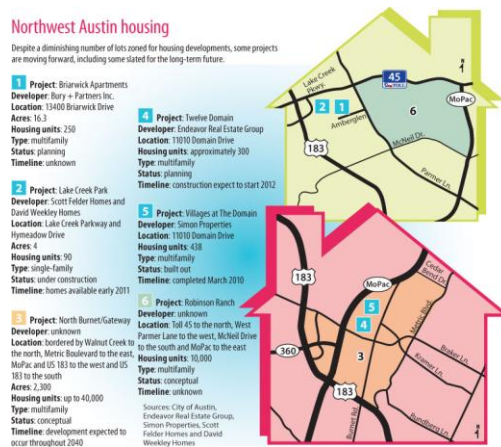


With plan, housing capacity may surge

By Joseph M. de Leon – Community Impact Newspaper

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NORTHWEST AUSTIN — Although some housing developments are moving forward in Northwest Austin, options for new projects are dwindling— 277 parcels are zoned for single-family use and about 13 lots are zoned for multifamily projects, according to Austin’s Planning and Development Review Department.



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Site constraints, such as proximity to floodplains or steep slopes, mean that many of those lots cannot be developed.

The number of residences that could be built in Northwest Austin could increase if redevelopment in the 2,300-acre North Burnet/Gateway comes to fruition. The land, equivalent in size to downtown and The University of Texas campus combined, is mostly zoned for high-density mixed use, but plans call for parts of the area to be rezoned and reconstructed into transit-oriented developments in the next 20 to 30 years.

Molly Scarbrough, principal planner for Austin’s Planning and Development Review Department, said the plan that was adopted in 2007 is designed to allow buildings up to 30 stories near transit with room for major employers. As many as 40,000 residences and a key transportation hub for Capital Metro commuter rail and the proposed Austin-to-San Antonio passenger rail initiative called Lone Star Rail are also planned.

“The project really outlines a vision of much higher density, mixed-use development throughout the area,” Scarbrough said. “We’re allowing that space to be converted into a neighborhood where people can walk to destinations and transit easily and live in a vibrant community.”

Scarbrough said the area’s redevelopment could take more than 30 years to complete, and 40,000 residential units is the maximum that could fit in an area that size, taking into account current building ordinances, but the true number could be vastly different.

“With the slowdown in the economy it could take a little bit longer, so it will be market dependent,” Scarbrough said. “Just because it allows 40,000 doesn’t mean it will get built immediately.”

Factors that could influence development include changes in lending practices, fluctuations in public and private investments and opposition from surrounding residents, Scarbrough said.

Today the site, which is bordered by Walnut Creek to the north, Metric Boulevard to the east, MoPac and US 183 to the west and US 183 to the south, includes a few apartments but is mostly filled with commercial spaces.

The planning for the North Burnet/Gateway project—technically two neighborhoods lumped together—began in February 2002, but before 2009 zoning restrictions did not allow more residential developments, Scarbrough said. Austin officials adopted new design codes for the area in March 2009 that allow for more flexibility when developing mixed-use projects.

“That’s when the bottom fell out of the market, the economy took a sidestep and development in the city in general slowed down,” Scarbrough said. “We’re just now starting to see developers sticking their heads out of the water and they’re starting to talk about development again.”

Developments move forward

Within the North Burnet/Gateway area, two developers have created visions for upscale living at The Domain.

Trisha Thacker, business manager for Villages at The Domain, said the 483-unit project that was completed in March is 92 percent occupied. She said the upscale shopping center’s wide range of retail and dining options, major events, such as the annual Austin Wine and Music Festival, and nearby employers helps residents avoid traffic and enjoy a more active lifestyle because the site is designed to be walkable.

Chad Marsh, managing principal for Endeavor Real Estate Group, said plans to move forward on an approximately 300-unit project are in the conceptual phase. Twelve Domain will be Endeavor’s first multifamily development at The Domain, and Marsh expects to break ground before the end of 2011. No completion date has been set, but a nearby 9-acre park is planned to open once the condo units are finished.

One area of Northwest Austin that has seen development lies south of Toll 45 between Parmer Lane and US 183.

The Lake Creek Park neighborhood started development in March and the first houses are expected to be ready for move-in before the end of the year.

The approximately 90-home project features houses built by Scott Felder Homes and David Weekley Homes. Houses will start at \$220,000 and range in size from 1,600 square feet to 3,000 square feet.

A nearby apartment building is now closer to becoming reality, according to planning department documents. Austin officials approved permits for the proposed 250-unit Briarwick Apartments, located near West Parmer Lane and Amberglen Boulevard, in September. The project is still in the planning phase, and a date to break ground has not yet been set.

Paul Frank, principal planner for Austin’s Planning and Development Review Department, said thousands of more residential units are in the area’s future.

Robinson Ranch, bounded by Toll 45 to the north, West Parmer Lane to the west, McNeil Drive to the south and MoPac to the east, was granted planned urban development status in 2005, but no plans have yet been set, Frank said. The area has a potential for 10 million square feet of commercial space and up to 10,000 residential units.

Concerns for growth

City demographer Ryan Robinson said the population of Austin has grown in the past few years, partly because economic migrants from across the country who have been severely affected by the economic downturn are moving to Austin in search of opportunity.

As more housing options are needed and the economy improves, development will pick up throughout the Greater Austin area, Robinson said, but some choice areas will present unique challenges.

The most difficult thing to predict for residential projects is how developers and city planners will redevelop an area decades from now, Robinson said. A change in zoning, particularly to mixed-use zoning, can yield a far higher density for commercial and residential space than plots of land zoned for only one use.

“As you define a subregion that’s a very desirable part of town like Northwest Austin, you’ll begin to see price pressures tied to land availability,” Robinson said. “That’s what will really trigger mixed-use development, which is one way the market reacts to land availability being a constraint. All of a sudden, you’re vertically stacking retail and residential.”

Courtesy of JB Goodwin