Downtown Plano: Creating A Transit Village
Frank F. Turner, FAICP

Not long ago, downtown Plano was the nearly forgotten commercial center of a farming community displaced by metropolitan expansion. Today, downtown Plano is reemerging as an urban center, stimulated in part by the coming of light rail transit. New development containing nearly 500,000 square feet of floor area was recently completed, adding 463 urban apartments and 40,000 square feet of non-residential development to the compact 80-acre downtown. Historic commercial and civic buildings are being restored, including the adaptive reuse of the city’s first school gymnasium (built in 1938) as a performing arts theater; and new single-family housing is contributing to the revitalization of neighborhoods adjoining downtown. Plano provides insight on the use of light rail transit (LRT) and the principles of new urbanism to create an urban activity center within the context of older commercial development and as a sustainable development strategy for a maturing suburban city.

Early History

Initially settled in the 1840s, Plano was incorporated on June 2, 1873, six months after the Houston and Texas Central Railroad opened, making the city the trading center of agriculturally rich southwest Collin County. Additional transportation improvements further secured the city’s position. The Cotton Belt Railroad opened in 1887, connecting Plano to Ft. Worth, and in 1908 the Texas Traction Company (interurban electric railway) began service between Plano and Dallas. The wagon road connecting Plano to Dallas (approximately 20 miles south) would evolve into a state highway (State Highway 5). Plano prospered, attaining a population of 1,304 people by 1900. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, downtown Plano consisted of a single block of one and two-story commercial buildings (approximately 110,000 sq. ft.) surrounded by scattered heavy commercial and service uses. Downtown businesses included grocery, drug, variety, furniture and appliance stores, banks and other services. The small train and interurban depots were located on the west and south sides of downtown. Churches and neighborhoods adjoined downtown, completing the small town.

Plano’s population was 2,126 in 1950, when expansion of the greater Dallas metropolitan area began to affect the city. Development of North Central Expressway (1950-1956) greatly improved access to northern Dallas and Collin Counties and stimulated suburban development. City leaders prepared for growth. By 1950, eight area school districts completed consolidation and established the 114 square mile jurisdiction of the Plano Independent School District. In 1951, Plano and nine other cities created the North Texas
Municipal Water District to provide for their common water and wastewater treatment and solid waste disposal needs. The City of Plano was granted a home rule charter on June 10, 1961, which increased the city’s governance authority and its ability to annex. During the following years, city leaders aggressively developed infrastructure and facilities to serve growth. Today, after four decades of rapid expansion, the City of Plano occupies approximately 72 square miles, with a population greater than 237,000. Plano is a major employment center with more than 120,000 local jobs. The city’s diverse economy includes international and national corporate headquarters, high-tech manufacturing, warehousing and distribution centers, hospitals and over 14 million square feet of retailing.

Despite Plano’s tremendous growth, downtown remained largely unchanged. Residential growth during the 1960s and 1970s created retail demand and supermarket-anchored shopping centers were developed at arterial intersections away from downtown. In 1971, a small shopping center was built at the southwest corner of 16th Street and Avenue K, adjacent to the historic downtown core. Named “Downtown Center,” the T-shaped, Spanish-style strip center contained small shops, services and a restaurant. Complete with surface parking lots, the design and architectural style of the shopping center stood in odd contrast to the older downtown core. The shopping center was small (approximately 34,000 square feet) and its development did not alter the fact that downtown had lost its position as the city’s business center. During the 1980s, a regional mall and numerous big box retailers located along North Central Expressway, less than one mile west of downtown. Residential and commercial expansion continued to the west and north, and other major commercial centers soon developed along Preston Road and more recently along the Dallas North Tollway.

Unable to compete, downtown changed from a traditional business center to a specialty retail district composed of antique stores and gift boutiques during the 1980s. These businesses benefited from the historical setting and a favorable rent structure. Unlike mainstream retailers, locally-owned boutique businesses were able to adapt their merchandising and operations to the small footprint and other peculiarities of downtown’s older commercial buildings. Businesses turned over frequently, but fortunately vacancies did not last long. Most businesses opened mid-morning and closed by late afternoon. In the evening, downtown was dark. Most buildings were not owner-occupied, and both landlords and tenants were reluctant to make more than cosmetic improvements to their buildings. Downtown was in a precarious position...
and was physically and economically eroding.

Municipal Commitment to Downtown

Because of rapid suburban growth, downtown Plano was no longer the city’s principal, or even a major business center. Nevertheless, civic leaders felt a strong sentimental attachment to the area. City Council reaffirmed its commitment to downtown during the 1980s. A new 38,000 square foot municipal building opened in October 1980. The building was sited on the east side of Avenue K just north of 15th Street, directly across the street from Downtown Center. On October 17, 1983, the city purchased the First National Bank of Plano’s building at 14th Street and Avenue K for $850,000. Renamed “Municipal Center South,” the 13,167 square foot building was occupied by the Parks and Recreation Department in June 1984.

Voters approved a bond program in 1984 that included $9.65 million for additional municipal office space. Council debated moving the municipal offices from downtown, but ultimately decided to expand the existing downtown municipal building to 138,000 square feet. Completed in 1991, the expanded “Plano Municipal Center” bolstered downtown’s economy and civic identity. Parking for the expanded municipal building was adequate for initial occupancy, but was known to be insufficient when the building was fully occupied. On February 25, 1991, City Council approved purchasing Downtown Center for $1.9 million with the intent of demolishing the aging commercial center for additional parking when needed. The city continued to lease the center to businesses for the next eight years and recouped its investment.

New police and court facilities contributed to downtown’s civic function.

In August 1974, the Police Department moved from Plano Municipal Building on 15th Street to a new 14,000 square foot headquarters at 909 14th Street. In 1982, a 20,000 square foot addition was made to the police complex. The Robinson Justice Center, a 60,000 square foot municipal courthouse, was built on the north side of the police building in 1996. A second 20,000 square foot expansion to the police complex was completed in April 2003.

In 1984, voters also authorized bonds for downtown streetscape improvements. Restoration of 15th Street's brick surface and installation of brick sidewalks, ornamental streetlights and benches reinforced the historical charm of downtown. A small plaza was created at the west end of downtown next to the railroad crossing of 15th Street. The plaza was recessed below street grade and screened by landscaping to create a peaceful retreat. A large ornamental clock was installed at the plaza entrance, and a low wall with water cascading from the top was placed along the plaza’s east side to mask traffic noise. The plaza was the centerpiece of Plano’s celebration of the Texas Sesquicentennial in 1986.

The 1984 bond program also included money for the expansion of Haggard Park. Many people mistakenly believe Haggard Park was established during the city’s initial development. In
fact, the original 1.65-acre park site, located along Avenue H across from First Christian Church, was dedicated in 1925. The park was expanded during the mid 1980s to just less than 5 acres and recently an additional acre was acquired. The park expansion supplied needed open space and removed several unsightly businesses from downtown. Inside of the park, the former interurban electric rail station was restored in 1986 and now houses the Interurban Electric Railway Museum. The design of the park complements the historic character of downtown and surrounding neighborhoods. The picturesque park is often used for family outings and weddings. Concerts and events are conducted in the park throughout the year, making Haggard Park the city’s ceremonial heart.

On August 13, 1983, voters in Plano and 13 other cities approved the formation of Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART). The agency was charged with developing and operating regional transportation services, including bus, high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes and light rail transit (LRT). The initial service plan showed LRT service would extend to Plano within the Houston and Texas Central Railroad corridor, parallel to US 75, and terminate at Spring Creek Parkway (later changed to Parker Road). The LRT would run through downtown but without a stop. Because of the cost and complexity of developing the LRT system, service to Plano was not expected to begin until after 2010. The creation of DART, therefore, had no immediate influence on private development downtown; however, years later the extension of the LRT to Plano would be a major catalyst for change.

Traffic downtown was a growing problem. The center of downtown is the intersection of 15th Street and Avenue K. Until 1991, both streets were two lanes wide. Avenue K (State Highway 5) is part of a continuous arterial connecting Dallas and McKinney. 15th Street is part of a major east-west arterial crossing the city. Neither road could be easily widened downtown because of existing development. In 1983, 15th Street was landscaped and widened to four lanes from US 75 to Avenue G. From there, heavier traffic was rerouted around downtown to 14th street. Improving Avenue K was a larger problem. The solution was to create a one-way pair, or couplet, through downtown by making Avenue K three lanes southbound and Avenue L three lanes northbound. The streets were merged north and south of downtown, where Avenue K was widened to a six-lane arterial. This work was completed in 1991, and greatly improved north-south traffic flow.

Downtown Development Plan

During the spring and summer of 1991, a sub-committee of the Plano Planning and Zoning Commission prepared a plan to guide downtown development. Improvements made during the previous decade beautified downtown but failed to stimulate private reinvestment. With the reconstruction of Avenues K and L underway, many believed downtown was poised for growth. While new development was welcomed, the committee believed growth needed to be carefully directed
to complement the historic downtown core.

The Downtown Development Plan was approved by City Council on September 11, 1991. The plan recommended preserving and enhancing downtown to create a compact, mixed-use district. The term “new urbanism” had not yet come into use, but the Downtown Development Plan followed many of the same design principles (e.g., compact, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented design). The plan recommended expanding downtown through infill and redevelopment projects adjacent to historic commercial buildings along 15th Street. In addition to traditional main street commercial and civic uses, the plan recommended diversifying downtown with art and cultural facilities, including a theater and museum.

Existing downtown zoning regulations allowed heavy commercial uses that detracted from the main street environment. The zoning also specified building setbacks and parking requirements based on suburban development standards that were inconsistent with the goal of creating a compact urban center. A new zoning district (Business/Government) was proposed for the 80-acre downtown core. The new district limited building height to four stories and required new buildings to be placed close to the street. Surface parking was restricted and heavy commercial uses were not permitted. The plan recommended the city prepare architectural and signage guidelines to ensure new development would complement the area’s historical character. The plan also recommended installing additional brick sidewalks, ornamental lighting and landscaping downtown concurrent with the reconstruction of Avenues K and L.

DART light rail service was still years away, but the potential benefit of a downtown station was clear. The plan recommended locating a station downtown between 15th Place and 16th Street with connecting bus service to nearby neighborhoods and employment centers.

The Downtown Development Plan extended beyond the commercial core and emphasized the need to preserve and enhance the surrounding neighborhoods. Downtown’s retail success required building a stronger residential base. The neighborhoods near downtown contained many well-maintained historic homes, but other homes were in disrepair. Inappropriate zoning had allowed small apartment buildings and commercial uses to encroach upon and degrade the neighborhoods. The plan recommended zoning changes, infill housing programs and other actions to improve the area.

The plan recommended enlarging and improving Haggard Park to integrate downtown and adjacent neighborhoods into a single community. Rebuilding 15th Place and 16th Street, including brick sidewalks, decorative lighting and landscaping was recommended to strengthen the connection between the Municipal Building and Haggard Park. The 1991 Downtown Development Plan and the subsequent efforts in support of the
plan’s recommendations laid the foundation for downtown’s current renaissance.

Downtown Plans and Studies

- Downtown Plano Development Plan, 1991
- Preservation Plan Update, 1992
- Design Guidelines for Plano’s Historic Areas, 1993
- Infill Housing Study, 1995
- Business/Government Zoning District, June 1993
- 10 Big Ideas for Eastern Plano, 1997
- Downtown Development Plan Update, 1997
- Preservation Plan and Ordinance Update, 1997
- Urban Residential District, February 1998
- The Plano Performing Arts Center Report, 1998
- Downtown Light Rail Stop: Development Vision and Objectives, 1998
- Land Use and Transportation Study for the DART Parker Road Transit Center, 1998
- Eastern Plano Streetscape Features, 1999
- Downtown Plano: A Vision and Strategy for Creating a Transit Village, 1999
- Neighborhood Empowerment Zone #1, 1999
- Eastside Tax Increment Financing District, 1999
- Haggard Park Heritage District, January 2000
- Downtown Plano Parking Study and Executive Summary, 2000

A psychological setback occurred in 1994, when the Plano Independent School District (PISD) moved its main administrative offices from Cox High School to 2700 W. 15th Street, approximately 2 ½ miles west of downtown. Cox High School, Plano’s oldest existing public building, was constructed in 1924 on Avenue H. The building’s primary use shifted to administrative functions after Williams High School opened in 1962. By the early 1990s, PISD, like the city, needed additional office space and made the decision that expanding operations at the Cox location was not economically viable. While the school district continued to use the Cox properties for a variety of administrative services, moving their main offices weakened downtown’s position as the community’s place of governance.

Light Rail Transit Catalyst

In 1993, the DART service plan was updated. The revised light rail transit (LRT) plan included a special events platform downtown to be used only in conjunction with festivals or other special activities. Later, DART staff concluded the concept of occasional service was not workable, and the plan was amended in 1995 to designate the downtown platform a full-service stop. DART was eager to begin engineering of the LRT extension into Plano. Favorable tax revenues and federal funding allowed DART to expedite the project and a new target date - June 2003 - was set for commencing service.

The downtown station was planned as a “destination station” without a park-and-ride lot. Regional commuters would be directed to the Parker Road and Bush Turnpike Stations, both planned with large parking lots. The downtown station would serve primarily visitors, tourists and nearby neighborhoods. The decision on where to locate the LRT platform created significant debate. The platform needed to be close to 15th Street if it was to attract visitors downtown. Some downtown merchants doubted that rail transit offered any business benefit. They were concerned the trains would disrupt traffic flow and LRT commuters would use customer
parking. The Downtown Development Plan recommended placing the platform north of 15th Place next to Haggard Park to provide convenient access to special events. Later studies raised a concern that the platform’s width would require land from the park or force closure of Avenue J. An alternate location just south of 15th Street seemed a better choice, but it too, required purchasing additional land occupied by an old lumber supply building then in use as an antique mall. Downtown merchants strongly objected to the possible loss of the antique mall and they feared locating the platform south of 15th Street would have a greater impact on customer parking.

On November 14, 1997, the city initiated a formal study of the alternative platform sites to evaluate their potential for stimulating economic development, as well as their cost and technical merit. An idea drawn from the 1991 Downtown Development Plan renewed interest in the northern site. The DART platform could be the catalyst needed to assemble and redevelop the Downtown Center block. Closing Avenue J between 15th Place and 16th Street would provide sufficient land for the platform and eliminate any need to encroach into Haggard Park. Closing the street would also deprive or diminish access to the lots along the east side of Avenue J and would require acquisition of the affected property. For the most part, heavy commercial and auto-related uses occupied the property. The buildings were in very poor condition and considered to be blight. Buying and clearing the property alone would benefit downtown; and if the surplus property were transferred to the city, Plano would own the entire 3.6-acre block and possess an excellent redevelopment opportunity. The city and DART agreed on the strategy and the site. On April 14, 1998 DART officially approved the platform location.

Inspired by new urbanism projects in the Uptown area of Dallas, the redevelopment concept was to create a high-density mixed-use project directly connected to the DART LRT platform. Council approved the redevelopment concept on May 11, 1998. Following a period of extended negotiations, the City and DART approved an interlocal agreement on August 10, 1998. The agreement provided that DART would purchase the property and transfer ownership of any surplus property to Plano in exchange for the city reconstructing streets, drainage, and utilities needed to serve the platform (a cost normally borne by DART). The cost of the city’s work would become a credit to be balanced against the value of the property transferred to the city. Since construction cost was likely to exceed the value of the property, DART agreed to reimburse the city the difference (on Dec. 20, 2001 Plano received a check for $233,000).

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) held its annual conference in Dallas in October 1998. As a part of the program, ULI invites developers and public agencies to submit proposed projects for a critique by a panel of development experts. Plano submitted its proposed redevelopment project and the ULI panel met on October 9th to discuss the project’s merits. The panel concluded the project was workable and supported
the mixed-use, transit-oriented goals of the project. They were concerned that the project's size was insufficient to attract private investment or to stimulate downtown. They recommended the city develop a larger vision for downtown, of which the proposed project was but a part.

**Eastside Village**

Encouraged by the ULI panel, on October 22, 1998, the City issued a request for qualifications (RFQ) to solicit a project developer. While a number of Dallas area developers expressed interest, only four companies submitted their qualifications. A committee comprised of downtown merchants, neighborhood representatives, staff and other interested persons reviewed the qualification statements and interviewed the company principals. On January 14, 1999, the committee selected Amicus Partners, with the choice receiving Council's approval on February 8th. Amicus Partners, a new company, was headed by Robert Shaw, an experienced developer who specialized in urban infill projects. Under different company names, Shaw led the development of Uptown Dallas, Addison Circle, Plano’s Legacy Town Center and numerous other projects.

The city granted Amicus Partners an exclusive but non-binding 120-day opportunity to negotiate an agreement on project design, financing and construction responsibilities. During the next few months, Amicus worked with city staff and a citizen committee to prepare preliminary project plans. The committee approved the plans on April 22nd, and the Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council jointly reviewed and accepted the plan on May 4th. The plan called for the development of 245,000 square feet of gross building floor area. The proposed project contained 234 dwelling units and 15,000 square feet of non-residential space, including two restaurant spaces. The buildings were three and four-stories with zero setback from the inside edge of the site’s perimeter sidewalks. The exterior was brick clad with detailing reflective of the style of late 19th century mercantile architecture. The block was divided in half by a new north-south street. The western half of the development abutted the DART platform and plaza creating a seamless project connecting public and private space. The western buildings surrounded a private courtyard and pool. The eastern half of the development contained a four-story building, wrapping a five-level parking garage on three sides. Ground floor commercial space was placed primarily along 15th Place in hopes that merchants on the north side of 15th Street would improve the rear entrances of their buildings, opening them to the public. Only the southern half of the ground floor facing the DART platform was designated for non-residential use. Similarly, only the south half of the ground floor facing Avenue K was designated for non-residential development.

**Eastside Village I**

During this same period, the city drafted a vision statement to communicate how the redevelopment project fit into a larger plan for the downtown area. “Downtown Plano: A Vision and Strategy for Creating a Transit Village,” was approved by City
Council on May 10, 1999. The document refined the concepts originally articulated in the 1991 Downtown Development Plan. The vision statement reinforced the goal of transforming downtown to a compact, mixed-use district closely linked to the surrounding historic neighborhoods. The document placed greater emphasis on downtown’s relationship to the DART station and the need to increase residential density. The plan set a goal of developing 1,000 dwelling units and 50,000 square feet of retail development within ¼ mile of the DART platform and identified potential redevelopment sites. The plan recommended a variety of development incentives, including land banking redevelopment sites, eliminating development fees, reducing private parking requirements and expanding public parking.

The Business/Government (B/G) zoning district (approved in 1993) anticipated most of the development requirements of Eastside Village. The residential density necessary for viable urban housing, however, was underestimated at 40 units per acre. The proposed project required a residential density of 100 dwelling units per acre. The plan for Eastside Village demonstrated that the real issue was design, not density. With support from nearby neighborhoods, City Council amended the B/G district to increase the maximum density on June 14, 1999.

Concurrent with the design process, the city and Amicus Partners negotiated an agreement on lease terms, cost-sharing and development responsibilities. Prior to issuing the RFQ, the city decided that it preferred to lease rather than sell the site. A long-term lease would generate income and give the city a greater voice in the development and use of the property. Amicus agreed to a 70-year ground lease with three 10-year renewal options. The lease locked down the use of the property, including potential future redevelopment. The base annual rent was set at 10% of the negotiated value of $6 per square foot (significantly greater than the $3.20 per square foot appraised value of the DART property transfer to the city). Amicus agreed to annual rent adjustments, based on the annual net operating income generated by the development. A start-up incentive was granted to the developer by discounting the ground lease to 25% of the base rent during the first year and 50% of the base rent during the second year. Amicus was given a credit for the development fees it paid to the city against rent owed during the first two years. The city agreed to pay for all off-site public infrastructure and streetscape improvements required for the project ($2 million). Most of this cost ($1.03 million), however, was being counted by DART as credit against the value of the property transferred to the city. Additional details were negotiated between Amicus and the city concerning development timing and performance. The ground lease and master development agreement were approved on June 28, 1999.

DART began acquiring property along Avenue J and 16th Street in January 1999. Most of the tracts were purchased through negotiated sales agreements. Condemnation proceedings were initiated for several Eastside Village I
properties. The last property acquired was a house on 16th Street. The house (circa 1910) had been a place of business for many years, with the then current owners operating a custom drapery business. On January 26, 2000, the owners accepted DART’s offer to purchase the property for an amount substantially above the appraised value. Still, problems with the property remained. Several historical preservationists protested demolition of the house. The solution was to permit the demolition contractor to give the house (now technically salvage) to one of the preservation advocates. The house was moved in February to a lot at 911 17th Street, where it was restored. Earlier that winter, DART began demolishing buildings along Avenue J. and 16th Street. The following April, the city demolished Downtown Center. During May, DART began construction of the downtown platform and the city started construction of street, water and sewer improvements. Later that August, hydrocarbon contamination from a previously removed underground fuel storage tank was discovered, but the construction delay and expense of remediation were minor.

Amicus Partners signed the ground lease and took possession of the property on September 25, 2000. Construction began on October 9, 2000, with the first units occupied on September 1, 2001. The final certificate of occupancy was issued on December 14, 2001. Market response to the project was very strong. Lincoln Properties, leasing and property manager for Eastside Village, opened its leasing center in September and the project was fully occupied by June 2002. Non-residential space has leased more slowly. Tenants include a coffee shop, convenience store, financial investment service and a day spa. The restaurant space remains to be leased.

The city leased 2,500 square feet of ground floor space adjoining the DART platform for a community room. Named “Plano Station,” the meeting room is designed to accommodate business, social and civic events. The facility is equipped with a warming kitchen and catering is available. Approximately 80 events occurred at Plano Station during the first six months of operation, including business meetings, parties, and wedding receptions. The city also hosts a monthly coffeehouse music series at Plano Station.

**Eastside Village II**

In January 2001, the City of Plano and Amicus Partners joined together to undertake a second redevelopment project in downtown Plano. The project site is 3.3 acres, located at the northeast corner of Avenue K and 14th Street, approximately 400 feet south of Eastside Village I. The downtown plan and transit village report identified the site, then owned by the city and TXU (Texas Utilities), as a good redevelopment opportunity. The city’s portion of the site (1.1 acres) was partially acquired in 1983, in conjunction with the purchase of the First National Bank of Plano. A few years later, the city purchased an adjacent gas station located at the northeast corner of 14th Street and Avenue K, for right-of-way to improve the intersection. After demolishing the gas station, a small 80-space parking lot was constructed on the combined site. Immediately east of the city’s property, TXU owned 2.2 acres containing a small customer service and billing center that they had operated since January 1978. TXU had indicated to the city that the facility no longer met their needs, and they wanted to consolidate their operations at a new location. The city informed Amicus Partners of the opportunity and eager to construct a second project, Amicus purchased the TXU property for
$800,000, subject to negotiating a development agreement with the city. The city had previously agreed to grant its property to Amicus in exchange for 100 parking spaces in a garage to be built by Amicus, subject to the approval of project plans and a development agreement.

Amicus dedicated all right-of-way needed for the project, which amounts to more than two-thirds of the land area conveyed by the city to Amicus. The city reimbursed Amicus Partners $800,000 for the construction of the street and other public improvements. Amicus provided all other project financing. City Council approved the final development agreement with Amicus on June 11th and construction began on September 28, 2001. The first units were ready for occupancy in September 2002, and the project was fully complete by the end of December 2002. By the following April, 62% of the residential units were occupied.

Eastside Village II

Amicus again involved downtown merchants and neighborhood residents in the design process. City Council approved the preliminary development plan for Eastside Village II on March 26, 2001. The project, now complete, is a mixed-use development of three and four-story buildings containing apartments, retail, offices and restaurants. The project is similar in scale to Eastside Village I and also follows the design principles of new urbanism. The project has a unique architectural character using contrasting styles and materials. The project contains approximately 245,000 square feet of gross building area, 229 apartments and 25,000 square feet of non-residential space. The project includes a 416-space parking garage (with 100 spaces granted to the city in addition to those required for the project). A new interior street connecting Avenue K and 14th Street provides access to the garage and expands the downtown street grid.

Downtown and the Arts

In 1981, the Cultural Arts Council of Plano, Inc. was chartered as a private non-profit corporation for the purpose of promoting the development of community arts programs. In 1982, the Council opened an exhibition and instruction center at Collin Creek Mall in space donated by the mall’s management company. On July 12, 1991, backed by corporate and individual gifts, the Cultural Arts Council purchased the Harrington Furniture Store located at 15th Street and Avenue K for its new home. The building (originally two buildings, circa 1897) was modified through the years, including the addition of the existing front facade.
some time before 1921. The Cultural Arts Council remodeled the building for galleries and instructional space and converted a separate warehouse building to a theater. In the spring of 1994, the galleries were opened to the public. Tragically, after the building opened, it was determined the east exterior wall and foundation were failing. Further study revealed the entire eastern half of the building was structurally unsound. Attempting to preserve the building’s historical character, the front facade was stabilized before the remaining eastern portion of the building was demolished. After a successful fundraising campaign, the building was rebuilt to resemble its original exterior appearance. The ArtCentre reopened on September 30, 1995.

The ArtCentre of Plano is a valued community and regional asset. The ArtCentre presents local, regional and international touring art exhibits and lectures. It is frequently used for receptions, musical performances and private functions. Since reopening, the ArtCentre has exhibited the works of over 1,000 artists to more than 100,000 visitors. The ArtCentre staff, board and volunteers are active downtown supporters and participate in downtown promotions, festivals and events. The ArtCentre also supports historic preservation efforts. With a grant from the city, the ArtCentre created an exhibit gallery devoted to photographs and memorabilia from Plano’s past.

The Plano Repertory Theatre (PRT) was organized in 1972 and incorporated in 1979 as a non-profit corporation. PRT conducted performances in various locations throughout the community until it secured space for a theater in a shopping center in 1986. The shopping center was remodeled in 1990 and PRT was forced to find a new location. PRT moved downtown in 1992 and became the primary occupant of the new ArtCentre Theatre. PRT continues to build its reputation as an outstanding regional theater. Attendance during the 2001 season exceeded 19,000 with 1,500 season subscriptions. PRT received 10 of 19 Leon Rabin Awards (presented by the Dallas Theatre League) for its 2000 season and received 9 awards for its 2001 season. The ArtCentre of Plano and the Plano Repertory Theatre have greatly enriched downtown with their programming, supporters and patrons.

The Plano Courtyard Theater is the latest addition to downtown’s cultural facilities. The 325-seat theater not only expands the city’s cultural resources, it preserves an important community landmark. The theater was created through the adaptive reuse of the Cox High School Gymnasium, located on Avenue H across from Haggard Park. Constructed in 1938 under the Works Progress Administration, the building is Plano’s second oldest public structure.

Hardy, Holzman and Pfeifer, the theater’s architect, has designed a flexible venue well suited to a variety of theatrical, musical and other artistic performances. The theater can be set in several configurations, including end stage, thrust stage and arena. The “courtyard” name refers to the manner in which the balcony surrounds the floor seating and engages the stage to create
an intimate environment. Moveable panels allow the room to be acoustically tuned to the needs of the performance. Approximately 24,000 square feet in size, the theater includes large lobbies and ample space for technical and administrative functions. During the first year of operation, the theater was in use 237 days with a total attendance of 34,500 patrons. The theater is contributing to the growth of Plano’s arts organizations. Season subscriptions to Plano Repertory Theatre have grown from 1,500 to 4,200 since moving its main play series to the Courtyard Theater.

Construction commenced on March 15, 2001 and the theater was officially dedicated on April 23, 2002. The theater is only a 3-minute walk from Eastside Village and the DART station. The theater further enlivens downtown and contributes to the goal of making downtown a regional destination.

The Courtyard Theater restores the property’s use as a center for civic, educational and cultural events. In 1909, the Plano Civic Auditorium was built on this same site. Then, as now, the property was owned by the Plano Independent School District, who gave the city permission to construct the auditorium under the condition the district could also use it. The frame neo-classical structure was the largest auditorium in Collin County. It was used for a wide variety of social, cultural and educational functions, including graduation ceremonies. The auditorium was also the site of the first motion picture shown in Plano. The auditorium was demolished in 1937 to clear the site for the school gymnasium.

The arts provide downtown with more than a mere amenity. The arts contribute to the area’s unique image and quality of life, critical factors stimulating residential development and strengthening the surrounding neighborhoods. The arts add an element of bohemian character, which is often associated with successful urban
centers. The arts reinforce downtown’s position as a regional destination and activity center that is essential to market development for restaurants, retailing and services.

**Small Business Response**

Many of the small business owners along 15th Street are making major investments to improve and expand their buildings. Two recent business projects illustrate this trend. Nikki’s Gifts located at 1011 E 15th Street has been in business since 1990. Two years ago, Richard and Nikki Tuttle decided to sell their home to move downtown and expand their business. They built a two story 4,100 square feet addition onto the rear of their store to expand retail and storage space and add a public mail center facing 15th Place. The Tuttles recently moved into the second story apartment, creating a true live-above-the-shop environment.

Last fall Jörg and Cathy Fercher opened Jörg’s Café Vienna, a restaurant and biergarten at 1037 E. 15th Street. The project was a major building restoration, with all new mechanical systems and reconstruction of the historic storefront. The restaurant’s success has stimulated the development of two more restaurants, now under construction.

Nikki’s and Café Vienna have new rear building facades with store entrances facing Eastside Village. While Eastside Village is the most visible sign of downtown reinvestment, it is the actions of small business owners like the Tuttles and Ferchers that truly signify restored confidence in downtown Plano.

**Development Incentive Programs**

Downtown development is being spurred by a variety of incentives provided by local government. Eastside Village demonstrates the City of Plano’s ability to join with business to create development opportunities and tailor partnership responsibilities to meet the specific needs of each project. The city continues to amend development regulations to achieve good design and sound development economics, while protecting downtown’s historical and architectural character. The city expedites plan review and inspections to keep projects on schedule. In addition to these incentives, the city has created several programs, described below, to further encourage development downtown and in the surrounding neighborhoods.

**Tax Increment Financing:** In 1999, the City of Plano, PISD, Collin County and Collin County Community College created a tax increment finance (TIF) district to encourage economic reinvestment along the DART LRT corridor. A TIF receives funding through ad valorem taxes derived from the growth of the total appraised value of property within the district occurring after the district is established. TIF funds can be spent for infrastructure, facilities and land within the district to facilitate economic reinvestment. State law also grants municipalities broader development powers within a TIF district. The Eastside TIF extends along
the DART rail corridor from the southern city limit to approximately ½ mile north of Parker Road. At the time the TIF was created, the total appraised value of property within the district was $328 million. Four years later, the total appraised value has grown to nearly $451 million, yielding $3.6 million in revenue to date. The total revenue generated during the district’s 15-year life (expires 2114) should exceed $20,000,000. Thus far, three projects (including the Courtyard Theater) have been specified for TIF funding, creating an obligation of $7.6 million. The remaining TIF funds are available for additional economic development projects within the area.

Historic Preservation Tax Abatements: Properties designated as a heritage resource by the city are eligible to receive a property tax exemption to encourage proper restoration and maintenance. The size of the exemption ranges from 38% to 100% of the structure’s value based on the use of the property and its historical significance. All four governmental entities that levy a property tax in Plano participate in the program. Designated properties are reviewed annually to ensure they are properly maintained and qualified to continue to receive the exemption. In addition to designating individual properties, Plano has established two historic districts – downtown and the adjacent Haggard Park neighborhood.

Fire Sprinkler Program: Fire protection of downtown has been a long-standing concern. Downtown was repeatedly destroyed by fire in the 1890s. Today, only a few buildings in the historic commercial core have fire sprinklers. The fire department is working with downtown merchants and building owners to reduce risk and install a shared fire sprinkler system. As an incentive, the city will pay the cost of fees within an empowerment zone to stimulate economic development, including the production and rehabilitation of affordable housing. Plano’s empowerment zone waives all development-related fees for construction, remodeling and rehabilitation of commercial buildings and single-family housing. Fees are also waived for the rehabilitation of multi-family units, provided the cost of work is greater than $8,000 per unit. The neighborhood park fee is waived for new multi-family construction. As of March 31, 2003, $206,544 in fees have been waived, resulting from construction valued at $25,767,051, including 23 new single-family houses.
extending water lines and installing fire valves and risers to serve building groups. The merchants will pay the cost of internal service lines and sprinkler heads. Three sprinkler line extensions are currently being constructed.

Transit-Oriented Development and Design

In 1999, city leaders embraced the vision of transforming downtown Plano into a transit village. As articulated by Peter Calthorpe, Robert Cervero and other transit-oriented development advocates, land use within transit corridors and surrounding stops should reinforce transit use and provide focus for regional metropolitan growth. Counter to the prevailing suburban development pattern, the successful use of transit requires increasing density and integrating employment and housing. The goal of a “transit village” is to create a compact, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented district with convenient access to transit. Ideally, a transit village reduces automobile trips by making it possible to live, work, shop and play in the same environment; and to use transit for some portion of the trips outside of the village. DART began LRT service in December 2002, so it is too early to truly assess the relationship between downtown transit operations. Even so, some preliminary observations can be made on efforts to create a successful transit-oriented development.

District Definition: The 1991 Downtown Development Plan recommended expanding the downtown core within an 80-acre area bounded generally by 14th Street, Avenue L, 16th Street and Avenue G. Within this area, urban infill development was encouraged, and redevelopment sites, including Eastside Village I & II, were identified. This area was rezoned Business/Government (B/G) to implement the plan’s recommendations. From a policy perspective, the B/G district defines downtown. The B/G district has focused downtown revitalization efforts and allayed fears of commercial encroachment into surrounding neighborhoods. The area is compact and walkable, yet provides ample development opportunities to create a significant urban center. The B/G district was recently amended to include additional commercial land along the Ave K corridor and is now 94 acres.

Mass and Density: Creating an urban center requires mass and density. While 15th Street has a main street character, the area is too small to be a sustainable or meaningful urban activity center. Beyond the obvious role building mass plays in differentiating urban from suburban character, building mass also produces the necessary environment for frequent face-to-face interaction. With few exceptions, Plano’s development pattern is suburban. Mass is often expressed as the ratio of a building’s floor area to the size of its site. Most buildings in Plano do not exceed .25 to 1 floor to area ratio (FAR). Eastside Village I & II add 490,000 square feet of gross building area to downtown with a combined FAR of 1.65 to 1.

Plano’s estimated population on January 1, 2003 was 237,925. This yields an average population density of 5.163 persons per acre (based on the city’s entire incorporated area of 72 square miles). Assuming Plano reaches a peak population of 260,000, its density will only increase to 5.64 persons per acre. The 2000 Census estimates that 608 persons lived within ¼ mile of the center of downtown (15th Street and Avenue K). Assuming 98% occupancy of Eastside Village I & II, with an average household size of 1.2 persons, an additional 529 people will be added to downtown’s population, creating a
density of 9.05 persons per acre. If the goal of adding 1,000 new dwelling units is achieved, downtown’s population will increase to 1,784 with an average density of 14.2 persons per acre. Within a ½ mile radius, the area’s 2000 population was 2,278. If the goal of adding 3,500 dwelling units to this area is met, the area’s population would increase to 6,394, at an average density of 12.7 per acre. While this is still a relatively low density to be termed “urban,” it should significantly contribute to creating activity and market opportunity.

**Development Pattern:** Downtown Plano, like most 19th century commercial centers, provides an excellent context for urban infill development, including a grid street pattern and in-line commercial buildings located close to the street. The major design issue was how to add large new buildings that would complement this character. Development economics dictated that the buildings be three and four stories with large floor plates. Careful attention was paid to designing vertical elements to break the buildings’ street side elevations and create the visual effect of multiple smaller buildings. Both sites were divided by new “mews” streets to reinforce the street grid and improve pedestrian movement. Ground floor storefronts combined with upper story large windows, balconies and awnings connect the buildings to the streets. Broad brick sidewalks, street trees and ornamental streetlights establish continuity with older portions of downtown. Before the development of Eastside Village, downtown focused exclusively on 15th Street. Now, the new development along Avenue K forms a cross axis with a strong visual presence that enhances downtown’s sense of place.

**Mixed-Use:** Eastside Village I and II added 463 dwelling units and 40,000 square feet of non-residential space to downtown. Approximately 75% of the units are occupied and the positive effects of residential development are clearly observable. There are simply more people downtown. In the evening, the light coming from the windows of Eastside Village signifies downtown’s expanded life. Led by restaurant development, merchants are extending their business hours. The coffee shop in Eastside Village has become a neighborhood gathering place, and Plano Station, the new community room, is being used daily for business meetings and social events. The Courtyard Theater and other arts facilities are enriching the mix and strengthening downtown as a destination.

**Platform Location and Design:** LRT systems are often built within existing railroad corridors. Station locations are selected based on the best choices drawn from limited opportunities, often less than ideal. In downtown, however, a better site could not have been selected. The DART platform is located in the middle of the B/G zoning district and the entire district is within ¼ mile of the platform. The platform begins approximately 250’ north of 15th Street, sufficiently removed from heavy vehicular traffic. The platform is easily accessible by pedestrians and bicycle riders from all directions. Drop-off lanes are provided for riders coming to the station by car and bus. Rubber-wheel trolley service links surrounding neighborhoods and shopping areas to the platform. The platform plaza is a pleasant public space, seamlessly connecting Eastside Village and Haggard Park.

**Walking Environment:** The existing street grid serving downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods continues to be improved. Brick sidewalks, street trees, ornamental streetlights and
furniture were installed downtown to create a pleasant pedestrian environment. On-street parking was expanded to separate pedestrians from moving traffic. Additional mews streets were constructed within Eastside Village I & II to improve pedestrian and vehicular access and to create small blocks consistent with an urban development pattern. New downtown buildings have been designed to enhance the pedestrian environment. The buildings are brought close to the street and doors, windows, awnings and balconies are used to connect public and private space. The surrounding neighborhoods are connected to downtown through the street grid. Neighborhood streets have been repaved and sidewalks improved. Walking tours of the area’s historic landmarks are routinely offered. A hike and bike trail, running parallel to the rail corridor, is being planned to provide additional access to the DART stations.

Parking Expansion and Management: Reducing automobile dependency is a goal of transit-oriented development, but cars and parking remain a reality. Having sufficient parking is essential to the success of downtown business and residential use. Requiring parking based on suburban development standards, however, would make new infill development economically unfeasible. Further, creating large surface parking lots runs counter to the goal of developing a compact urban center. Parking requirements for new development downtown were discounted to 75% of the city’s standard requirements based on the benefits of mixed-use development and transit. Both Eastside Village I & II contain large five-level parking garages internal to the development and screened from view. More than 300 surface parking spaces are being constructed on the edge of the downtown core for employees, visitors and business customers. To avoid the potential problem of DART commuters exhausting available parking, parking close to the DART platform and the business core is restricted to a four-hour maximum duration.

Linked Neighborhoods: A successful transit village should benefit and interconnect with surrounding neighborhoods. The Haggard Park, Douglass and Old Towne neighborhoods are adjacent to downtown, and their residents have actively participated in neighborhood planning and improvement programs. During the last decade, all three neighborhoods have physically and economically improved. Streets and utilities have been rebuilt throughout the area. Code enforcement and neighborhood police programs have also strengthened the area. During the last three years, 26 new single-family houses have been built in the area, including both assisted and market rate units. Neighborhood residents have actively supported the downtown development projects. The residents enjoy downtown as a place of leisure and as a source of community identity. Today, only a few downtown businesses provide basic goods and services needed by the adjacent neighborhoods. It is believed that continued residential development will strengthen the market needed to diversify downtown business.

DART Start Up: On the morning of August 13, 2002, the first DART test train arrived downtown and was greeted by a small but exuberant group of merchants, residents and civic leaders. Full service commenced on December 9th. During the peak morning (6:00–8:00 AM) and evening (3:30–6:30 PM) hours, trains stop downtown (both north and southbound) at a 6-minute average interval. Each train (three car configuration) has the capacity to comfortably carry 300 passengers.
Ridership is greater than projected. Plano-based weekday ridership is estimated to be 7,284 trips (each way is a separate trip) as compared to DART’s forecast of 6,739 trips. Most of the trips (5,088) begin and end at the Parker Road Station, the last stop one mile north of downtown. However, the downtown station serves 1,116 weekday trips, and it is unexpectedly outperforming George Bush Station.

**LRT Weekday Ridership**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>2010 Proj.</th>
<th>Actual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parker Rd.</td>
<td>5,196</td>
<td>5,088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downtown</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>1,116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>1,770</td>
<td>1,080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7,866</td>
<td>7,284</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A study has not yet been made of downtown riders to determine the origin and destination of trips or their purpose. The majority of the trips appear to be work-based trips, including a significant number of people reverse commuting to Plano jobs. Eastside Village leasing agents report that many new apartment residents are the result of DART service. Merchants also report that DART is bringing new customers to downtown.

Parking management programs have been effective in downtown. As expected, commuters did initially try to park downtown, but warning notices followed by tickets for parking more than four hours quickly curbed the problem. Drivers are learning to adjust to the presence of DART trains downtown, especially during the PM peak hours.

How the use of the downtown station will mature remains uncertain. Hopefully, an increasing number of downtown and nearby neighborhood residents will make use of DART to commute to employment. Ridership is increasing on the rubber-wheel trolley-service linking downtown and nearby neighborhoods. If downtown continues to develop retail, restaurants and cultural facilities, DART will likely be used by regional visitors and tourists. DART can also be used as a shuttle to remote parking when major downtown festivals are held. DART and the city are working to market downtown Plano as one of several “destination stations.”

**Conclusion**

Rapid suburban expansion of America’s metropolitan areas has overtaken many small farm towns that ringed major central cities. Often the core of the original farm town has been lost to decay and displacement. In some cases, the original fabric remains, but the area has declined and no longer holds a position of economic or civic importance. Downtown Plano illustrates the renewal and transformation of one such farm town as an urban center. The foundation of this renewal was laid in the 1980s by the city’s financial investment and civic commitment. More recently, the vision of creating a transit village gave downtown direction. DART
provided the catalyst for significant private investment; however, this investment did not result from the mere decision to locate a station downtown. Rather, it was how that opportunity was used to leverage public and private action. By looking beyond the engineering and cost considerations of locating the platform, DART and the city were able to see the larger opportunity for stimulating downtown development and transit ridership. Realizing the vision required both organizations to step outside their normal roles, creating an excellent learning experience and a successful project.

Amicus Partners was initially drawn to downtown because it and the surrounding neighborhoods possessed the proper form and context for an urban infill project. Further, downtown’s close proximity to employment centers and regional transportation routes made the location marketable for apartments. Amicus also saw light rail transit as a positive factor, especially in differentiating their project from others in the north Metroplex. The project would not have occurred, however, had not the public sector shared risk and provided incentives. Developers are reluctant to undertake infill and redevelopment projects because they possess greater risk with less certain reward. The cost of land assembly, environmental remediation, infrastructure and permitting are major obstacles. Suburban cities typically focus on keeping up with the service and facility demands of growth and regulating development for compliance with their plans and standards. Maturing suburbs, like Plano, must assume the role of entrepreneur to stimulate infill and redevelopment projects to sustain growth and vitality.

The next few years will be a critical period in further realizing the vision of a transit village. The Plano Courtyard Theater and the expansion of Haggard Park will enhance the area’s quality of life and image. Marketing programs, festivals and cultural activities are needed to strengthen downtown as a regional destination. Additional redevelopment projects are needed to build mass, density and diversity of use. New residents and businesses must be woven into the existing community fabric, and a symbiotic relationship must be nurtured among DART, downtown businesses and residents and nearby neighborhoods to achieve the benefits of transit-oriented design.

By 2025, the population of the four core counties of the D/FW metropolitan area is expected to grow 52% to 6,967,535, potentially consuming more than an additional 500 square miles of farmland. Intensifying development within the existing built area, especially the portion of the region served by transit, could lessen the extent of sprawl and its adverse impacts. The development of transit villages alone will not significantly change the course of future regional development, however, they may stimulate public interest and support for new sustainable development models that break from the traditional suburban pattern.

Related Web Sites

www.dart.org/downtownplanostation.asp
www.eastsidevillage.com
www.planoplanning.org
www.planotx.org/art
www.tpcworld.com
www.hhpa.com