Downtown Plano
A Vision and Strategy for Creating a Transit Village
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Across America, people are searching for places that are real, not manufactured. They seek places with the feel and meaning that only comes with time. They want places that are very much connected to the world, but where life’s daily needs do not require endless trips by car. They desire those rare places where you can walk to a store, restaurant or park and talk to friends along the way. Fortunately, there is a special place like this very close by — Historic Downtown Plano.

Downtown Plano is being rediscovered. Once the commercial center of a small farming town, Plano’s main street today offers unique shops, galleries and a small theater. Haggard Park, the center of downtown, is a great place for a concert, picnic or a romantic stroll. The neighborhoods surrounding downtown are graced with old trees and historic homes. Downtown is attracting new businesses and residents appreciative of its unique character. Soon, downtown will be connected to Dallas by light rail transit service, further stimulating growth and opportunity. This report presents a vision and strategy for downtown Plano’s future.

**A Historic Beginning**

On February 16, 1907, the Plano City Council granted a franchise for 50 years to the Texas Traction Company to operate an interurban railway from McKinney to Dallas. Rail service began July 1, 1908. A rail car left Plano each hour for Dallas, limited to a speed of 8 miles per hour as it passed through the city. Later, the Texas Traction Company and other similar railways combined under the name Texas Electric Railway and established continuous service from Denison to Waxahachie. Low fares and dependable service made interurban rail operations successful within the region. By the 1920s, however, increasing automobile travel resulted in a decline of passenger service revenue. The focus of service shifted to freight through World War II. The continuing development of highways and automotive transportation led to the close of the interurban railway on December 31, 1948.
The interurban railway was important to the development of Plano, helping the city secure its position as the trade center for southwest Collin County. During this period, many rural communities in Collin County failed to establish a sense of place and mature into cities, but in Plano, transportation, agriculture, trade and residence successfully converged. Today, the Interurban Railway Station Museum celebrates the significance of the Texas Electric Railway to Plano’s early development.

New Opportunity

Fifty years following the close of interurban rail service, downtown Plano is poised for renewed growth as a transit village. DART will open light rail service to the City of Plano in 2003. The downtown rail stop will be less than 300 feet from the historic Interurban Station Museum. During peak service hours, DART trains will arrive and depart at 15-minute intervals. A trip from Plano to downtown Dallas will take approximately 35-40 minutes.

Major metropolitan areas throughout the United States are building light-rail systems to improve mobility and environmental quality. This strategy is strongly related to changing land use patterns to reduce auto-dependency. Station area planning is a means for optimizing the land use and transportation relationship. Station area plans vary widely due to the role and context of stations. The location of rail corridors and stations is typically based on opportunity rather than choice. Land use and road systems around stations are often already established. This severely limits opportunities for coordinating land use and transportation. As a result, planning efforts often focus on feeder bus routes, vehicular access and parking. When new development or redevelopment opportunities exist, station area planning uses the principles of transit oriented development (TOD) to encourage land use that generates transit trips, and development design that makes transit and pedestrian travel convenient and enjoyable. This is the case for downtown Plano, where there is an excellent opportunity to develop a transit village.
Transit Village Concept

A transit village integrates residential and commercial uses in a compact, pedestrian-oriented environment surrounding a transit station. The concept of a transit village has its historical roots in the streetcar suburb and new town developments of a hundred years ago. At that time, transit and land development were joined to build ridership and disperse urban population. A modern transit village, unlike its antecedents, is typically an infill or redevelopment project within an established urban or suburban area. The transit village attempts to generate ridership by clustering development within walking distance of the station.

A transit village may be primarily a place of employment or residence; the latter being more common to suburban settings. The land use mix within a transit village must achieve synergy, whereby each use supports and reinforces other uses. Mere compatibility of use is not sufficient. The amount of residential development must be significant to create a market. Retail and service businesses must relate to the needs of the local market. Open space, recreation and civic needs must also be addressed. The primary core of a transit village should be contained within a 10-minute walk of the transit stop. A transit village is not intended to be a self-sufficient entity, but a truly interactive community where auto-based travel by residents is more by choice than necessity. Commercial, recreational, and civic uses should serve a larger market than just the local residents. They increase the area’s role as a community activity center and reinforce the use of the transit system. The design elements of a transit village are similar to those of traditional neighborhood development (TND) and new urbanism. Major design elements are reviewed on the following page.
Design Elements of Traditional Neighborhood Development

**Village Center** The village center is the area of greatest density and interaction. It is where people meet, conduct business, and engage in leisure, entertainment and celebration. The center is a place frequented by nearly all residents. Those living outside the village perceive it as a place of community importance. The design model of the village center is usually the main street or town square of a small town.

**Grid Streets** A transit village should have a tight grid pattern of streets to ease circulation and promote interaction. Small blocks make walking easy, and frequent intersections discourage speeding vehicular traffic. The street grid should create a regular pattern, but occasional offsets and irregularities create visual interest and unique development sites. Street width should vary (22'-36'). Large divided thoroughfares should be avoided as they tend to detract from the pedestrian environment of a village.

**Development Grain** A transit village should principally consist of a fine grain of narrow lots and multiple buildings, both attached and detached. A few large anchor uses are desirable to generate activity, establish identity and induce visits by people residing outside the village. Development intensity should decrease from the center to edge.

**Mixed Use** Mixing land uses increases the likelihood of symbiotic interaction. Land use can be mixed horizontally (side-by-side) or vertically (stacked). It is natural and desirable for sub-areas within the village to be either predominately—but not exclusively—residential or non-residential.

**Common Open Space** A transit village should be relatively dense and compact. Common open space should be provided instead of private open space (such as yards and landscaping) to create a compact development pattern. A central open space or plaza is often located in the village center.

**Street as a Place** A street is more than a means of travel. A street is an outdoor room framed by buildings. A street is a common shared environment. It is a place where people meet, conduct business and play. The appearance of the street (including pavement, curbs, walks and fixtures) sets the quality of the place. Streets should be designed to discourage high speed traffic, thereby making the streets safer for walking and biking. Buildings should be brought close to the street (generally a maximum of 15' behind curb) to frame the street and connect the public and private environments.

**Shared Parking** Like open space, parking must be managed to maintain a compact development form conducive to pedestrian travel. The amount of code required parking should be reduced below standard requirements and organized in shared lots and garages, generally located on the perimeter of the village. On-street parking is encouraged to reduce the need for parking lots and reduce the speed of vehicular traffic. On-street parking also provides a separation between pedestrians and traffic.

**Linked Neighborhoods** The core of the transit village is typically too small in size and population to support service businesses on its own. Developing a strong link to nearby neighborhoods is critical to creating a larger retail market and generating transit ridership. This linkage should be both physical and psychological. Physical ties are primarily established by street connections. Psychological ties are developed through providing services that residents of these neighborhoods will use on a regular basis.

**Entry Corridors** The village should be accessible to the larger community. Entry corridors must balance the need for accommodating traffic volume with the need to maintain a pedestrian oriented environment. Major thoroughfares must either be routed around or tamed as they pass through the village. Public parking should be located convenient to the entry corridors.
Downtown Plano as a Transit Village

Downtown Plano is ideally suited to be a transit village. The village fabric of historic downtown Plano is still in place. The village main street is 15th Street from Avenue G to Municipal Drive. Downtown Plano has a well-defined street grid. The area has a fine-grain development pattern of small commercial buildings and an urban park at its center. Downtown’s anchors include municipal buildings, the Plano ArtCentre and the proposed performing arts center. The entire area is within a 10-minute walk of the transit station. Downtown Plano is surrounded on three sides by neighborhoods that enrich the area. Downtown Plano is easily accessible and has a good base of public parking. The area’s greatest strength is its historic character, which distinguishes the area as authentic when compared to the contrived appearance of some new urbanist developments.

The “Transit Village” concept is consistent with the opportunities outlined in “Big Idea Number 4, Enrich the Downtown Area” and “Big Idea Number 5, Create a City Center” as recommended by the East Plano Development Task Force in “10 Big Ideas for Eastern Plano”. These two concepts reinforce the need to promote mixed-use development and other creative approaches to enhance the downtown and surrounding areas. Such approaches should be used in a manner consistent with the existing character of the area.

While its assets are many, downtown Plano does have some deficiencies that should be addressed in order to make it a successful transit village. Vacant lots and mid-twentieth century commercial buildings are scattered throughout the area and result in a somewhat disjointed development pattern. The number of dwelling units within 1/2 mile of the DART stop is insufficient to materially affect transit ridership or to provide a strong market for neighborhood retail uses. Existing downtown merchants primarily specialize in antiques, crafts and specialty clothing. The streetscape of the immediate downtown area is high quality and pedestrian-oriented, but the quality of the surrounding area is of a much lower quality. The lack of streetscape continuity along 15th Street provides a poor entry to downtown and eastern Plano. Parking in downtown is poorly organized and insufficient to accommodate growth. Finally, the surrounding neighborhoods have improved significantly in recent years, but still need further reinvestment. All of these problems can be corrected through a coordinated program of action.
Plan and Strategy for Downtown

The 1991 Downtown Plan has provided a good framework for land use and transportation development. The plan guided the establishment of the Business/Government and Urban Residential zoning districts, streetscape improvements, location of the DART stop, and the promotion of downtown as a center for arts and culture. The recommendations of the plan are consistent with the concept of a transit village. The plan, however, should be reviewed and updated.

Any efforts to promote and accommodate the "Transit Village" concept must recognize the importance of maintaining the historic and architectural character of downtown and the surrounding areas. Key historic properties should be renovated and preserved. New development and/or redevelopment should be carefully designed to complement existing historic structures and to enhance the overall integrity and heritage of downtown Plano.

Transforming downtown into a transit village requires directed action. A two-tiered strategy is recommended based on proximity to the DART stop. The first tier is directed to the village center or primary area. This area is within 1/4 mile of the DART stop and is bounded by 16th Street, Municipal Drive, 14th Street and Avenue G. The second tier strategy is directed to the area outside the center but within 1/2 mile of the transit stop. This area does not have precise boundaries; rather, it is intended as an area of linkage and transition. Objectives and recommendations for the two areas follow.

Primary Area Strategy

Objectives:

- Develop 500-1,000 units of housing to add transit ridership and increase retail demand. Housing will absorb vacant and underutilized property and contribute to nighttime activity. Multifamily and "live-above" work space is well suited to the downtown area.

- Develop (or occupy) 30,000-50,000 square feet of space with retail, restaurants, and services to support residential development.
• Use redevelopment opportunities to reduce the impact of nonconforming uses as well as vacant and underdeveloped properties while preserving and maintaining structures that contribute to the historical character of the downtown area.

**Actions:**

• Redevelop key sites through financial incentives and acquisition where necessary. Redevelopment of the Downtown Center block should be the first priority. This site provides an excellent opportunity to connect the 15th Street businesses, Municipal Center, Haggard Park and the proposed performing arts center. This project should be a mixed-use development, predominantly residential. Other key redevelopment sites include the northeast corner of 14th Street and Avenue K, the southeast corner of Avenue I and 15th Street, and the southeast corner of Avenue G and 15th Street. Some structures or uses within the identified redevelopment areas may be appropriate for continued use upon further study. (See Appendix A.)

• Develop the performing arts center in downtown Plano. The performing arts center will solidify downtown as Plano’s arts district. The center will reinforce downtown as a primary activity center of regional importance. It will enrich the area’s diversity and stimulate the development of nighttime uses. (See Appendix B.)

• Develop a parking program for downtown that eliminates or significantly reduces the need for private parking. This program should result in 500 new public parking spaces in the primary and secondary areas. Both existing and new facilities could be used. This parking should be initially landscaped surface lots. Later, these lots can be redeveloped for business, housing and structured parking. (See Appendix C.)

• Expand Haggard Park by acquiring all remaining private property along the south side of 16th Street. Haggard Park is the area’s primary open space and the city’s civic ceremonial plaza. Expansion of the park will add room for events and create a better tie
between downtown and the Haggard Park neighborhood.

- Designate historic properties in downtown and provide technical and financial assistance for restoration. Expand use of local and federal tax incentives. Consider purchasing façade easements to restore and protect storefronts. (See Appendix E.)

- Complete streetscape improvements in downtown. This work includes 15th Street, 14th Street, Avenue I and Avenue G. The project should include improved sidewalks, street trees, street furniture and fixtures common to downtown. (See Appendix F.)

Secondary Area Strategy

Objectives:

- Increase the amount of housing within 1/2 mile of the DART stop to 3,500 units. This amount of housing will generate demand for new retail use and will boost transit ridership.

- Improve transitions and linkages to surrounding neighborhoods. Residents in adjacent neighborhoods should find downtown a desirable and easily accessible destination.

- Improve the physical condition and economic vitality of nearby neighborhoods.

Actions:

- Encourage infill housing by reducing or eliminating development fees within qualifying areas. Conduct park and utility capacity studies to determine if impact fee waivers are appropriate. If necessary, purchase dilapidated properties, clear structures and resell lots for infill housing.

- Designate historic properties and districts. Provide tax incentives for the restoration of designated properties. Install street trees, pedestrian lighting and special street signs to reinforce neighborhood identity.
• Improve access to downtown and the DART rail stop. Complete street construction and streetscape improvements. Evaluate sidewalk widths and conditions. Evaluate and improve pedestrian crossings of major thoroughfares. (See Appendix D and F.)

• Examine DART feeder bus routes and prepare a plan for short loop service to adjoining neighborhoods and commercial areas as housing and business density increases.

• Develop programs to increase public awareness of downtown neighborhoods. Programs could include tours of historic properties and media releases on specific accomplishments.

Implementation and Funding

A task force of city departments, in conjunction with the resources of the Plano Economic Development Board, could be charged with responsibility for implementing the strategy. A portion of the financial resources required was authorized as a part of the 1998 bond referendum. Other funding sources are available through federal, state and regional programs. A recently approved tax increment finance (TIF) district for eastern Plano could provide additional funds. TIF districts provide for the capture of increased property tax revenues resulting from private investment in an area. The increase is then used to fund specific improvements within the district. A TIF district would be an excellent means of funding a public parking program and other infrastructure needs beyond those identified in the recent bond program.
Summary

The transit village concept provides the framework for an effective strategy to revitalize downtown and maximize the benefits of DART rail service. The concept builds on the 1991 Downtown Plan, and the more recent proposals for development of a performing arts center and redevelopment of the block adjacent to the planned rail stop. Most of the resources required to implement the strategy are available and could be enhanced through the creation of a tax increment finance district (TIF).

The next step in the process of making this vision a reality is to develop a more detailed plan defining future land uses in the primary and secondary service areas. This plan should also address the area surrounding the Parker Road DART rail stop. The plan should define the relationship between the two areas as recommended in “Big Idea Number 5, Create a City Center”, in the East Plano Development Task Force’s Report, “10 Big ideas for Eastern Plano”.

Commitment and focus on the objectives noted in this plan will allow downtown Plano to become a destination and not just another stop on the rail line. This is an opportunity that the city should embrace and encourage.
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Appendix B Emerging Cultural District

Proposed Site of the Plano Performing Arts Center (Cox School)

Haggard Park Historic Neighborhood

Planned Downtown Center Development Project

Repertory Theatre ArtCentre

Municipal Center

Downtown Plaza

Downtown Retail District
Downtown Transit Village

Appendix C
Public Parking Opportunities

(Not intended to designate specific properties or boundaries)
Appendix D Design Considerations

Haggard Park - Haggard Park is important to downtown Plano. It links all major uses and sub-areas, and serves as Plano’s “Boston Commons”. The extension of Haggard Park, through the acquisition of the remaining three privately owned properties on 16th street, should be a high priority. Except for City House, all buildings should be removed. Vegetation along 16th Street should be selectively cleared and replanted to open views between the homes along the street and the park. In addition, the park should be extended eastward by removing the parking lot, when other parking is available. This will serve to complete the expansion of Haggard Park to fill the entire block. In the short term, a landscaped pedestrian way connecting the park to the DART platform should be installed.

14th Street - 14th Street forms the southern edge of downtown. It also connects downtown to the Douglass neighborhood. Vacant lots and parking lots abut most of 14th Street from Avenue G to Avenue K, degrading the visual quality and connectivity between the two areas. Streetscape improvements and infill development should be sought.

15th Street - 15th Street is downtown’s Main Street. It is also the major entry to downtown from US 75. The streetscape quality of 15th Street is uneven and in need of improvement. The streetscape program should distinguish the intersection of 15th Street and Avenue G as the beginning point of downtown proper.

15th Place - 15th Place is a service corridor behind the buildings along 15th Street between Avenue K and Avenue J. The street can be transformed into a mews—a narrow pedestrian street, lined with shops and patio restaurants. 15th Place will connect the Municipal Center to the DART stop. Modifying the Municipal Center to include a public entry and architectural detailing in this location would enhance the connection between it and Haggard Park.

16th Street - The segment of 16th Street between Avenue G and Avenue K serves several important functions. The street forms the northern edge of Haggard Park. The street should connect the park with the Haggard Park neighborhood, rather than convey the image of a boundary. The street should be a major pedestrian path connecting the performing arts center and neighborhood to the DART station and the Municipal Center. There is an excellent view of the Municipal Center clock tower from 16th Street. This view should be protected and enhanced.

Avenue G - Avenue G is a major traffic carrier linking 15th Street and Central Park Boulevard. The street is the boundary between downtown and commercial development oriented to US 75. Streetscape improvements are needed to improve the appearance of the area and to designate the entrance to downtown.

Avenue I - Avenue I should be improved to provide a pedestrian connection between the Douglass neighborhood and Haggard Park. Sidewalks, street trees and antique street lights should be placed along Avenue I. The Interurban Museum is an attractive focal point at the north end of the street.

Avenue K - Avenue K is a major arterial street. In the immediate downtown area, Avenue K is paired with Municipal Drive to create a one-way couplet system. Avenue K carries large volumes of southbound traffic during the morning peak hours, but during other periods volumes are well below capacity. Traffic speeds along Avenue K are well above those consistent with a pedestrian-oriented environment. Permitting on-street parking during off-peak periods should be evaluated to determine its effect on traffic speed. Other traffic-calming techniques should be researched as well.
Appendix F  Sample Streetscape

Conceptual Plan for 15th Street/Avenue K Intersection
Appendix G DART Rail Plan
Appendix H Related Documents / Publications

- Downtown Development Plan (1991)
- 10 Big Ideas, East Plano Development Task Force (1997)
- Design Guidelines for Plano’s Historic Areas (1993)
- Infill Housing Study (1995)
- Downtown Plano Light Rail Stop—Development Vision and Objectives (1996)

The above items are available in the Planning Department, 1520 Avenue K, Suite 250. For more information, please call the Planning Department at (972) 941-7151