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Developers, City of Austin eye 6,000 acres of historic ranch for Northwest

"I think, in my entire career, I probably will never present a case this large to you in one single time," neighborhood planning and zoning director Greg Guernsey said in the 2004 city council meeting to annex the Robinson ranch.

What he speaks of is a developer's dream in the middle of north Austin. This vacant piece of land is surrounded to the north by Round Rock's tech industry and to the south by the commercial growth along US 183. For more than 100 years, much of these nearly 7,000 acres of land remained undeveloped under the ownership of the Robinson family. However, as Austin grows around this prime real estate, the Robinsons are under pressure to sell and open the land to development.



Annexation

The City of Austin annexed 6,000 acres of the ranch in 2004, making Austin the largest unincorporated city in land size in Williamson County. The land was previously within Austin's extraterritorial jurisdiction but was not actually within the city limits. In the agreement, the city states its reason for annexation to "establish, define, protect and clarify (their) jurisdiction and regulatory authority over the Robinson ranch." Pursuing annexation early would allow the city to secure all the land before Round Rock annexed it or before it was annexed out in small parcels.

"One unusual thing about this case was that most of the time, when you are doing zoning and annexation like this, you have something in mind that you want to do, and in this case there wasn't," Guernsey said. "We worked with the landowners but there wasn't actually a proposed development or project for the site."

The Robinson ranch is currently under limited-purpose jurisdiction, meaning that it operates under city zoning but does not pay city property tax or receive municipal services such as police and garbage collection. When development begins, the land will undergo full annexation, said Virginia Collier of Austin's platting and zoning commission.

The select few

The Averys, another well-known land-holding family, are famous in Round Rock. The sales of their ranchland have led to the development of Seton Medical Center Williamson, The Round Rock Higher Education Center and subdivisions bearing their name. The Robinson family, however, shy away from publicity and have been reluctant to sell land or even to let it be annexed. The family declined to comment for this story.

In the annexation and development agreement, the Robinsons stated they had no interest in development or changing the land use from its current agricultural and quarrying projects with Austin White Lime Co.

But the Robinson family has not shut their land off from development entirely. The family, led by Spike and son Brad, generally only sell land for projects that are beneficial to the community.

Over the last 20 years, small plots along the edges of the property have been sold for development of Motorola, Abbott Labs, Round Rock ISD schools and Round Rock's first hospital, St. David's Medical Center Round Rock.

In 2003, 320 acres were sold to the Texas Turnpike Authority and Williamson County in order to build Toll 45 and the extension of MoPac. According to the agreement, the Turnpike Authority and the county had to pay more because the road bisected the land and devalued it. The land was sold at \$62,500 per acre for a grand total of more than \$20 million dollars.

Transit-oriented development

The MetroRail stop is one reason why growth in and around Robinson ranch seems inevitable. The Capital Metropolitan Transit Authority has already done environmental impact research on the Robinson ranch for a MetroRail stop, due in 2008, along Howard Lane near McNeil High School and the Robinson-owned Austin White Lime Co. Capital Metro is currently building a bridge for the MetroRail where it crosses the Union Pacific railway and is expected to announce a choice for the rail stop in the coming weeks.

In the city's zoning process for the Robinson ranch it designed three land uses. The first is mixed use combining residential, commercial and industrial uses. The second is zoned open space, which comprises 1,760 acres of the land. The third is the newest form of zoning, transit-oriented development. TOD is a special type of design that is pedestrian oriented and reinforces the use of mass transit.

In 2003, Envision Central Texas, a non-profit group that encourages positive urban growth, targeted the Robinson ranch as a concept site for the future of TOD. What they came up with was McNeil Junction, featuring around seven blocks of high and medium density housing fanning out from a commercial town center that surrounds a possible MetroRail station.

While the McNeil Junction concept ultimately has no power over what will occur within the Robinson ranch, it offers an idea of what the city and developers envision.

The entire piece of land also falls under the category of a planned unit development. This type of development is intended for large, complex areas to help put them under control as a single, continuous unit rather than dividing the project into small individual areas. Most recently, a PUD was used in the case of the former Concordia University site near 34th Street.

Looking forward

The next step in the process is up to the Robinson family. While the land is annexed and zoned, it is not sold, and the Robinsons made it clear in their annexation agreement that they would be able to continue their current operations unhindered.

“One of the things annexation gives the Robinsons is certainty,” Guernsey said. “Certainty is the golden goose of development. If you know what you can do in the future and not worry about codes changing, that brings a lot of comfort.”

Courtesy of JB Goodwin