

TXI plans 2,000-acre development straddling Texas 130

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More than 2,000 acres straddling Texas 130 where Texas Industries Inc. operated a sand and gravel mine for 40 years could one day be home to 8,000 houses, office space, shops and restaurants, and more than 1,100 acres of parks and open space.

TXI plans today to file initial paperwork to trigger a lengthy development review process for the Rio de Vida project.

The land is south of FM 969 and north of the Colorado River as it snakes east of Austin.

It would be the biggest project so far for the Texas 130 corridor, where other residential and commercial projects have been proposed.

With more than half of the 2,130 acres set aside for green space, "this would be, to our knowledge, one of the largest developments to incorporate this much open space in a densely planned sustainable community," said Don Bosse, president of Bosse & Pharis Associates, an Austin firm that created the land plan for Rio de Vida.

The conceptual plan envisions a dense development with housing, retail and a town center clustered east of Texas 130. West of the toll road, the plan calls for commercial space, where TXI hopes to attract a hotel and major employers, who could be drawn in part by the location, a five-minute drive to Austin-Bergstrom International Airport and 15 minutes from downtown.

A cornerstone of the project would be a 550-acre park along the Colorado River, along with a hike-and-bike trail and dozens of small parks.

Some land could be used for a school, libraries and a grocery store, and farming.

The overall vision is to create a community with housing to accommodate families with a range of incomes, like the 711-acre Mueller development in East Austin, according to officials involved with the project. The housing would include single-family homes, townhomes and apartments, where 12,000 to 16,000 residents could live.

TXI has developed other mixed-use projects but has planned nothing on the scale of Rio de Vida, said Barry Bone, TXI's vice president of real estate. He said the project would represent an investment of more than \$2 billion over 20 years.

Bone said TXI has not decided whether to develop the project itself, to do so in tandem with another developer, or to sell the land to someone else to execute the plan

"For TXI, it's the largest mixed-use development, and the most environmentally creative, we've ever planned," he said.

The proposed environmental features include natural systems to filter storm water, instead of diverting it to retention ponds, and rainwater harvesting.

"It sure beats what's out there right now," said Joe Gieselman, executive manager of transportation and natural resources for Travis County.

"Rio de Vida may become the role model for how these former mining sites can be reclaimed to become community assets," he said.

Gieselman noted that more than 40 percent of the land in the Colorado River corridor between Austin and the Bastrop County line is owned by mining companies.

TXI is winding down its operations on the proposed Rio de Vida site and shifting them to nearby sites further east, near Webberville.

Manijeh Huereca, president of the Del Valle Community Coalition, said residents who live near the site appreciated that TXI approached them about its plans Monday, before the project became public.

"We're very happy that it's going to be environmentally friendly, and the way the housing is set up," she said.

She said her group "sees potential" in the plans but noted that there are "a lot of unknowns."

The Rio de Vida land is outside Austin's city limits but in an area where the city has some jurisdiction over development.

TXI has briefed city and county officials or their representatives.

"The initial plans look good," City Council Member Randi Shade said. "They remind me of a Mueller development but with more open space, including land set aside for community urban farms."

She also noted that the land is in the desired development zone, where Austin leaders want to steer development.

A number of complex questions remain, including who would provide water, wastewater and electricity.

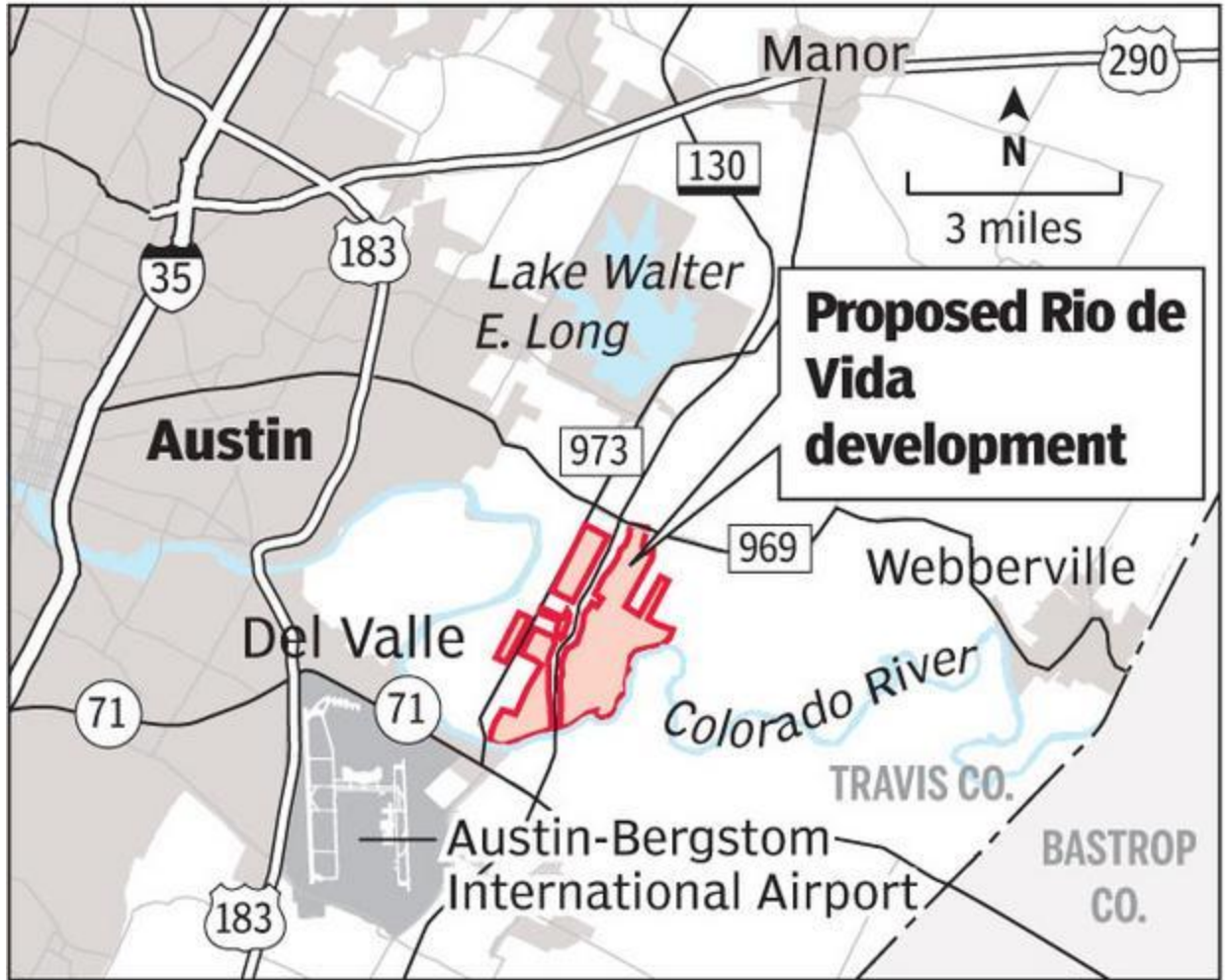
"There's a lot of work to do before this comes to fruition," Bone said. "I don't want to come off like I have my shovel and am breaking ground."

The review process that is being launched today will include determining what city and county regulations will apply and what approval will be required.

John Joseph, the land use and entitlement attorney for the project, said it could take 18 to 24 months to obtain the required approvals for the project to break ground.

Joseph said Rio de Vida would be the largest new-urbanist, environmentally sensitive and sustainable planned development in the region, representing "the ultimate in reuse of resources."

"There's nothing of this magnitude in Central Texas," he said.



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Courtesy of JB Goodwin