

2009-2010 AUSTIN MUSIC POLL BALLOT VOTE NOW

RELATED STORIES

Reinventing Airport Boulevard

Can 'form-based zoning' turn Austin's suburban-style drags into walkable shopping districts?

BY KATHERINE GREGOR

Drive Airport Boulevard from Lamar to I-35 – trying to see it with a newcomer's eyes – and it's hard to disagree with Council Member Chris Riley's assessment: "We can do better than this." Cruising along the street (there's no way to walk it), you see no pedestrians except at bus stops – virtually no one out strolling to shop, no one walking or cycling to a neighborhood taco joint. Perhaps that's because this corridor was never designed to be a place for people; it was built for cars, and an ode to the auto it remains. The unlovely streetscape is dominated by surface parking and chaotic signage, lots selling used autos and used tires, and generic strip malls – the classic Anywhere, U.S.A.

[CLICK TO ENLARGE](#)



A familiar sight along some sections of Airport Boulevard

Photo by John Anderson

Punctuating the blandness are several iconic, endearingly affordable Austin businesses such as Mrs. Johnson's Bakery ("Quality donuts since 1948"), Tamale House (the enchilada plate is still \$3), I Luv Video, Lammes Candies (established in 1885), and Quality Seafood Market ("An Austin institution since 1938"). But taken as a whole, this stretch of Airport is a drag – literally and metaphorically.

Riley believes it can be something more. He's been talking with people in the surrounding neighborhoods who would love to see a few nice infill projects supporting those beloved places and improving their main thoroughfare – perhaps a grocery store, another hip local coffeehouse to join Kick Butt Coffee (near Koenig), or bakeries, bookstores, cafes – gathering places with additional sidewalk access to replace the ghost buildings and empty parking lots. They'd like a street that's appealing to walk and bike along and that's safe for people to cross on foot. They'd like a central shopping district as attractive and sustainable as those promoted for Downtown – walkable, transit-oriented, dense yet human-scaled – with its own unique neighborhood charm.

As it is, many businesses on Airport are barely getting by or have closed – including two of the four anchor stores at Highland Mall. Ray McGuire, who has owned McGuire's Clocks at 4915 Airport since 1986 (it was started by his late father, Archie McGuire, in 1964), hadn't heard of Riley's initiative when I stopped by in late December, but he liked the sound of it: "I would absolutely welcome anything that's positive!" McGuire said urban blight in the area has affected his business, which draws customers and specialty repairs from all over Central Texas. "I am in the red now; I've been trying to close it up, but my wife won't let me," he sighed. "I'm just tired of bleeding money." He described problems over the years with a crack house, a shooting, needles on the sidewalk, transients from a nearby day-labor site, and car break-ins behind his building. In the past year or so, his front door has been broken into four times. From it, he pointed out a "bum camp" in the ditch that runs between Airport and Capital Metro's train tracks, where he sees people cooking and urinating in plain view.

"I'd welcome it if they'd come in and buy up a whole block and build something larger and nicer," said McGuire. He believes higher-quality neighboring businesses could boost his own walk-in traffic: "I'd kill for a Starbucks somewhere around here! Or a big new restaurant."

Character by Code

To effect a desirable transformation, Riley proposes to use a tool – an alternative approach to zoning – known as "form-based code." Sometimes called "place-making" code or "SmartCode," the zoning regulations specify the *form* for new development – how buildings, streetscapes, and the public realm should be scaled and should look and feel –

[CLICK TO ENLARGE](#)

PROMOTIONS

- Mind Over Music
- Online Contests
- Chrontourage
- Chronicle Merch

[VIEW ALL PROMOTIONS](#)

classifieds

SEARCH

GO

BROWSE

Arts & Entertainment (79)
 Services (88)
 Civic (10)
 Retail (27)
 Food & Drink (45)
 Coupons (9)
 Jobs (7)



itsruby

I've got a head on my shoulders and I can...

5X5W.COM
TOMORROW HAPPENS HERE.





REGISTER TO ATTEND
MARCH 12-21
AUSTIN, TX

online directory

MORE than a list



FEATURED ADS IN PICTOVISION®

CENTRAL AustinCool.com COOL CENTRAL APARTMENTS, LOFTS & CONDOS...

CENTRAL • \$525 • STUDIO 1 block to Engineering and UT Law School w/ Free Month Holiday...

CHILDFREE COUPLES • RESEARCH STUDY Don't have kids by Choice? Participate in a study and earn \$50!...

LABRADOODLE PUPPIES Labradoodle Puppies - Australian

rather than the *uses* allowed on the site. (See "[What Is Form-Based Code?](#)") In fact, Riley hopes form-based code can be piloted on Airport, then adopted to transform similarly blighted corridors around town. It's also likely to be discussed as a solution for Austin as a whole during the city's ongoing comprehensive-planning process.

As a first step, Riley and co-sponsors Mike Martinez and Lee Leffingwell introduced a resolution Dec. 10, 2009, directing the city manager and staff "to identify funding opportunities and develop a proposed process for a form-based code planning initiative along a segment of Airport Boulevard, generally located within the area between North Lamar Boulevard and IH-35, that will serve as a pilot project for corridor redevelopment."



This is Duncanville, Texas – before and after. The "after" is simply a rendering of the development that would happen under the code. It is a result of the neighborhood asking how a local movie theatre would be designed and look under the form-based code on the corridor.
Courtesy of Gateway Planning Group, Inc.

Why use form-based code planning? The big advantage it offers over Austin's current use-based code is far greater certainty about new developments' feel, look, and scale. An antidote to all that we've done wrong since World War II, form-based code is being adopted in Denver; Miami; Portland, Ore.; San Antonio; and now in federal and state transportation planning policies and manuals to promote next-generation projects – especially compact, walkable, transit-oriented development. Neighborhood organizations like it because mandatory form-based code establishes by law that new projects must fit sensitively into the context of existing neighborhoods and residents' visions for the future. Developers and property owners like it because it creates predictability and a smoother application and project review process. (Other cities report that the main opposition to form-based code initiatives has come, sometimes stealthily, from real estate attorneys when they realize that its predictability will drastically reduce the demand for their services in brokering variance petitions and in neighborhood/developer fights.)

No code is perfect, of course. Dean Almy, an associate professor of architecture and urban design at the University of Texas who serves on the city's Waterfront Planning Advisory Board, has been studying form-based codes and their development outcomes, both here and abroad. "Form-based codes are restrictive in many ways," he points out. "They can guarantee a particular outcome, but perhaps at the expense of something extraordinary arising. They are used to overcome worst-case scenarios, but they can lead to lowest-common-denominator design solutions. Many European cities are using ones that are more flexible; the form-based codes currently in use in the U.S. are closely modeled on the agenda of CNU [Congress for the New Urbanism]. We haven't found that balance between prescription and variation yet in this country." Still, he said, moving to a form-based code "could be a timely move for Austin."

At its best, form-based code provides a fine-grained regulating plan for realizing a community's own preferred vision, area by area, block by block. Properly administered, it's not just a set of design guidelines or a big-government urban renewal push or friendly to developers who do massive cookie-cutter projects.

Out of the Suburbs

Like other urban roadways developed after World War II, Airport Boulevard is a relic of the suburbanizing era, when America abandoned traditional town-planning principles proven over hundreds of years and began building for the automobile. That resulted, as the Charter of the New Urbanism puts it, in "the spread of placeless sprawl." Originally built as State Highway 29, the suburban road had its name changed by a City Council resolution in 1944 to Airport Boulevard. It formed the western boundary of Robert Mueller Municipal Airport, which opened in 1936 and closed in 1999. On the Eastside, between I-35 and Highway 183, Airport Boulevard has been Texas State Highway Loop 111 since 1960. (In 2007, the portion between I-35 and MLK, bordering the new Mueller neighborhood, was returned to the city. According to city staffer George Zapalac, the portion north of I-35 has been city-maintained for many years.) When it opened in 1971, Highland Mall on Airport was celebrated as Austin's first enclosed suburban shopping mall.

Today, Airport is a big-city boulevard stuck in its suburban past, like some awkward relation still sporting 1971 sideburns. It's now near the demographic heart of a region with more than 1 million people – a main reason that Riley sees it as ripe for New Urban rebirth. To promote sustainable growth and lower the region's carbon footprint, City Council policy now favors central density over sprawl. City policy designates "core transit corridors," the best places to add that density, to preserve the interior of established neighborhoods. So while most of the city's urban planning efforts focus on Downtown, Riley is tackling the less glamorous challenge of reimagining and improving corridors like Airport. (Assisting him is aide Marisa Ballas, an architect and planner who came to Riley's office from Black + Vernoo, where she edited *Emergent Urbanism: Evolution in Urban Form, Texas*, a book on Central Texas published for the CNU annual conference in Austin in 2008.) In addition to



An Austin institution, Tamale House draws breakfast taco lovers from near and far.
Photo by John Anderson

Multigen Labradoodles born 11/30/2009, 3 boys, 3 girls,...

classifieds

area stakeholders, Riley's office is involving the local chapters of professional groups such as the American Institute for Architects and the CNU. To gather reactions, in October Riley invited former Austinite Scott Polikov – president of Gateway Planning Group, which works nationally crafting and implementing form-based code projects – to present the concepts to a representative group of homeowners, residents, property owners, and business owners, plus city staff. He and Riley have talked separately with other council members, the city manager, and senior city staff as well. The Central Texas Chapter of CNU has a policy group actively promoting the initiative's success; in November it helped host a public reprise of the presentation by Polikov, who sits on CNU's national board.

Among those present for Polikov's first presentation was Carol Huntsberger, owner of Quality Seafood Market. (Like the other locally owned businesses mentioned, the seafood store and restaurant repeatedly wins *Chronicle* "Best of Austin" awards.) Huntsberger had never heard of form-based code, but she remembers finding the images shown instantly appealing; they reminded her of walkable places she'd enjoyed in other cities.

"I'm very excited about the prospect of it," said Huntsberger. "They're trying to add density on the corridor, and we get to help determine what we want that to look like." As a property owner, she said she isn't concerned that improvements might increase her property taxes: "That's not always a bad thing; it means the neighborhood has improved, so the money goes for something." She especially liked the way diverse stakeholders were brought together for the presentation, "so we were all hearing the same thing at the same time."

"I think it's a great investment for Austin," said Huntsberger, who liked the idea that a form-based code corridor initiative piloted on Airport could help other parts of the city too. "It connects people; that's what's exciting. I think it's going to be awesome!"

Airport's Advantages

Why pick Airport for the pilot? Austin has plenty of other aging central corridors to revitalize – Cameron Road, Burnet Road, and South Lamar come to mind. Riley cited a number of factors that make Airport ideal for form-based planning and redevelopment. The big five: 1) neighborhood and local business support; 2) Capital Metro's Red Line, which runs parallel to Airport and has two stations built along this stretch; 3) the impetus of the Mueller neighborhood; 4) the economic development potential; and 5) the seemingly imminent death of Highland Mall, which in theory could be redesigned as a new live-work-play urban village.

In Austin – where neighborhood associations (or a few vociferous homeowners) routinely fight new projects or planning efforts that involve developers, gentrification, or indeed any change – having neighborhood enthusiasm and support is "huge," said Riley. In fact, said Huntsberger, "some of the neighborhood associations have been pushing for something like this for a while. At first they were slightly skeptical," but after talking with Riley and seeing Polikov's presentation, "now they're optimistic, because the city and council want to work to make this happen."

"We are very excited about it," said Katrina Daniel, past president of Highland Neighborhood Association and vice president of the city's Highland neighborhood plan contact team. "This area is like an old house that you look at and you think, 'Why doesn't somebody fix that up?' Council Member Riley's interest, and the rail together, might be just the right catalyst to help this area achieve its full potential."



An empty Highland Mall parking lot
Photo by John Anderson
[CLICK TO ENLARGE](#)

"We haven't been one of those neighborhoods that resists density," she added. "There's a lot of underutilized land that could be a great opportunity to do affordable housing, because we're just five miles from Downtown – and with the bus rapid transit and rail coming through, it feels even closer." She was bullish on using form-based code to establish specific rules for new development patterns, "because you just have to add density the right way."



The Highland Mall transit stop (to be)
Photo by John Anderson

Indeed, an intriguing advantage of form-based code is that it offers a way to break the cycle of Austin's infamous neighborhood vs. developer fights. Those typically are spurred when a project seeks variances to existing zoning and to the preferred vision expressed in neighborhood plans. Mandatory form-based code, by contrast, makes it law that future new projects must conform to the people's vision. "The neighborhoods would be fully engaged; the coding is based on a community plan," explained Polikov. (So far he has been assisting Riley pro bono; he's also on the team for the city's Strategic Mobility Plan.) "This initiative will create a context in which the neighborhoods and community define what developers can do – sensitive, context-based, true infill development."

But what about the gentrification problem? "That's why corridor redevelopment is a good idea – it will allow infill to occur while preserving neighborhood integrity," Polikov responded. "It occurs only on the edge, where it should. You're not redoing whole areas, like is occurring in East Austin, where you have whole blocks changing." Form-based code regulates not just buildings but also public and open space and

streetscapes – potentially with more finesse and holistic vision than our current commercial design standards. "Form-based code creates a highly tailored set of regulations for new development, designed to make sure the community's plan occurs," Polikov said. "That's the difference with form-based code – developers are actually required to implement the community's plan, for things like scale, walkability, and connectivity." It can provide the crucial piece long missing from city neighborhood plans – a hammer that forces developers to add attractive infill of the kind residents want.

Transit-Oriented Development

Robert Vasquez, owner of Tamale House at 5003 Airport, was dubious when I spoke to him about Riley's form-based code initiative. (It was the first he'd heard of it.) "I've been here 31 years, and it's still hard to make a dollar," he said. Out front, the building's paint is peeling; the tiny interior has few tables and no air conditioning. Unlike McGuire and Huntsberger, Vasquez doesn't own the property. He worries that "a new code could mean it would be hard to start any kind of business, unless you have a stack of money." He added: "I've never seen any improvements that didn't result in higher property taxes. If they go sky-high, people probably can't afford to live here anymore."

Yet when Vasquez talked about his business' challenges, they included the very problems the corridor initiative would strive to correct. "There's so many obstacles, like bad street crossings," he said. "My business stays level, and that's it." He remembers speaking some years back to a would-be competitor planning to open a restaurant nearby; the man expected that business would be great, because Airport has so much traffic. Vasquez told him: "Sure there's a lot of traffic, but it doesn't stop. It just goes by. They just pass through here." It's the classic curse of the suburban throughway.

Capital Metro's Red Line commuter rail service will run right along this stretch of Airport; the passenger stations are built and ready to open at both Crestview (at Lamar) and Highland (across from the mall). But Vasquez didn't see how that would help his business or save Highland Mall. "Nobody's going to get off that train to come to the Tamale House," he said. "They'll just whiz on past, like the traffic does." He mentioned, though, that he'd seen places on television he liked the look of – where people actually did their shopping and eating around commuter rail stations.

But based on Riley's research, the presence of rail transit that's about to begin service any day (or month or year) has the potential to transform the corridor. Transit-oriented development is another everything-old-is-new-again trend being successfully used to create walkable neighborhood centers that spur economic development in many of Austin's peer cities. Already, the Crestview station has spawned Midtown Commons – a New Urbanist, three-star green-built transit-oriented development now leasing apartments and slowly signing up office and retail tenants, such as Black Star Co-op Pub & Brewery.

If the city can seed a positive, collective vision for the corridor, said Riley, private investment can help implement it. Airport might be a good candidate for tax-increment financing – a tool that funds new public improvements (as at Mueller) by capturing the increased property taxes that they stimulate over time. Such improvements to the public realm – things like wider sidewalks with trees, landscaped medians, and significant roadway improvements – typically attract new development. Mueller itself is a positive influence as well; McGuire said he'd already seen the new retail and homes there begin to raise up the whole neighborhood.

"When you see what other cities have done and you look at Airport Boulevard, it's kind of a no-brainer," commented Dennis McDaniel, whose company is a general partner and manager for Highland Village, a strip shopping center across Lamar from Midtown Commons. His group is planning to redevelop it following a similar transit-oriented model. "I'm really encouraged by [Chris Riley's] creativity and the attitudes of other members of council," he said. "I see all that land along there turning over for a higher use."

The Dying Mall

In the middle of the stretch is the gasping Highland Mall. These days, the expanse of parking lot surrounding it is largely empty of cars. About 40% of the retail space is vacant. In the spring of 2009, Dillard's sued the mall's owners for letting it become a "ghost town." The co-owners – Simon Property Group and General Growth Properties (which manages it, and which declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy in April 2009) – countersued, claiming breach of contract, "business disparagement," and "interference with business relations," the *Austin Business Journal* reported.

Clearly Highland Mall needs a fresh vision of its own. Many cities work with mall owners and master developers to transform outdated malls into well-designed town centers. The huge tract could serve as an economic engine for a whole corridor-remake effort, said Riley; others reported that investment groups are already circling like vultures around the property. The worst-case scenario would be another Northcross Mall debacle – in which the owner quietly got city administrative approval of a site plan for an uninspired redo anchored by a Wal-Mart. Northcross owner Lincoln Property Group largely ignored the city's new commercial design standards and neighborhood goals, generating furious outcry by residents, lawsuits, and much embarrassment and frustration for council members. Riley isn't worried about a repeat; as a practical matter, he said, Highland Mall's ownership is so fractured that nothing can happen quickly there. (But in November, it was reported that Simon is exploring the acquisition of its main rival, General Growth Properties, whose bankruptcy was described by Reuters as "the biggest real estate failure in U.S. history.") But council might be wise to take preemptive action now to ensure city planning input on a mall redevelopment – such as requiring its approval (and/or a conditional use permit, which triggers public hearings) for any new site plan submitted.

In the end, said Riley, piloting this corridor redevelopment and form-based code project is a "very valuable parallel effort" to developing a comprehensive plan for Austin. "It seems like we're positioned to keep doing more of the same; to preserve existing neighborhoods, we'll tend to keep sprawling outwards," he observed. "Corridors present a very appealing opportunity to accommodate some of that growth, in a way that would support a whole range of community interests." They're a place to realize abstract goals that citizens have identified in early comprehensive planning sessions, such as more affordable housing and reduced household transportation costs. Applying a form-based code to Airport Boulevard, Riley said, "offers a way to make concrete progress on the kinds of theories we'll talk about in the Comprehensive Plan." To implement the "grand strategy," he said, we need a specific project that "burrows into the details, the tactics of how it can happen."

While we're at it, how about a citizen contest to rename the road once again? With namesake Mueller Airport long gone, the name is now as outdated as Sixties sprawl, and it confuses visitors trying to catch a plane. Rechristening it just might help rally a rebirth. Boundless Boulevard, perhaps?

See Chris Riley's presentation on "Re-inventing Austin's Corridors" [here \[2MB PDF\]](#). For examples of large-scale corridor planning projects around the country, see the Project for Public Spaces publication "Great Corridors, Great Communities" at www.pps.org/pdf/bookstore.

What Is Form-Based Code?

BY KATHERINE GREGOR

Share

Digg Twitter Facebook Del.icio.us LinkedIn
Email Print article

COMMENTS

6

Zoning outside of the city center is to liberal. [hlowe](#) Jan 07, 2010 - 10:42 am

"City Council policy now favors central density over sprawl." That's great!
Take a look at San Diego

Zoning outside of the city center is to liberal. [hlowe](#) Jan 07, 2010 - 12:58 pm

"City Council policy now favors central density over sprawl." That's great!
Take a look at San Diego, because it is almost builtout, older areas are renewed, vs. builders sprawling out to new areas like they do here in Austin, resulting in dying areas. We need to control sprawl (thru zoning) first.

think big [MartinkThomen](#) Jan 08, 2010 - 03:36 pm

Timely article. Because it's important to get in front of the issues, especially the redevelopment of Highland Mall. I think property owners and city leaders should think big and into the future. How about burying the Cap Metro rail road track from north of N. Lamar to east of the interstate? That and giving Airport Blvd a diet (decreasing its width) would free up lots of land. Maybe the cost benefit would be tough today, but think about how valuable that land would be in the future. Cap Metro could create entire (large) parcels to lease, sell and finance more rail. They should also run fiber optics and bury all of the utilities and make it not only a transportation, but an innovative information-based corridor.

Airport on the East Side [StuartGourd](#) Jan 09, 2010 - 02:32 pm

We need to make sure that any redevelopment corridor along Airport Blvd. also includes the area east of I-35, and not just to service Mueller. There is a lot of dynamism on the East side of Austin, and many working and middle-class individuals and families are moving there for the relative affordability and friendly character.

Riley's ideas [abniceguy](#) Jan 10, 2010 - 07:18 pm

This stretch of Airport Blvd would be ideal for adult bookstores, topless clubs and halfway houses, all would generate jobs, increased property taxes and bring to life an otherwise dead part of Austin.

Airport on the East side [CentralEastfor55yrs](#) Jan 11, 2010 - 11:21 am

I would welcome further development of Airport Blvd as well as other areas of Central East Austin but, our City council, Police Dept and Neighborhood Assoc need to be more aggressive in resolving 3 major problems that put a negative image on East Austin--1. numerous cars parked on the front yard of single family homes 2. more enforcement of pickup of trash, debris on front/side

POST A COMMENT

UserName: Password:

-or- you can:

 [Connect with Facebook](#)

Headline (optional):

Don't have an account?

[Create an account](#)

[Forgot your username/password?](#)

[Why should I create an account?](#)

Comment:

Permission to Print. Letter to the editor.

RELATED STORIES**What Is Form-Based Code?**

BY KATHERINE GREGOR

FURTHER READING**Keywords**

for this story

- Airport Boulevard
- form-based zoning
- Chris Riley
- Tamale House
- Quality Seafood
- Mueller

CALENDAR TODAY

Texas Stars

BLOGS

- City Gets Into the News Biz
- Pushy Polls
- Execution Exaggeration

FORUMS

- Reinventing Airport Boulevard
- Supports Smoking Ban
- Naked If I Want To

ARCHIVESMore from **January 8, 2010**[News](#)[Arts](#)[Books](#)[Food](#)[Screens](#)[Music](#)[Columns](#)[Sports](#)Browse the **Archives** by[Issue](#)[Author](#)[Column](#)[Review](#)[Section](#)

More by

Katherine Gregor**Central Library Design****Aims for Adaptability**

January 8, 2010

Architects hope new library will suit surroundings and patrons for long time to come

City Launches Carbon Calculator, Hosts Climate Expo

January 8, 2010

The Climate Protection Program starts off 2010 with a bang

Top 9 Developing**Stories** January 1, 2010

1) PLANNING-A-GO-GO This year saw a harmonic convergence of major planning efforts shaping the region. If properly synced up,...

Developing Stories: What to Do With**Waterloo** December 25, 2009

Turning Waterloo Park into a beach – and other fanciful ideas

Copyright © 1995-2010 Austin Chronicle Corp. All rights reserved.

[HOME](#) | [NEWS](#) | [ARTS](#) | [BOOKS](#) | [FOOD](#) | [SCREENS](#) | [MUSIC](#) | [CALENDAR](#) | [CITY GUIDE](#) | [CLASSIFIEDS](#) | [PERSONALS](#) | [PROMOTIONS](#)

[best of austin](#) | [find a paper](#) | [submit an event](#) | [info](#) | [advertise with us](#) | [national advertising](#) | [contact](#) | [privacy](#) | [oops!](#)