus plans to bring in as many as six more builders who can present different designs of lofts and condos.

The Joshis chose a three-bedroom single-story house by Meritage Homes, a home builder based in Austin, Tex. (While Mr. Joshi declined to say exactly what he had paid, the Meritage homes start at \$240,000.) Now the couple are among a handful of residents living in what is still a massive construction zone.

“There’s a little bit of a twilight-zone aspect to it,” Mr. Joshi said. By the end of this year, a dozen families will have moved in, and 2008 will bring 300 more.

Until then, Catherine Berry and David Hamburger, who have a year-old son, Milo, and a baby due this month, are taking the temporary inconveniences in stride. “We have three lovely Dumpsters in our backyard,” said Ms. Berry, 39, an actress and music teacher. “It’s all sort of beautiful chaos.”

The pair moved to Austin from [New York City](#) several years ago and settled in the Travis Heights neighborhood. They bought a home in the Mueller development to gain more square footage without increasing their mortgage. They chose a three-bedroom house for \$319,000, also by Meritage Homes. (Similar-size homes in Travis Heights would have cost \$400,000.)

**Courtesy of JB Goodwin**