The Importance of Mixed Use

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Mixed-use—the close physical integration of places for work, living, recreation, entertainment and relaxation—is an essential ingredient in creating sustainable communities. It is essential that efforts should be made to incorporate greater mixed-use in the UT Medical School District as this important sector of Central Austin develops.

Mixed Use Development

In a very elementary sense, mixed-use development is just practical. It places the day-to-day things we need to do in immediate proximity to each other. Less transportation is required for daily life, and thus the massive amount of consumption associated with transportation is minimized. There is less need for elaborate apparatuses like cars, buses and transit systems. Fewer roads and rails are required, consuming less land and creating less impervious cover. The need for parking lots and garages is reduced. And, of course, consumption of fossil fuel or other energy sources associated with transportation is minimized.

Over the last decade, downtown Austin has become something of a poster child for mixed-use development. The addition of a very impressive stock of multi-family housing and retail to an already healthy quantity of office and institutional uses, as well as a beautiful array of recreational and entertainment opportunities has made it possible to live, work, recreate, and find entertainment in a compact district that is becoming increasingly pedestrian and bicycle friendly. Improved transit systems, car-share, and bike-share programs that thrive in dense mixed-use districts have enabled residents to rely less on their own cars.

Indeed, it has become possible to live without a car in downtown Austin or to live as a couple or small family with only one car rather than two. This means that, although the cost of housing may be somewhat high, the overall economic
sustainability for an individual or family may be more desirable than in more auto-centric patterns of development. Rather than putting money into the purchase of an automobile (an item which depreciates quickly) and into auto insurance, auto maintenance, and fuel (all of which are non-recoverable in the long run), people can invest the same dollars in their home which has a greater likelihood of being a recoverable investment or even one that appreciates.

Mixed-use is practical and sustainable at both the individual level and at the level of the larger society. It reduces an individual’s dependence on expensive and time-consuming transportation modes that syphon resources from better long-term investments. It diminishes infrastructure investments in roadways, transit systems, and the operational and maintenance costs that accompany each, which act as a constant drain on resources for local and regional governments.

In a broader sense, mixed-use is also a tool for cohesive and lasting community building. It brings people in pedestrian environments together and allows them to interact face-to-face both socially and professionally. It creates the “in-between” spaces that link working, living, and relaxing, and also emphasizes a public domain that is shared by all members of a community. Sociologists and urban observers like Jane Jacobs and William H. White have heralded the social and cultural benefits of mixed-use environments for decades. More recently, economists like Richard Florida have touted the importance of such communities in stimulating a creative culture and a lifestyle that is essential for the health of the 21st century American economy.

Public health experts like Dr. Richard
Jackson are also promoting dense mixed-use environments with a high level of pedestrian activity as a means of promoting a healthier, more sustainable lifestyle for Americans. Obesity, diabetes, heart problems, diminution of bone density, and joint deterioration are all reduced when people walk regularly throughout their lives, a pattern that is natural and pervasive in mixed-use environments, but often absent in auto-centric environments.

True sustainable design requires long-term social, economic, and physical health in a community as well as long-term environmental stability; the patterns of development created in quality mixed-use environments are great contributors to that health. The small embryo of sustainable mixed-use in downtown Austin needs to be nurtured and grown if the city is to become the kind of sustainable metropolitan region it likes to talk about being.

UT Medical District

As the UT Medical District develops as an essential new force in central Austin, priority should be placed on integrating housing, daily services, entertainment and other activities into what is already a pretty good mix of activities in the first phase of development. There is an opportunity here for a blending of town and gown that could be immensely beneficial both to the University of Texas and to the City of Austin.

There is a relatively rare opportunity in the area around the Medical District to implement quality planning because three public entities own the great majority of the land. UT Austin owns most of the land between IH-35 on the east, San Jacinto Street on the west, 15th Street on the south and Martin Luther King Boulevard on the north. The State of Texas owns most of the land between San Jacinto Street on the east, Lavaca Street on the west, 11th Street on the south and Martin Luther King Boulevard on the north. Central Health (a county-based healthcare district) owns most of the land between IH-35 on the west, Red River Street on the east, 15th Street on the north and 12th Street on the south. All three of these public entities have been preparing master plans over the last few years with some degree of coordination. UT Austin is planning for most of its land to hold academic and research purposes and a hospital, though there is also some retail being proposed as well as some potential for student housing. Central Health is projecting the possibility of a substantial amount of multifamily residential development along with public services and health related private development. The State of Texas has not yet committed to future plans for its property near the district.

Two very substantial developments could greatly enhance the mixed-use potential of this area. The Waller Creek Plan that was unveiled by the Waller Creek Conservancy in late 2012 offers great promise for the whole east side of Central Austin, although no immediate plans for actual implementation have been announced. A very critical part of that plan is the development of a major urban park at the site of the old Waterloo Park between Red River Street, San Jacinto Street, 12th Street and 15th Street. This could establish a welcome and meaningful public space with everyday recreational uses right in the heart of the district.

The current routing of the urban rail initiative that is due to be on the ballot in November’s election would bring a major transit route up the San Jacinto Street/Trinity Street corridor, immediately beside the Medical School. A major station would be located at the intersection of San Jacinto Street and 17th Street. Urban rail stations are wonderful complements to mixed-use development as they generate pedestrian activity, encourage retail around them, and provide connections to more distant destinations without car dependency.

The context of the UT Medical School District holds great potential for the creation of a sustainable mixed-use area that would extend the success of similar recent developments downtown. The opportunity for students, faculty, staff, hospital employees, research personnel, state workers and others to live, work, recreate and find entertainment in a compact, walkable environment would be a great boon to the Medical School. It would also further UT Austin’s commitment to sustainability and to practicing exemplary standards of sustainable development.