

Developer's plans for Oak Hill land grow significantly

Retail, apartments, townhouses and a hotel envisioned at U.S. 290 and RM 1826.

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The bland, aging shopping centers at the congested intersection of Texas 71 and U.S. 290 are the closest thing the more than 24,000 residents of the Oak Hill area in far Southwest Austin have to a town center.

Jobs, restaurants, movie theaters and most retail stores are miles away in Austin, Bee Cave and Sunset Valley, while community gathering places such as ball fields and recreational centers are few and far between.

An Austin-based developer could be about to change that, with plans for a mixed-use development less than a mile from the "Y" where Texas 71 and U.S. 290 meet.

Rudy Belton says he wants to build as many as 393,000 square feet of retail space and 450,000 square feet of office space, along with a 200-room hotel and a multiscreen theater on the north side of U.S. 290 at RM 1826. As many as 480 apartments, condominiums and townhomes are also planned, along with a recreational center, community center and outdoor amphitheater.

Belton's plans remain a work in progress, and building it won't be easy.

The 130-acre site lies in the Barton Springs watershed, sensitive land that is the seat of some of Austin's fiercest environmental fights.

The current plan would cover at least 35 percent of the land with material impenetrable to water, 10 percent more than allowed by the Save Our Springs Ordinance, which voters passed in 1992 to strengthen water quality protections over the aquifer that feeds Barton Springs.

Austin City Council members would have to grant a variance by at least a 6-1 vote, and such a variance would likely face opposition.

"We support full compliance with the Save Our Springs Ordinance and oppose any amendment that would increase impervious cover there," said Bill Bunch of the Save Our Springs Alliance.

Some Oak Hill residents say they support Belton's concept but have been slow to endorse the plan, with some citing concerns about traffic, green space and the impact on already struggling commercial buildings nearby.

"As it stands right now, I don't believe that the organizations and neighborhoods support the (plan) in its current form, but I think there is room to work and there could be certain changes and modifications that might lead us to support the project," said Dwain Rogers president of the Oak Hill Association of Neighborhoods, which represents 23 area homeowner associations.

The residents want to include Belton's property in a broader master plan that would include property along U.S. 290 from Texas 71 to RM 1826.

West Park would be the first large mixed-use project for Belton, who most recently has developed single-family subdivisions in Hutto and Leander and apartments in Pflugerville.

He has owned most of the rolling, empty land in Oak Hill since 1996. In 2000 he won approval from the City of Austin to build 900 apartments and 70,000 square feet of retail on the site, but an economic downturn and ongoing uncertainty about future expansion of U.S. 290 put the project on hold.

Meanwhile, residents of Oak Hill undertook an extensive neighborhood planning process.

"There was a growing consensus that we really wanted Oak Hill to be a place where you could live, work, shop and play," Rogers said. "That desire came out of recognition that we are undeserved as far as commercial and retail services go. The idea was to hopefully create a town center at or near the 'Y' that would cluster in a new, urbanist, mixed-use development the commercial, the retail and the office uses that you see in those sorts of projects."

Belton began meeting with residents more than two years ago. "A lot of what's in the plans are in response to interests or requests from neighborhood," Belton said.

Rogers said residents are pleased Belton incorporated some of their ideas and has involved them in the planning.

But some residents say they are concerned about the amount of land Belton wants to cover with material impenetrable to water. If Austin grants the variance to the SOS ordinance, Belton probably would have to buy and preserve open space elsewhere.

Rogers said some residents feel developers in Oak Hill too often buy so-called mitigation land outside Oak Hill and they would like Belton to buy and preserve green space in the community. The developer already plans to keep 52 acres as open space on the site.

Some residents say they want a more robust transit station that would include a park-and-ride and room to accommodate an express bus into Austin as well as buses that circulate in the area.

Others have said they would like to see more residential units in the development to help support both the commercial and retail space in the project and existing shopping in the area. They fear too much new commercial space and too few new consumers in the area could cause more businesses to move from the older centers and give property owners little incentive to keep up their buildings.

Belton said he is working with residents to address their concerns and plans to begin the approval process with Austin soon. But it could be years until anything is built.

"Theoretically it's something that could start within a year, or it could be three to four years," Belton said. "There are a number of factors that will play into that."

The real estate market is slowing, and retailers are slowing the opening of new stores. Financing large projects is much more difficult than in previous years, and Belton has yet to begin that process.

If Belton can get the necessary approvals and the money to build, he probably won't have any problem finding tenants or customers, said real estate market researcher Charles Heimsath.

"That confluence of roadways gives that general area tremendous amount of exposure, and there are very, very few other parcels in the entire southwest portion of Travis County that have any approvals for commercial and high-density residential development," Heimsath said. "It's a fairly affluent area with not much shopping."

Courtesy of JB Goodwin