

# Imagining a new Airport Boulevard

## *City seeks to transform shabby commercial strip to pedestrian-friendly mix of retail, residential development*

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Robert Vasquez knows tacos.

For 33 years from his Airport Boulevard haunt, the Tamale House, Vasquez has served up flour tortillas stuffed with staples from the Tex-Mex cookbook. The tacos — his mother's recipes — are still under a dollar, there's still no air conditioning, and the line to order still tails out the door. Change happens here about as often as Longhorn die-hards change colors.

The same might be said for much of Airport Boulevard, a dizzyingly sign-cluttered thoroughfare made for driving and long known for its iconic fixtures — Lammes Candies, Mrs. Johnson's Bakery — and its fast food joints, strip malls, tire shops and car lots. Some of the buildings date to the late 1940s and long ago lost their shine.

"Many have a dilapidated look and seem to be ready for some kind of reinvestment," Austin City Council Member Chris Riley said.

Some who live and work around here see the potential for dramatic change. Led by Riley, proponents envision transforming Airport between North Lamar Boulevard and Interstate 35 into an attractive, pedestrian-friendly mix of public spaces and retail and residential development, perhaps, in some cases, with both uses co existing in the same, taller buildings.

The 2 1/2-mile stretch could become a place where people would want to live and shop, eat and hang out, walk and ride bikes, and be close to the bus lines and commuter rail, said Scott Polikov, president of Gateway Planning Group Inc., a Fort Worth-based firm selected by the City Council last month to lead the effort to make that vision reality.

Polikov said redevelopment could leverage existing features, such as the Capital Metro rail line, which runs parallel to Airport; Highland Mall, which has been mired in decline; and Travis County's plans to consider growing its already large cluster of offices on the street.

"This is an opportunity for Airport Boulevard to take advantage of what it is, the people it has, its authenticity, its experience over time, but to reinvent itself," Polikov told the City Council in September.

But before reinvention begins, Gateway must write new regulations that would serve as the blueprint for development. The City Council agreed to spend \$478,000 for the project. If the city and Gateway reach a contract agreement later this month, Gateway would begin its work next year, using an emerging regulatory technique never tried in Austin: form-based code, a term that, for now, has some scratching their heads.

"I'm a little fuzzy on what it means," said Ray McGuire, who has run his McGuire's Clocks shop on Airport since 1986. Like Vasquez, McGuire said he has concerns about the new rules' potential impact on his pocketbook and on the small businesses that dominate the boulevard.

"Just don't handcuff the commercial property owners," McGuire said.

Polikov said the code is a holistic approach to writing development rules intended to achieve a specific look and form for an area. The rules address compatibility and relationships between neighborhoods, building designs, sidewalks, streets and public improvements.

In writing form-based code projects in other cities, Polikov said, Gateway has taken the approach that small-business owners in non conforming buildings could stay unless they make substantial changes or investments in their buildings, which would trigger the new development standards.

"We think it's important to encourage the business community there today to stay as long as they want to," Polikov said. "Let the market decide when it's time to stay or go. The last thing you want to do is empty out a business in the name of a bunch of progress."

He told the City Council that Gateway would begin by engaging merchants and residents to get their thoughts "about what they think the opportunities and problems are."

#### What the people want

Drawing first on recommendations from neighbors and property owners, the new development rules could take a year and a half to write. They would need City Council approval, and there's no guarantee that, even if approved, development would follow. How potential improvements and development would be financed isn't certain, either.

Some question what will happen if the market can't support a reinvented Airport Boulevard.

"The current market supports the type of land use that is there. It's a lot of single-story commercial buildings, a lot of locally owned buildings," said Michael Wilt, director of government relations with the Real Estate Council of Austin.

Wilt said the council is eager to see revitalization in the corridor and is represented on a city-appointed advisory board formed to help in public outreach on the project.

"But if landlords or property owners now under a new code are encouraged to build something that's vertical and mixed-use, what if they can't bring in the tenants to support something like that? How do we address that gap?" Wilt said.

There are no guarantees development will follow, said Riley, the city council member. "But what we can do is work with property owners and potential developers to see what it would take to achieve the kind of vision that we arrive at for this corridor," he said.

According to Polikov, Airport Boulevard isn't attracting the kind of development desired now because it was designed for moving cars rapidly. But property owners will want to participate in redevelopment because, under the common vision, new investments at other properties would add value to their own, Polikov said. He told the council that Gateway would bring potential investors to the table.

In planning efforts, such as Envision Central Texas, Austin residents have stated a desire to see urban development near public transit stops and along main corridors, Riley said.

The council, too, has talked often about promoting more pedestrian-friendly development in the central city. But with the commercial standards and development rules in place today, Riley said, it is still difficult to produce the kinds of corridors many would like to see.

"You're never really going to see that much change. You might see a building \u2026 but one building does not make a corridor," Riley said.

The form-based code project, Riley and Polikov said, could become the prototype for guiding redevelopment of other commercial strips in the city where walking is next to impossible.

#### What change means

"It's a great opportunity and probably long overdue," said Katrina Daniel, a state government employee who lives just off Airport Boulevard. Daniel said the street — "it's a highway" — was built when the area was the outskirts of town. Now it's the inner city and densely populated.

"It makes sense to make it more walkable and more bicycle-friendly. If you try to walk or bike now, it's pretty scary," Daniel said.

Neighborhood groups have been pushing for a revamped boulevard for years, said Thomas Gohring, who lives in nearby

Crestview and owns two businesses on Airport, Kick Butt Coffee and Master Gohring's Tai Chi & Kung Fu. Gohring said the boulevard has "a dead area. It's old Austin and kind of run-down, and in some parts it's beginning to revitalize on its own."

Gohring referred to the intersection of RM 2222 and Airport Boulevard, where new restaurants, a Spec's liquor store and other businesses have opened in recent years. Gohring opened his coffee shop there about 21/2 years ago.

He said it would be smart to give it direction "before it loosely and clumsily tries to become something on its own."

Airport Boulevard has the potential to become a North Austin version of South Congress Avenue, he said, "but with a smarter concept to start off with, from how they have people park to how to make it more pedestrian-friendly, even how they might integrate the light rail."

About the only drawback Gohring envisioned treads on the unknown. What if the landlord at the old strip mall where he's run his martial arts school for the past 15 years decides to sell the property to redevelopers?

Relocation costs could be high, though Gohring said another scenario could have him moving into a space that's being redeveloped.

But change could come hard on this street where one longtime business, I Luv Video, still rents DVDs — an increasing rarity in the age of mail subscription movie rentals.

The name of Vasquez's taco establishment might best illustrate a reluctance to change on the old Airport Boulevard. A stocky 69-year-old given to wearing guayaberas and to cracking wise, he stopped selling tamales 15 years ago when they fell out of favor, but it's always been the Tamale House.

"It'd be kind of ridiculous," he said, "to change the name now."

### **What is form-based code?**

A relatively new regulatory technique from the New Urbanism movement, form-based code uses physical form, rather than separation of uses, for its 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, the institute says.

The codes are adopted into city or county law as regulations.

They are an alternative to conventional zoning, which can create conflicts through its segregation of land uses and by micromanaging uses that might not work over time, said Scott Polikov, president of Gateway Planning Group Inc.

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