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Leander moves forward on high-density development

Issue expected to pass easily tonight, mayor says

By **Anita Powell**

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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Leander's City Council and planning and zoning commission will vote tonight on specially tailored zoning ordinances for the city's proposed 2,300-acre transit-oriented development, including annexing land for the project.

Studies done by the planners, Austin-based Gateway Planning Group, predict that the project will add nearly \$2 billion to Leander's tax base and 30,000 residents to the city.

Developments with similar goals have been planned in Robinson Ranch in North Austin, Plaza Saltillo in East Austin and at the site of the former Robert Mueller Municipal Airport. What will set apart Leander's project, which city officials and residents are calling "the T.O.D.," or "Todd, " are the specific codes that will govern it.

Planners and city officials are developing a zoning code that will allow builders to quickly know what they can and cannot build within the development, eliminating delays.

"There's nothing like it in Central Texas," planner Scott Polikov said Wednesday.

City officials expect that the zoning ordinances will pass easily tonight.

"We are really excited about the T.O.D.," Leander Mayor John Cowman said. ". . . I do think Leander is well on its way to prosperity."

After a one-week design session in January, planners unveiled images of the project, located in northeastern Leander east of U.S. 193 and north of FM 2243. The images showed a mini-metropolis with sidewalk cafes, walkable neighborhoods and small parks, centered on a Capital Metro commuter rail station.

Council Member David Siebold said he thinks it will be a win-win situation for commuters and residents.

"I wish we could approve this and wake up Friday morning and it's complete, and go out there Friday night, and have a dozen restaurants to choose from, or a dozen bands to go see," he said. "It's going to give everyone here a wider choice of dining, entertainment and housing options."

Some elected officials have questioned the project, saying they have not received enough information on its financing to make a decision. Other city officials dispute that claim.

"Before I sign a contract to buy a vehicle or buy a piece of property, I need to know what it's going to cost," Council Member John Perez said.

The council is expected in coming months to approve a tax increment financing plan for the project, which will allow developers to recoup half of their infrastructure costs by drawing from a city fund set aside for that purpose.

Planning and zoning commission member Frank Stiles whose veterinary practice will be involuntarily included in the development, said he didn't have details on how the project would be financed.

"We don't have any information on it," said Stiles, who noted that he may excuse himself from voting because he owns property in the development. "I don't think we should be voting on it until we get more information on it."

Leander Community Development Director Jim Bechtol, who oversees the city's planning and zoning commission, said city officials have been closely involved in the project from the beginning.



Polikov said his planning group has made numerous presentations to elected officials and within the community.

Stiles and Perez said that the issue will likely pass tonight and in the future.

"This is going to go through," Stiles said. "One way or another, this is going to go through."

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