

CENTRAL AUSTIN

New vision for Airport Boulevard raises business owners' concerns



A new 'vision plan' for Airport Boulevard, seen looking south from Koenig Lane, would add medians, angled parking, more green spaces and pedestrian walkways to the stretch of road between North Lamar Boulevard and Interstate 35.

Plans would draw bikes, pedestrians but might hamper cars, some say

By **Juan Castillo**

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Ambitious city plans to reinvent Airport Boulevard might not come to fruition for many years, and they depend first on writing the development rules intended to achieve the desired look. But elements of the early vision already are raising concerns among some business owners on the bustling commercial strip.

The city envisions transforming the 2½-mile stretch of Airport between North Lamar Boulevard and Interstate 35 into an attractive, pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly mix of public spaces and retail and residential development. Last week, residents and business owners got their first look at the work done so far by planners and designers.

Some business owners welcome attempts to revitalize the aging boulevard, but they also are raising questions about some of the signature features of what redevelopment might look like, such as medians and angled parking, which they say are not business-friendly.

Planners sought to allay concerns, stressing that nothing in the plan would force property owners or developers to make changes if they wish to continue using their property as it exists. Planners also emphasized that change on Airport will not come in a one-size-fits-all form and that specific locations for redesign features have not been decided.

"This is a vision plan. There's a lot of refinement that needs to go on," said Alan Holt, an urban designer for the City of Austin who is co-managing the project for the city.

Jay Narayana, a co-owner of Gate-

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VISION: Car convenience a plus for Airport, business owners say

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way Planning Group Inc., a Fort Worth-based consultant hired by the City Council to develop the proposed redesign, said the plan would guide development in the corridor for the next 30 to 40 years. "It won't happen overnight," Narayana said.

The plan would need City Council approval to be implemented. Under the vision, the city would invest in infrastructure improvements, and private developers would invest in new construction or improvements. Whether the city would offer incentives for development has not been decided.

Accessibility concerns

Ray McGuire, who has operated his McGuire's Clocks shop on Airport since 1986, said business owners oppose divided medians because they would reduce the ability of customers to turn into their stores. He said angled parking wouldn't work for businesses like his, either, because it would reduce accessibility as well as convenience.

A redesign plan could involve eliminating some storefront parking lots where appropriate to create on-street parking, Holt said.

"Why did I buy a building over here with parking space? Why can't I use it?" McGuire said. "I'm apprehensive. I'm just not comfortable taking somebody's word this may or

may not happen."

Planners envision a re-fashioned Airport as a place where people would want to live, shop, eat, hang out, walk and ride bikes. Bus lines and commuter rail run along the corridor. And plans to remake Highland Mall as Austin Community College classrooms and offices, with a mix of residential and retail, could give the redevelopment vision a jump start.

Today, there are few sidewalks along the sign-cluttered thoroughfare, which is lined with fast-food joints, strip malls, car lots and locally owned businesses, some in buildings dating to the 1940s. Pam Teich, a co-owner of the iconic 126-year-old confectioner Lammes Candies, applauded efforts to bring people—and potentially more customers—to the area.

"But whenever you start to look at inhibiting traffic in any form or fashion, obviously that concerns us," Teich said.

Lammes makes its products at the Airport location. Teich said some proposals, if implemented in her area, would make it impossible for Lammes to do business as a manufacturing plant because they would inhibit delivery of raw materials and reduce parking for employees and customers.

"Wouldn't we all love to see a beautiful area that people are proud to see and call their home? Sure. But how do you get about getting there is difficult," Teich said.

Narayana said one of the challenges on Airport is that many businesses have yawning driveways that open into

On the Web

www.airportboulevard.com

the busy roadway.

"It's pretty dangerous. There's really no differential between the parking lots, the sidewalk, the driveway — it's all one sheet of asphalt," Narayana said.

One option is to move parking from storefronts to the street, making it safer for bicyclists and pedestrians. Narayana said that as plans gel, planners would work individually with property owners.

Holt, the city planner, said the redesign won't look the same at every location up and down Airport. Planners are studying different locations to determine what's appropriate for parking, sidewalks, bike lanes and other design features.

Using form-based codes

The city wants to redevelop Airport using an emerging regulatory technique known as form-based codes. The codes address compatibility and relationships of neighborhoods, building designs, sidewalks, streets and public improvements.

Holt said redevelopment will occur in the natural course of how Airport grows, but with the codes, the city hopes to ensure that it happens in a way that contributes to a unified vision of what residents, businesses and other stakeholders want.

Built when the area was on the outskirts of town, Airport Boulevard was made for speed.

What are form-based codes?

A regulatory technique from the New Urbanism movement, form-based codes use physical form, rather than separation of land uses, for their organizing principle, according to the Form-Based Codes Institute.

The codes address relationships between building facades and public spaces, the form and mass of buildings in relation to one another, and the scale and types of streets and blocks. They are adopted into city or county law as regulations.

— Juan Castillo

Now the area is a densely populated part of the city, and the drag is anything but pedestrian-friendly.

But part of the appeal of having a business in the Airport Boulevard corridor is that it is easy to get there by car, said Thomas Gohring, who owns two businesses on Airport, Kick Butt Coffee and Master Gohring's Tai Chi & Kung Fu.

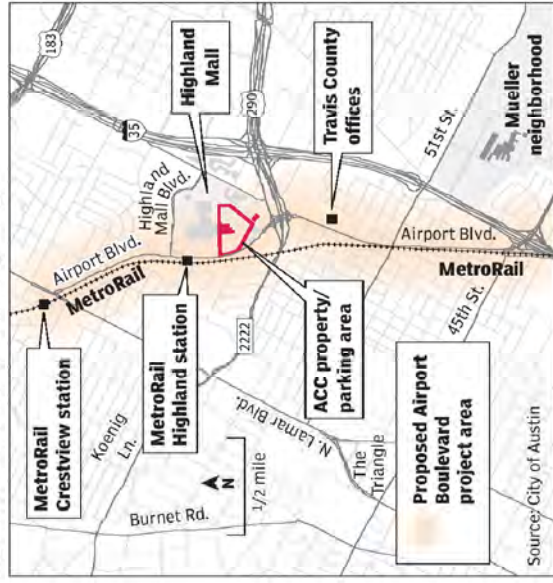
Gohring said a redesign must maintain Airport's convenience by car while adding a connectivity by foot and by bike that would be good for business.

"I don't think anyone right now wants to walk Airport Boulevard," Gohring said. "They might need to, but they don't want to," Gohring said some employees from nearby businesses regularly cross Airport to get to his coffee shop, but it's not an easy task in light of the traffic.

Gateway began work on the project in the spring. The vision unveiled last week at

A new look for Airport Boulevard?

The City of Austin wants future development along this stretch of Airport Boulevard governed by regulations aimed at making it more pedestrian-friendly, with a mix of retail and residential projects. Planners envision incorporating existing features, such as MetroRail, Highland Mall and Austin Community College.



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At last week's forum, planners heard praise for the idea of adding transitions between the Airport business corridor and adjacent neighborhoods with a mix of townhomes, small "patio lots" or apartment buildings, Narayana said.

In some areas, residences built up to the rear of commercial buildings and service alleys. Residents also favored adding a rail and/or bus transit station near Middle Fiskville Road and Airport.

Narayana said Gateway hopes to complete writing the regulatory codes that would guide redevelopment by early next year. More public meetings are planned in the coming months, and Gateway will go back to the City Council for more feedback, she said.

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