

Groundbreaking anticipated for TND and campus

Texas A&M University hopes to start work early in 2009 on a San Antonio campus that would be the centerpiece of a \$2 billion traditional neighborhood development (TND) called Verano at City South. On 694 acres donated by the Verano Land Group, the university expects to build a branch campus that could eventually accommodate 25,000 students.

Last fall, enrollment at a fledgling A&M branch in the San Antonio area amounted to just a few hundred students, but by the end of this year, administrators expect it to grow to 1,500. When that number is reached, it will be the signal for A&M, which is based in College Station, to start developing the entire new branch campus.

The university operation and the mixed-use development being planned around it will together occupy 2,700 acres near the Loop 410 highway on San Antonio's South Side (see March 2007 *New Urban News*).

Verano Land Group, a development firm owned by the Las Vegas-based investment group Triple L Management, offered the land to A&M at no cost. In return, the Texas legislature promised to provide \$40 million in tuition revenue bonds to help establish the campus. Some academic programs are expected to be operating at the site by the 2010-11 school year.

The first section of a dense town center will face a multiway boulevard directly opposite the campus, says Scott Polikov, president of Fort Worth-based Gateway Planning Group, lead designer for Verano. The intent is to create a walkable community with a mix of uses and a balanced ecosystem, Polikov says. To help ensure the project's environmental soundness, Polikov says, "we hired the sustainability expert Pliny Fisk."

SMARTCODE AS CATALYST

Before Verano was proposed, Polikov had been volunteering his time to help apply the SmartCode to a 45-square-mile sector plan that Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. devised for the South Side. Triple L, led by Ralph Lampman, found the emerging urban strategy attractive. The result last December was that the city amended the sector plan to include a "regional center" — Verano at City South.

The city, Bexar County, the San Antonio River Authority, and a community college authorized up to \$250 million in tax-increment financing (TIF) to pay for pocket parks, parking garages, mass transit connections, and other infrastructure. More than 20 parks and plazas will be created. "This is the largest incentive package in the history of San Antonio," Polikov says.

"We project a tax base of \$2 billion for Verano at build-out."

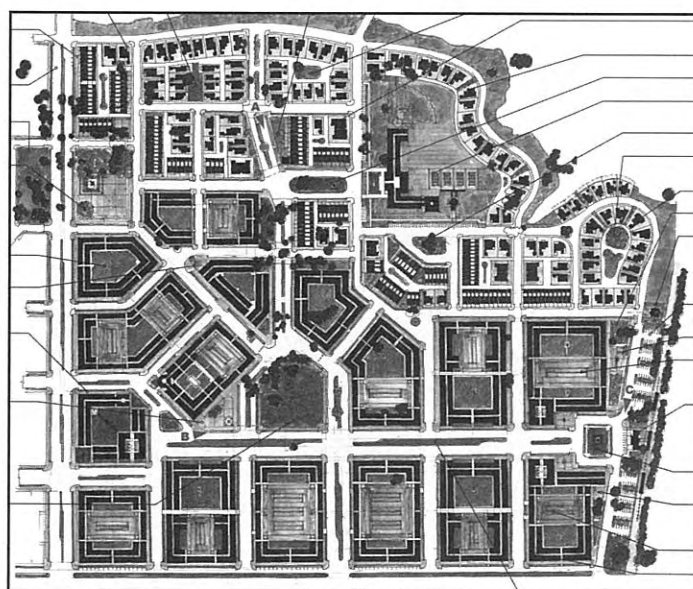
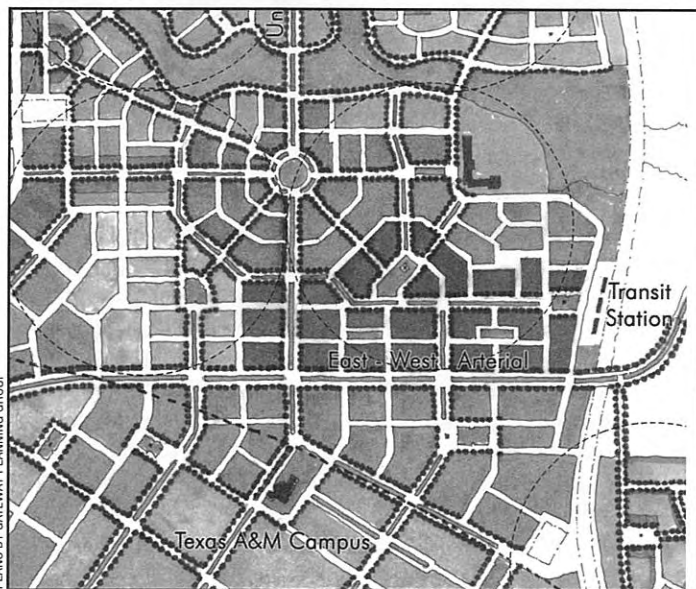
Pate Engineers of San Antonio is designing the main roadway; Gateway is reviewing Pate's work to make sure it supports an urban setting. Verano's planning is premised on the idea that there will ultimately be regional commuter rail, a bus rapid transit system to downtown San Antonio, and a university shuttle system.

A point system is being devised that will award density bonuses in return for the development's adhering to SmartCode best practices in water management, land use, transit, and other matters.

Once the master development plan is approved — which is expected Oct. 22 — all subsequent platting and site plans will be reviewed by city staff and given approval "if they're consistent with the SmartCode regulation plan and the original zoning," he says. "We will never have to go back to a political body again for approval. We created this to avoid the NIMBY problem."

By completion in 2037, Verano may have 10,000 to 12,000 housing units of varied prices and types, along with a sports complex, a teaching hospital, industrial space, offices, stores, and restaurants. Sasaki Associates and the local firm Marmon Mok Architecture designed the campus. ♦

A portion of the Verano plan, at left, shows how the new neighborhoods will connect to the Texas A&M campus. A close up of the downtown, at right, includes about 15 blocks of high-intensity development with structured parking. The transit station square is at lower right of this plan.



PLANS BY GATEWAY PLANNING GROUP