

Top Stories

Posted on Sun, Apr. 19, 2009 Comments (2) Recommend (1) Print E-Mail BOOKMARK

North Richland Hills has vibrant vision for rail station areas

BY CHRIS VAUGHN
cvaughn@star-telegram.com

NORTH RICHLAND HILLS — Talk of "new urbanism," a blend of retail, residential and revelry all in a walkable space, no longer belongs exclusively to Sundance Square, McKinney Avenue and Mockingbird Station.

Some historically car-oriented and strip-mall-dense suburbs speak the lingo now, and few suburbs in Tarrant County are catching on faster than North Richland Hills.

First came the city's Home Town NRH development, a new neighborhood with narrow streets, smaller lots and sidewalks near a shopping center with apartments above the stores.

Now comes a more ambitious, even audacious, plan involving the construction of two heavy-rail stations and the rezoning of close to 500 acres in the Iron Horse and Smithfield areas to create a big-city mixture of commercial, residential and small green spaces.

"The mayor, council and city staff realize their economic development future is dependent on being attractive to a broader market — empty-nesters, young professionals, singles, the types of people who traditionally are not attracted to the suburbs," said Scott Polikov, an urban planner in Fort Worth who was hired by the city to help craft the project.

The city's plan, put together over the past 24 months by city staff, elected leaders and Polikov's Gateway Planning Group, will spend the next few months winding its way through the Planning and Zoning Commission, then the City Council.

So far, little, if any, opposition has surfaced, which one city official called "unbelievable" considering the scope of the plans.

The city's target date for final approval of the zoning changes is July, which they say would allow enough time to apply for several million dollars in development grants that the North Central Texas Council of Governments will award in October.

"The face of North Richland Hills is changing," Mayor Oscar Trevino said. "We talk a lot about Loop 820 and the changes that will be happening there. We don't talk much about what's going on with rail. But it takes these kinds of discussions to know what we're going to look like in 20 to 25 years."

Not just a platform and parking

Despite being the third-largest city in Tarrant County, North Richland Hills is often overshadowed by other suburbs such as Mansfield, Southlake and Grapevine. But city officials are quick to point out that North Richland Hills lies strategically between downtown Fort Worth, Alliance Airport, Dallas/Fort Worth Airport and Arlington.

Their vision for new growth in their city arose from two developments — plans for a commuter rail line through North Richland Hills, and the success of Home Town NRH, which features some elements of mixed-use zoning.

The Fort Worth Transportation Authority, known as the T, wants to run a commuter rail line on existing freight tracks from southwest Fort Worth, to the north side, Haltom City, North Richland Hills, Grapevine and D/FW Airport. It aims to start service in 2013. North Richland Hills would have to join the T for stations to be built there.

"The mayor and council didn't want just a train platform surrounded by parking," said Mike Curtis, director of development services for North Richland Hills. "They wanted to look at what the possibilities could be."

Two stations, two parts of town, two looks

Related Content

A proposal for new urbanism

North Richland Hills is hoping to rezone about 500 acres in two areas to capitalize on commuter rail stations and transform the neighborhoods into more urban, walkable environments.

Related Tags (BETA)

mouse over a tag to see related stories

North Richland Hills Home Town NRH regional rail train stations Mike Curtis Smithfield Road Planning and Zoning Commission Sundance Square Fort Worth Transportation Authority Council of Governments Northeast Loop 820 FW Airport Iron Horse

Most-read stories

- Brisk sales of ammo are leading to shortage in Texas, nationwide
- A lost soul is found in an unmarked grave in Arlington
- North Richland Hills has vibrant vision for rail station areas
- Season is young but critics hot in pursuit of Rangers
- Chaos of Columbine moved hospitals to prepare for disaster

Pier 1 imports Gift Basket Giveaway In stores now. Tell us about your mom. We'll tell you about the perfect gift. C'mon. Tell us.

Pier 1 imports Gift Basket Giveaway In stores now. Tell us about your mom. We'll tell you about the perfect gift. C'mon. Tell us.



Drive The Truck of The Year
Click Here for Internet Savings!



Lynn Smith Chevrolet
Home of the \$14.95 oil, lube, filter and car wash!



Shopping with Accents
Click Here to Shop! Antiques, Gifts, Collectibles, Fashion, Beauty & More



Check out our Specials!
Click HERE to View Our New & Pre-Owned Inventory!



Get Away To Granbury!
Where Texas History AND Texas Hospitality Live! Click here for details.

Because North Richland Hills is hemmed in by other cities, its leaders said they needed some way to maximize their tax base and population, in addition to taking advantage of the volume of train riders they anticipate.

The goals for the two areas reflect the differences in each part of the city.

The zoning around the Smithfield station would take advantage of the area's historic character, churches and nearby neighborhoods and feature more shops, cafes and low-density apartments. City leaders want the Iron Horse station, in a mostly big-box retail and industrial area just north of Northeast Loop 820, to have denser and taller buildings for residences and businesses.

But overall, for a suburb largely built on the primacy of the freeway and two-car garage, the possibilities outlined in the plan are nothing short of revolutionary:

Two- to three-story buildings would allow businesses at street level and apartments above them.

The buildings would be at the sidewalk with parking in the back or side.

In certain areas, architectural styles would be enforced.

Businesses would not be allowed to have drive-throughs.

Parking would not be required for small businesses.

Certain streets, such as Main Street and Smithfield Road, would be narrowed to create on-street parking.

What they envision is people who live in far north Fort Worth or Keller driving to a rail station in North Richland Hills and staying for dinner or a drink after work, and they envision attracting young people or retirees to live in an apartment above a business because of the amenities and easy transportation nearby.

They see small businesses and "pocket parks" and pedestrians who can park once and visit multiple places.

Owners whose land uses do not comply with the new zoning, such as industrial and auto-related businesses, would be grandfathered in, officials said. City Planning Director John Pitstick believes that the requirements provide "flexibility for the current owners and predictability for the future."

Cynthia Waller, who lives in the Smithfield area, said she does not know the details of the plan but likes what she hears.

"It sounds very ambitious," she said. "Honestly, it would be nice to have more around here as far as restaurants. I don't know if we'll still be here when it all happens, but it would be a nice boost for the area."

Complementing, not replacing, the suburbs

Unlike Addison Circle or Sundance Square, Polikov said, North Richland Hills will have single-family neighborhoods nearby to help sustain the development.

What Polikov calls "first-ring suburbs" are getting into the concepts of mixed use more. Garland, Mesquite and Duncanville, he said, are all pursuing new-urbanism projects.

"This is nothing new," said Polikov, who serves on the board of the Congress for the New Urbanism. "We're just taking advantage of it in the Texas context. Some of the cities think it's an all-or-nothing proposition with urban villages. I don't see it replacing the suburban model of large-lot, single-family homes. I see it as complementing them. You need the full gamut of people who can live in your town.

"Why should you as a city force a retiree with income to leave town if he wants to walk to get a latte and a *New York Times*?"

The scope of the rezoning is massive and highly atypical, North Richland Hills officials said. But they say they want to rezone such a large area to make sure that future mixed-use development blends with the existing neighborhoods.

Most of the questions and concerns about the rezoning have come from homeowners in the Smithfield area worried about commercial encroachment, and city officials say they have varied the zoning to ensure that neighborhoods of single-family homes are protected.

"This is a multi-year development," Curtis said. "We want something that when it is complete is going to fit into the surrounding neighborhoods."

Joining the T and raising the money

One big hurdle remains, though — North Richland Hills is not part of the T, and until it is, it cannot have a train stop.

Cities pay for T service, but since North Richland Hills has reached the state limit on the sales tax it charges, it would have to come up with another way to raise the necessary money. The city is pushing legislation in Austin that would allow the city to join the T, provided voters approve a funding mechanism.

The redevelopment of the Iron Horse and Smithfield areas is not completely dependent on train stations, but city officials acknowledge that the rail line is the biggest draw.

"If we don't plan for it today, our citizens are going to wonder why they can't get on that train when it goes by," Trevino said.

More online

Information on the proposals, www.nrhtx.com/RegionalRail/index.aspx

Proposed commuter rail route, www.sw2nerail.com

CHRIS VAUGHN,  817-390-7547

POWERED BY  Pluck

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)