

# Council looks at transit-oriented development

By Cassie Holman  
Staff Writer

Mayor John Cowman has a vision for the city of Leander and it is based on a progressive style of urban design known as transit-oriented development (TOD).

Through a partnership with private landowners and Capital Metro, Cowman says he envisions Leander as being one of the first cities in Texas to adopt a large-scale TOD, a type of community that puts the pedestrian first and focuses on multi-use zoning.

"We're a small community but we have a professional management team and staff in place and we are planning Leander to be a state-of-the-art community," Cowman said.

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Leander has the unique advantage of having 2,000 acres of developable land which is owned by only seven major landowners. The land is accessible to the future Capital Metro Park and Ride transit center, set for completion by September 2005; the 183-A toll road, set for completion in about two and a half years; and a rail line also owned by Capital Metro.

Capital Metro is currently working on a long-range plan for its service area, according to Libba Letton, spokesman for Capital Metro.

"Later this spring we'll be conducting extensive community outreach," Letton said. "We'll be inviting the public to come and look at some of our proposals and comment on that."

If commuter rail receives public support, it would need approval by the Capital Metro board before being put on the November ballot, Letton said.

Should commuter rail be approved, Leander would be the northern-most point, Cowman said.

"I can see UT students living in Leander and going to UT because of the convenience of getting to school," he said.

The strategy behind transit-oriented development is to create a mixed-use, mixed-residential, pedestrian-friendly development, according to Scott Polikov, principal with Gateway Planning. The city council has approved a \$50,000 contract with Gateway Planning to gather project information to take to the landowners.

Polikov has done town planning in various communities across the state and nation. In Lancaster, the planning group focused on 1,200 acres of land. From the three neighborhoods, or about 400 acres, that are currently being platted, the net increase in tax base revenue to the city will be \$800,000 per year, he said.

"It's because we've elevated the market to a fuller range of housing types," Polikov said. "It's encouraging more empty nesters to live there, more young professionals and not just starter homes."

In McKinney, Gateway Planning worked on 5,000 acres of land in the growth corridor of Dallas. In that area, 200 separate blocks of land were set to become strip development along the highway and single-family residential.

"Now it's going to be very walkable, mixed-use, small lot homes, large lot homes, townhomes, lofts, neighborhood retail, destination retail, trails, and there's a plan for an eventual regional rail connection in the town center," Polikov said.

Councilmember David Siebold said he supports the development strategy because of the diversity it allows in homes, retail and entertainment.

"It's going to give us the opportunity to get a development in Leander that is unique to the Austin area and to a lot of Texas right now," Siebold said.

He also likes the idea of development being focused around the pedestrian. He said he thinks people would adapt to the change.

"You'll go to the extra trouble to take a longer walk or park if it's somewhere you want to go that's unique," he said. "That's the idea. If you develop something that you want to go to, people will adapt to whatever is required to get there."

While the development would be beneficial for commuter rail, it is not dependent on commuter rail, Siebold said.

"If this is done right and it's a neighborhood that people want to move to, if rail never comes here, it's still going to succeed," he said.

Transit-oriented development uses form-based codes based on urban design as opposed to the conventional codes used now by the city. "The existing zoning lays in but we lay over it special zoning," Cowman said.

There must be a cooperative relationship between the city and the private sector for transit-oriented development to be successful, Polikov said.

"I think those communities that are willing to engage in true public/private strategies will be ahead of the game as the growth continues," Polikov said.

Cowman said he has contacted each of the landowners about his plans. "There seems to be an air of cooperation," he said.

Polikov said is impressed by the vision of the city council.

"The leadership that the mayor and council are showing on this is incredible," he said. "For Leander to take advantage of this opportunity with the transportation infrastructure and the growth coming their way is very visionary."

Cowman has been working on the project for eight months. "This is what I do best and that is develop," he said. "This is a winner."