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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Building a better Austin

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Concordia University's online "Campus Relocation Updates" provide a real service to the university's community and to the residents of Austin, as we face a predicted doubling of the city's population in the next 30 years.

Concordia hired a firm with an established track record, the Staubach Company, to handle the disposition of its campus, 22 acres along Interstate 35 between 32nd and 38th streets.

The university foresaw that its relocation would take a long time - the theme of its Updates is "Beyond 2010" - and require openness to change. Update No. 5 for October 2005 wisely asks for "continued prayers during this challenging and exciting project."

Here we have what Paul Harvey used to call "the rest of the story." It also gives Austin residents a look at the years ahead as our city emphasizes urban infill.

Major developments have three components: the city government, the residents of Austin and developers. The Austin Planning Commission is outlining a plan to concentrate development in Central and East Austin using "neighborhood centers," in part, to achieve required density. As many as 60 neighborhood centers are envisioned for Central Austin.

Area residents' property values and way of life will be directly affected by such intensive development.

Finally, developers will play a key role. It would help if they're experienced and willing and able to modify their plans.

In the East Avenue Planned Urban Development (PUD) at Concordia, neighborhood associations have been meeting with the developer since May 2006 to reach an agreement on the most appropriate use for a large tract that affects three neighborhoods (Hancock, Eastwoods and Hyde Park).

An Oct. 20 American-Statesman story captured the situation: "The future owners of the current Concordia University campus are moving ahead with plans to transform the 22 acres into an urban village of condos, apartments, shops, offices and a hotel." The plan includes 1,400 apartments and condos; a 170-room hotel; 300,000 square feet of office space; and 400,000 square feet of retail shops. It will have four 240-foot high towers and 95 percent impervious cover.

While the Concordia developer is moving ahead, the neighborhood associations have unanswered concerns that will undoubtedly come into play in the planning of future sites.

First, the city should scrutinize the track record of development groups. Cerberus Investment Group is behind the East Avenue PUD. Cerberus has not answered requests for information about its history with such projects or how they determined how much to pay for the Concordia parcel. The price developers pay affects their ability to adjust their plans to local concerns. Cerberus contends it cannot change its plans because of the high price of the land.

Second, projects cannot be considered in isolation. The East Avenue PUD is near the St. David's Hospital PUD, the Mueller redevelopment and even the envisioned Game Day Center at Red River and Dean Keeton streets. Development costs and options, population density, traffic congestion, impervious cover and general quality of life are interdependent.

Third, local problems do not stay local. The East Avenue plans call for 32,000 vehicle trips per day to get to the main entrance off the west access road of I-35. Nearby, the St. David's PUD will yield another 14,000 trips per day. Public transportation will not appreciably alleviate the 46,000 daily trips made to and from developments of these kinds. Besides the effect on local neighborhoods, imagine driving near Red River between 51st and 26th streets during rush hour.

There are options for the Concordia site that fit the City Planning Commission's proposed neighborhood growth plans and keep buildings within a reasonable 60- to 120-foot range. These plans also will protect Austin's distinctive neighborhoods.

The mythical creature Cerberus is an apt name for how we are working through the urban development process. Our three heads must work together to keep us healthy. But, in the end, our aim is not to be guardians of hell, but of an Austin that will continue to be a heavenly place to live.

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