

# NORTH BURNET : MASTER PLAN G A T E W A Y



4

FUTURE PLAN

DRAFT



Why is it important to consider a more urban, mixed-use development pattern in the North Burnet/Gateway area?

## A NEED FOR CHANGE

In any undertaking requiring people to consider change, among the first questions is: “Why?” Most humans resist change – sometimes vehemently, sometimes just because it is easier to stay the same. As author Pip Coburn states in his work, *The Change Function*, “People change habits when the pain of their current situation exceeds their perceived pain of adopting a possible solution.”

How do we as a community assess the level of our “current pain” in regards to our urban development pattern? This process is difficult for several reasons:

- Things are going pretty well in Austin. Employment is robust, value of assets, i.e., business, real estate, tax base, etc. are up.

- Any societal pain felt by our current development format has built up over several decades, causing us to believe that what we are doing in the built environment is “just the way it is.”

- The pattern of disconnected, single use, auto-centric development that dominates our city has been institutionalized by the development industry, i.e., investors, lenders, developers and end users.

The intent of this Master Plan is to recommend a paradigm shift - to alter the predictability of development in this North Austin neighborhood. A major catalyst for change in this neighborhood already exists: the inevitability of at least one Capital MetroRail Urban Commuter Rail station and the potential for a commuter rail connection to San Antonio.

Rail has historically been a strong stimulus for industrial development since proximity to rail keeps transportation costs down. In recent decades trucking has largely replaced rail as a more flexible form of transporting goods. As economies and populations shift, the growth supported by rail has changed from industrial to residential. The commitment to a passenger rail network by a community constitutes

a major long-term investment in public transportation. In a time of lengthening automobile commutes and rising gas prices, this investment is exceedingly valuable to private sector developers, as well as to potential residents and homebuyers. To take full advantage of Austin’s commitment to passenger rail, the traditional pattern of suburban growth must be discarded for a more urban, integrated approach to development. To encourage new development patterns in an area the size of North Burnet/Gateway will take an extensive and collaborative effort, embraced by the general public, the business (private) sector, public officials and the staff of several public agency stakeholders in the area.

The work that went into *Envision Central Texas* helps frame the issue of growth at a regional level. This process allowed the community to contemplate how the region will look for decades to come as we accommodate the next million-plus residents making their home in Central Texas. The

vision for future growth that came out of the Envision Central Texas process reflects more compact, denser development clustered in town centers with lots of activity, an efficient transportation network of transit and roadways, and parks and open space.

There are significant recent studies that help measure the societal effect of sprawl. One such study, *Urban Sprawl and Public Health*, by Dr. Richard Joseph Jackson, is based on research sponsored and conducted by the National Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Dr. Jackson was recently interviewed by the magazine *Metropolis*. In that article, the interviewer states,

“The message of the book is simple: our car-dependent suburban environment is killing us... sprawl is at least partially responsible for a full range of American diseases, from asthma to diabetes, from hypertension to depression.”

In the *Metropolis* interview, Dr. Jackson made these salient points:

“The modern America of obesity, inactivity, depression, and loss of community has not ‘happened’ to us. We legislated, subsidized, and planned it this way. The public health community recognizes it is important to ‘create communities that allow people to meet their life needs without sitting in a car three hours a day’.

“While 60 percent of children walked to school in 1973, now only 13 percent do... [Walking is] the one exercise we can do at virtually every age... When you’re getting things done, you don’t even notice that you’re walking.

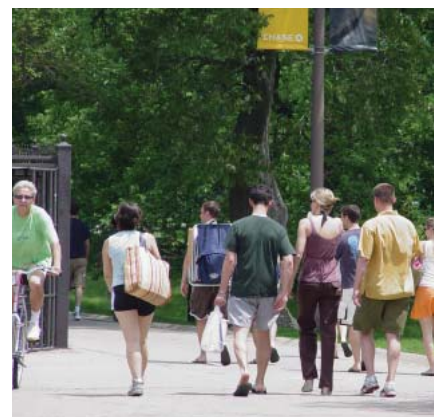
“Compar[ing] [mortality] statistics from the suburbs with the roughest inner city... Is it the commuter driving long distances from a pretty suburb or the person walking short distances in an urban area [who is more likely to die violently]?” “If you add crime and car crashes together, you’re 20 percent more likely to die in the

suburbs... But we know the treatment for these problems. We know how to build communities with central commons surrounded by civic buildings, with sidewalks, parks, and transport, with kids and old folks being able to get back and forth to their daily destinations. I think we are at the right moment to reinvent American communities back to what they were at their absolute best.”

As the interviewer states, one of the things most enjoyable about Dr. Jackson’s work is “that it reintroduces to planning the original motivation of public health—which has largely been missing for a century—but it turns this impulse on its head. The very first city planners increased life spans through an act of separation, by moving households away from those dark mills. Now Dr. Jackson and his colleagues are saying that the greatest danger is not the factories but the separation itself.”

According to Dr. Jackson, “It certainly is a good idea to not have our children living next to tanneries and slaughterhouses. That said, there is really no reason we shouldn’t be close to retail and accountants’ offices and all the rest. The fact is that we do know how to build healthy communities. We just have to make it happen.”

Another important study was published by the Center for Transit-Oriented Development and the Center for Neighborhood Technology. It states that “the cost of transportation, while not currently factored into the affordability equation, has become increasingly central to family budgets, given their choices to live farther from jobs and as today’s development patterns require families to use their cars more often to run errands or take their children to school. Therefore, the affordability of housing should be considered in the context of the transportation costs associated with the neighborhood in which the home is located. It is the intersection between housing and location that provides a more meaningful measure of affordability.”



“...sprawl is at least partially responsible for a full range of American diseases, from asthma to diabetes, from hypertension to depression.”

Source: *Our Ailing Communities* [www.metropolismag.com](http://www.metropolismag.com)

The study suggests a new formula for measuring affordability:

$$\text{Affordability Index} = \frac{\text{Housing Costs} + \text{Transportation Costs}}{\text{Income}}$$

Another important reason to consider redevelopment is stewardship and sustainability. A majority of Americans claim to support “the idea of preservation, restoration and/or improvement of the natural environment...” By redeveloping land, we are, in essence, recycling a precious natural resource. By redeveloping at a significantly higher density than suburban development achieves, we could be as much as 1000 percent more efficient in using the land. New land development referred to as “green field” development not only uses land inefficiently, it also requires significant new infrastructure to serve the development. Figure 4.1 compares the potential benefits of redeveloping the North Burnet/Gateway district to a similar development program applied to a green field site.

Another point worthy of consideration, which has been statistically validated in the last two U.S. Censuses, is the changing demographic make up of America. This change has occurred gradually but is significant in that the household form and lifestyle desired by the new demographic is much different than that delivered by the majority of suburban subdivisions.

Parents with school age children make up only about a quarter of the home buying market. This leaves the majority of the market seeking an alternative to conventional suburban development. These buyers often seek a mixed-use, walkable environment well supplied with amenities, jobs, local retail and entertainment. Additionally, they desire good civic and open space development to offset the denser form usually found in such developments.

Recently, the Urban Land Institute hosted an educational series on Placemaking “which suggests that the culturally rich, diverse environments will occur at a greater pace than in otherwise suburban settings. These “town center” developments such as the Woodlands Town Center are not near

the traditional central business district but are taking on a similar look and feel with a mixture of uses, greater density and alternative forms of transport and housing. They are not the soulless “edge cities” documented by Joel Garreau in the 90’s, but instead are vibrant alternatives for a market segment that demands “more than a suburb can deliver.”

To achieve a balance of jobs, houses, retail, open space and community facilities would be a worthy goal of any town plan. It is seldom that the opportunity to affect such a balance in modern city planning comes along. City planning is normally done by sector, area, or some other geographically defined subset of the overall community. Usually these sub-areas are dominated by existing residential neighborhoods. It is also common that these sub-areas harbor a high degree of “emotional investment” by the residents of the area. This seems to occur despite the socioeconomic or ethnic make-up of the area. It is human nature to resist change. That is why the opportunity to redevelop North Burnet/Gateway is so unique.

Figure 4.1 : Urban Redevelopment Compared to Greenfield Development

	NB/G REDEVELOPMENT	GREENFIELD DEVELOPMENT	COMPARISON
Acreage	2,300	16,463	Greenfield Development will consume 7 times the land of redevelopment
Dwelling Units, all types	41,158	41,158	Same
Population accommodated	81,904	81,904	Both accommodate appx. 8% of forecast regional growth
Land use efficiency (gross density)	17.5	2.5	700% more efficient use of land
Paving, total square feet (arterials, collectors, local streets and alleys)	13,925,952	75,730,189	Greenfield development requires over 5 times the paving for streets
Pavement per Dwelling Unit (square feet)	338	1,840	TND uses 23% less paving per DU
Connectivity based on intersection density (number of intersections per square mile)	111	73	NB/G redevelopment includes 50% more intersections/greater connectivity



The North Burnet/Gateway area is relatively large. By comparison, it is about three and a half times the size of Mueller Airport, the City's most significant redevelopment effort to date. As Figure 4.3 shows, the North Burnet/Gateway area is large enough to hold Austin's Central Business District (CBD), the State Office complex and UT's main campus, with room to spare.

Another unique attribute of the area is that it has no single-family ownership housing and only a few hundred apartments. As the consultants discovered in stakeholder meetings, a prevalent attitude was "there is nothing memorable about North Burnet/Gateway." Clearly, there are many property owners in the district, along with a host of thriving businesses, most of which are commercial services, industrial or retail (both local retail and destination retail). The goal of the plan should not be to displace all these uses, but as passenger rail is introduced to the area, the Master Plan should maximize the efficiency and use of the area by encouraging densification and reformatting existing uses into a new, more urban form.

How is this to be accomplished? The simplest way to think of it is to build up rather than out. We see this phenomenon in housing, where, as land becomes more valuable, homes get taller – generally two-story rather than one, lots get smaller. The same principle applies to commercial redevelopment. The value of any tract of land has two components: the land value plus the improvement value. The income stream derived from whatever use is in place on the land should not cloud the basic real estate value of the improved land. In many cases, the business occupying any given building is a tenant, not an owner. As redevelopment occurs, these tenants will find new addresses either in the district or elsewhere. Such decisions will be made by most business owners, based on several factors, such as cost, access, proximity to workforce, proximity to the primary market, competition in the area, etc. It is





the goal of this plan to create a scenario where those businesses that want to stay in the area can do so, even though they may find relocating to another area either in or out of the district desirable over time.

Another key ingredient in changing the nature of the North Burnet/Gateway area is to add a significant number of residents. People living in the area will have the most profound effect on its ultimate desirability. This will be an absolute necessity to making the area a successful transit-oriented development (TOD).

At a recent gathering of the development industry in Denver, it was reported that the changing nature of the American demographic will have a significant effect on the form of the American household and the “places” new buyers will prefer. This report is based on the results summarized in Figures 4.4 and 4.5.

This data is relevant to North Burnet/Gateway since the horizon for the initial phase of development coincides with the forecast household formation in Figure 4.5, which indicates that Generation Y will be moving through the rental phases into home ownership from now through 2020, while the Baby Boomers will be moving into the Empty Nester phase and down-sizing.

The panel also reports the preferences of this group will include new infill locations which are more dense, more diverse, more connected, “places” offering unique amenities and public gathering places. They will also support public transportation, and be willing to pioneer new locations. The idea of redeveloping under-utilized places will appeal to their desire to “do good.”

In their acceptance of density and diversity, it will be important to provide a variety of places to “breathe” such as plazas and parks. Individual unit design will likely get smaller and favor uniqueness versus sameness, with a balance between price and lifestyle.

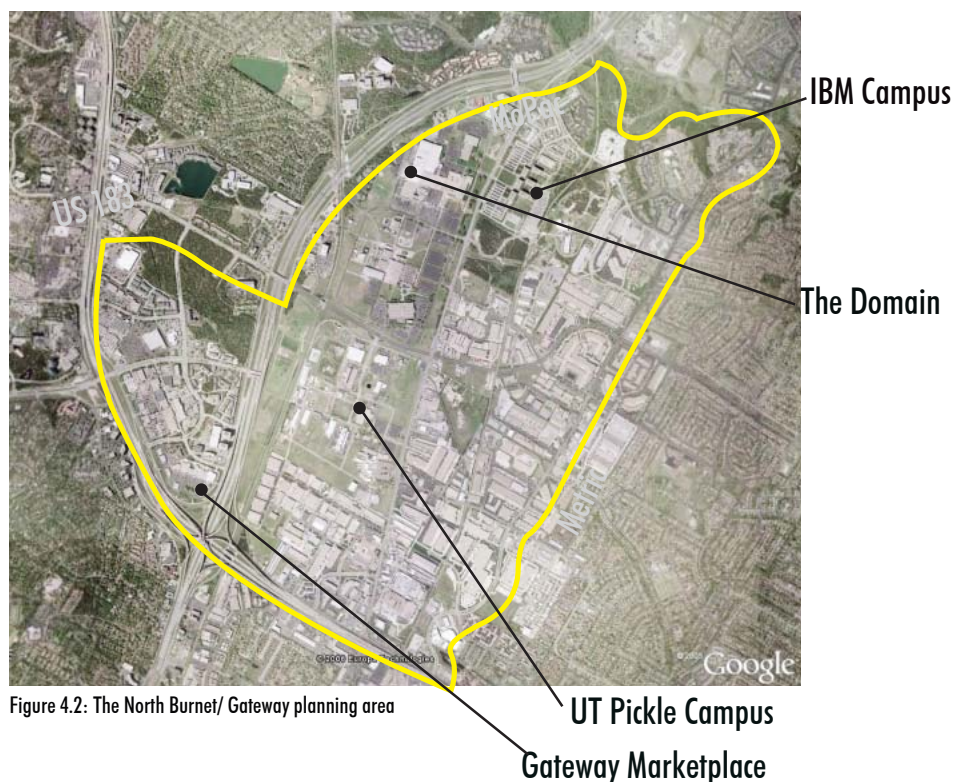


Figure 4.2: The North Burnet/ Gateway planning area



Figure 4.3: Downtown Austin boundary, relative to the boundary of the North Burnet/Gateway area.

Each of these factors has gone into the conception of the North Burnet/Gateway Master Plan. While the “Why” has been determined by a great deal of research, experiences, and basic market forces, the “How” has been written as a specific vision, followed by specific design principles and a tangible set of goals and strategies to make the vision a reality.

Figure 4.4 : Impact of Young Consumers on the American Population

Generation	Born	2006 Age	2006 % of Nation	2006 # of People	Average Annual Births
Eisenhowers	Before 1946	61+	16%	48M	2.6
Baby Boomers	1946 – 1964	42 – 60	26%	76M	4.0
Generation X	1965 – 1980	26 – 41	21%	62M	3.4
Echo Boomers/Gen Y	1981 – 1999	7 – 25	28%	83M	3.9
Post Echo/Gen Z	After 2000	0 – 6	9%	28M	4.0

Source: Claritas, Inc.

Figure 4.5 : Projected Housing Trends of Generation Y

	Student Housing	Single & Roommate Rental	Rent as Couple / 1 <sup>st</sup> Home	Young Family Own	Mature Family Own	Empty Nester Downsize Own	Retiree Senior Housing
2006	Gen Y	Gen Y	Gen X	Gen X	Gen X, Baby B	Baby B	Eisen, Baby B
2010	Gen Y	Gen Y	Gen Y	Gen X	Gen X, Baby B	Baby B	Eisen, Baby B
2015	Gen Y	Gen Y	Gen Y	Gen Y	Gen X	Gen X, Baby B	Eisen, Baby B
2020	Gen Z	Gen Y	Gen Y	Gen Y	Gen X, Gen Y	Gen X, Baby B	Eisen, Baby B

Source: Robert Charles Lesser & Co.