

# A 'boomburb' adopts New Urbanism

*A suburban Texas municipality approves one of the largest applications of the SmartCode and is working on a city-wide form-based code.*

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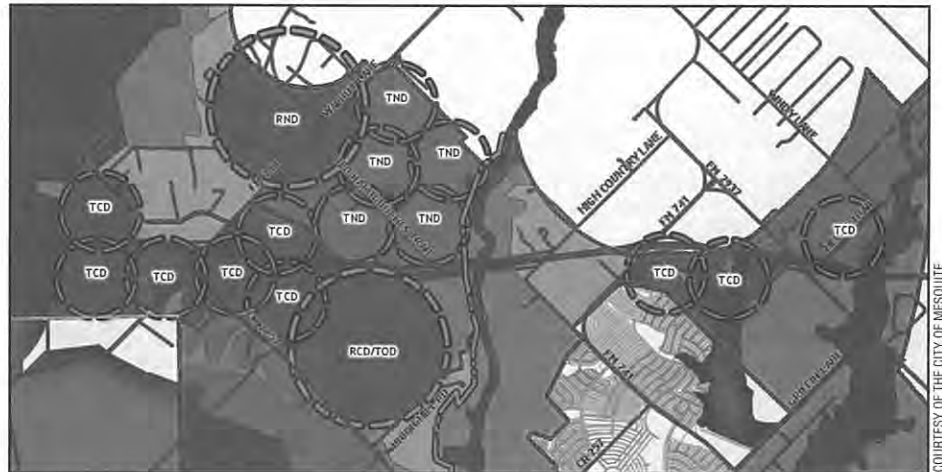
“Boomburbs,” as described by author Robert Lang, are suburban municipalities topping 100,000 people that have seen double-digit growth for at least three decades in a row. Most boomburbs were rural outposts in 1950, and although you may have not heard of many of them, they have accommodated a disproportionate share of the nation’s growth in the last half-century.

Mesquite, Texas, with 136,000 people, is a boomburb east of Dallas, but it is outside of what real estate analysts call the “favored quarter” — the area where the region’s highest valued growth has taken place in recent decades. That circumstance is reflected in property values that are lower than in north Dallas suburbs like Plano, McKinney, and Frisco. Mesquite’s image suffers as a consequence, as revealed in a 2006 survey of metropolitan Dallas residents. City officials are counting on new urban planning and zoning to shape growth and polish its image in the decades to come.

Development in boomburbs has largely ground to a halt recently, but Mesquite’s growth is expected to resume after the economy picks up. Mesquite’s relative proximity to downtown Dallas, its affordability, and a planned toll road contribute to its prospects.

Much of the city’s future growth will occur in a 2.2-square-mile area annexed by the city in 2006 and in a 19-square-mile extraterritorial jurisdiction — the latter being an unincorporated area where the city claims partial regulatory control. The SmartCode was recently adopted for the entire area, 21.2 square miles, one of the largest applications of this code to date. Richard Gertson, city director of community development, and Arti Waghray, city planner, customized the code to Mesquite.

The SmartCode is mandatory in the annexed area. In the extraterritorial jurisdiction, developers can avoid zoning approval altogether — unless they need water and wastewater service, according to planner Scott Polikov, a SmartCode ex-



A portion of the regional sector plan for Mesquite includes the cluster of town centers and traditional neighborhood developments along I-20 planned according to the SmartCode.

pert based in Fort Worth. Forgoing water may be practical for a handful of houses, but for any sizable project the city’s consent is needed to form a utility district, giving Mesquite leverage to require that the SmartCode be followed, he says.

The planning area can be thought of in three parts. About a third, consisting of floodplains, steep slopes, and other environmentally sensitive areas, will be preserved as open space. Another third, mostly in the eastern part of the extraterritorial jurisdiction, will be reserved for future development. Limited development is allowed in this sector, but this city intends to use development agreements to protect rural land. The final third is the growth area, where the city wants most of the development to take place. Focused on the I-20 corridor, the growth is designated as town centers, traditional neighborhood developments, and clustered land developments.

If the city is built according to plan, the SmartCode could result in the development of about a dozen connected TNDs and town centers in one part of the city. Officials hope that development will give the city a new character as well as improve possibilities for transit.

The city has hired Polikov’s company, Gateway Planning Group, to conduct a charrette in January for a significant parcel — perhaps the first to come under development as regulated by the SmartCode. The city is hoping that the regulating plan produced by the charrette will encourage the developer, Heartland, to build a town center. The parcel is 150

acres on a major interchange of Interstate 20, Polikov says.

## REGIONAL SECTOR PLANS

The SmartCode governs growth at three scales: sectors, communities and Transects. Sectors address preservation and development at the regional scale and contain one or more community types; community types are constructed around Transect zones, which set placement and form standards for buildings, streets, parks, and other urban elements. Only the larger applications of the SmartCode, like Mesquite’s, attempt to govern regional growth. Mesquite’s comprehensive plan incorporates what the SmartCode refers to as a “regional sector plan.”

The city planning staff identified areas, or sectors, where land is protected from growth in perpetuity, reserved for future growth, or intended for growth at three intensities. In the growth sectors, several community types are permitted — regional center developments, traditional neighborhood developments, and clustered land developments. Mesquite’s comprehensive plan goes beyond the SmartCode slightly by allowing two additional community types in the growth sectors — regional neighborhood developments and town center developments. These community types have specific characteristics — for example, there are parameters for the percentage of land allocated to each Transect zone. In using a regional sector plan, Mesquite is testing the waters for regional use of the Smart-

Code. The plan received the APA Texas Chapter Comprehensive Plan Award.

Mesquite also approved a SmartCode in 2007 for an infill revitalization area called Truman Heights, and has hired and has hired Clarion Associates of Denver and 180 Degrees Design Studio of Kansas City to create a unified form-based code for the entire city based on the SmartCode and Transect but rewritten and with different graphics.

Mesquite is the first of 54 boomburb in the US that is in the process of completely

revamping its codes according to new urbanist principles. Others are moving in that direction. Centennial, Colorado, has a town center, Belmar; that is a national model for such projects. Mesa, Arizona, (see short article on page 18) has annexed five square miles where a new town center is planned.

The website smartcodecomplete.com lists 23 jurisdictions that have approved a SmartCode, and 67 more that are in the process of doing so. ♦

Encouraged by the Dilworth Neighborhood Association, which was intent on having East Boulevard function as the neighborhood's main street, CDOT reduced the travel lanes to one in each direction, and striped the street's center lane as a left-turn lane that could be used by vehicles going in either direction. Center islands were installed to help pedestrians cross safely. The space previously occupied by the fourth lane was converted into bike lane in each direction.

"We used to have people traveling 30 to 55 mph," Gallagher says. "Now the most prudent driver dictates the traffic speed. There's no hard acceleration and deceleration. The noise level came down. Now they can have outdoor cafes. It becomes really positive for placemaking. It's kind of become an active restaurant row. I think what we've achieved is sort of a 'park once' environment."

Gallagher points out that road diets are most commonly done on routes carrying 10,000 to 12,000 vehicles; thus, "20,000 was breaking new ground for Charlotte and for many places across the country." Because of the alterations, East Boulevard now accommodates about 22,000 vehicles, in a much calmer atmosphere. In the year after the project was completed, CDOT found that the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile speed (the speed of vehicles going faster than 84 percent of the traffic) had fallen about 5 mph, to about 37 to 38 mph. Accidents fell 20 percent. The

## Charlotte becomes a transportation leader

*Road diets, a streetcar to the airport, and transit-oriented development are all being pursued by North Carolina's largest city.*

PHILIP LANGDON

It wasn't terribly long ago that Charlotte, North Carolina, was a typical Sunbelt city, happy with highways, office parks, and cul-de-sacs. But over the past several years, Charlotte's Department of Transportation (CDOT), with support from elected officials, has started adopting techniques associated with smart growth and New Urbanism.

A recent visit by *New Urban News* to the 672,000-population city found progress on these fronts:

- **Traffic-calming.** CDOT has implemented several "road diets" — on streets carrying up to 21,000 vehicles per day.

- **Street connections.** Connectivity standards that began taking effect in 2001 have enabled firefighters to get to emergencies faster, and they're seen as a partial answer to traffic congestion.

- **Mass transit.** Having inaugurated its first 10-mile light-rail line in November 2007, Charlotte is now looking toward installing a streetcar that will eventually run from downtown to the airport.

- **Transit-oriented development.** Approximately \$1.5 billion of TOD — not counting projects in the downtown — is under way, according to Interim Transportation Director Danny Pleasant.

### ROAD DIETS

To evolve from an auto-oriented city to a balanced and more walkable com-

munity, some of Charlotte's broader, higher-speed roads have needed to be slowed down. Probably the best example is the redesign of a one-mile section of East Boulevard, in the Dilworth neighborhood adjacent to downtown.

Prior to being redone in 2006, East Boulevard carried about 21,000 vehicles a day and had four travel lanes, each 9.5 feet wide, plus many driveway cuts. Traffic speeds varied greatly, and drivers frequently made left turns into businesses from the two center lanes, resulting in "a lot of jockeying of travel lanes, a lot of accidents, sideswipes," says Dan Gallagher, manager of CDOT's planning section.

### Housing goes up next to a light-rail station in Charlotte



PHOTO BY PHILIP LANGDON