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## Group takes on varied projects

7/13/2008

### Different cities seek answers from same planning firm

By [Owen Covington](#)

Messenger-Inquirer

With a population that has nearly doubled since 2000, the city of McKinney, Texas, is dealing with development and population challenges that some communities might relish having on their plates.

"We have had stuff coming and going out of our ears," McKinney Mayor Bill Whitfield said of his city's growth.

To help guide that growth and further spur development, McKinney hired Fort Worth-based Gateway Planning Group in 2006, and during a 15-month period moved from public meetings to a detailed plan for the city's historic downtown.

The same firm that crafted the McKinney plan, which was approved by its city council in March, is now working with the city of Owensboro that, with a population of 55,000, sits where McKinney did eight years ago.

But while Owensboro has added only about 1,300 residents since 2000, McKinney has grown to more than 100,000 residents thanks in

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part to its location just 30 miles north of Dallas.

The two cities have run along different paths in recent years, but they turned to the same firm to help craft a picture of their future.

While Owensboro is looking to boost development and regenerate its downtown, McKinney sought guidance on how the downtown can absorb the city's growth without losing its character.

Owensboro is at the beginning of the process at a time when McKinney is taking the product of the planning process and trying to make it a reality.

### Planning process

Gateway Planning Group officials, including the firm's president, Scott Polikov, visited Owensboro last week and laid out their strategy for creating a comprehensive master plan for downtown Owensboro on the "building and block" level.

The plan will include proposed uses for downtown properties, possible changes to planning and zoning regulations and the feasibility of large capital projects for downtown, such as an events center.

The city of Owensboro, Daviess Fiscal Court, the Greater Owensboro Economic Development Corp. and others in the business community have partnered in the \$400,000 study that they hope will help boost development in the city's core.

McKinney turned to Gateway after producing a long-term plan for the community that won awards but lacked the details needed to accomplish the plan's goals, said Kevin Spath, a member of McKinney's planning department.

The plan also lacked support in the community, he said.

"I don't think certain segments of the public's population really bought into the concepts," Spath said. "We really needed to engage the stakeholders in this (downtown) part of town in a different way."

McKinney leaders turned their sights initially on the downtown core. With Gateway Planning Group as the primary facilitator, the city held a series of public meetings and workshops during a 15-month



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period to develop the plan.

A process that included brainstorming and designing helped bring the ideas generated during those meetings together, Spath said.

The result was an "illustrative" plan that included proposed uses superimposed on a map of the downtown as well as descriptions and plans for entire areas of downtown, such as a "live-work-shop" area near the new City Hall and an entertainment district, Spath said.

The ideas that were generated were grounded in what would be possible by being "not too far-fetched but really implementable concepts," Spath said.

One of Whitfield's concerns was to keep development in line with the historic buildings downtown, and he said the new plan ensures that will be the case. "Anything we get down here has to be historically compatible," Whitfield said. "I know that as the city grows, everything has to be architecturally compatible."

### Implementation

Moving forward, McKinney officials will use the downtown plan to not only guide developments that are proposed, but to help generate ideas for developers.

By creating a detailed view of the potential future of downtown properties, city leaders will be able to do more than just wait for developers to approach them. "It does some of the preliminary work for any potential developers," Spath said. "It basically lays out what the city would like to see and opens the doors to development by the private sector."

McKinney has started widening downtown sidewalks to accommodate outdoor seating at restaurants and has worked with the Texas Historic Commission to revitalize the old county courthouse, which had been sitting vacant, to use as a performing arts center.

The renewed performing arts center opened before the downtown plan was completed, but the plan will help generate interest in development around the center, Spath said.

David Pitstick, president and CEO of the McKinney Economic Development Corp., said his organization was involved in only an limited capacity in crafting the plan, but he can see the value of

being able to pitch the amenities planned for the city to businesses looking to locate in McKinney.

However, Pitstick said he's not too familiar with the plan's details and will need to see successes before it can really play a role in what his group is trying to accomplish. "In my business, I've learned that everyone makes promises about things that will happen in the future," Pitstick said. "Unless it's under construction, everybody has a plan. Plans don't normally sell that great."

Different projects, similar philosophies

Polikov said he views the McKinney plan as a document that can help the city expand over the long term from 100,000 people to 400,000.

He noted that the project is different from what is being undertaken in Owensboro.

McKinney has a well-defined historic center in a way Owensboro does not, and it sits along a rail corridor that, when developed, will give residents even greater access to Dallas.

But there are some similarities, as both cities are dealing with state highways running through their downtowns, a demand for a more walkable community and the desire for downtown entertainment districts.

"Both downtowns offer a continuity of history and culture that has continued in some form or fashion," Polikov said.

The philosophy of using the plan to not only guide development but attract it is also the same for the two cities, Polikov said.

When asked about the next step after the Owensboro plan is completed, Polikov said the interest from developers is already there, so he doesn't anticipate a loss of momentum. "There's already interest out there," Polikov said. "Part of the challenge now is asking people to participate in the planning process."

On The Web

Portions of the downtown plan that Gateway Planning Group created for McKinney, Texas, and other cities can be found at the firm's Web site -- [www.gatewayplanning.com](http://www.gatewayplanning.com) -- under the "Town Planning &

Codes" link.

More information about McKinney can be found at the city's Web site at [www.mckinneytexas.org](http://www.mckinneytexas.org).

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