

New town takes a firm shape

Mixed-use development at interstate 35 could double city's population

By Jason Noble
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They came, they saw, they designed.

Architects, artists, designers and engineers converged on Liberty last week, quartered themselves at Heritage Hall and in eight days created an expansive, detailed plan for New Town at Liberty, a residential development planned for the city's northwest corner.

At 939 acres, or approximately 1.5 square miles, the development is the largest ever undertaken in Liberty. When it is completed — over the course of perhaps two decades and 20 phases — it could double the population of Liberty. As a New Urbanist development with an emphasis on walkable neighborhoods, diverse housing stock and mixed-use areas, it will be a major departure from the residential development seen in Liberty and the rest of the Northland in the last several decades.

With these considerations in mind, Whittaker Builders Inc. — New Town's developer — and Duany Plater-Zyberk — the urban-planning firm hired to design it — organized a series of charrettes, which took place between Jan. 17 and last Tuesday. The process involved more than a dozen Whittaker and DPZ professionals, including architects, land planners, traffic engineers, retail consultants and storm- and wastewater experts, most of who stayed in Liberty for the entire week.

It drew, over the course of seven public meetings, perhaps 500 residents and city officials.

The public meetings and open studio time — in which residents could interact with designers and planners as they worked — were intended to draw in community perspectives and allay concerns about such a radically different project.

The first opportunity for wide community input came Jan. 17. After hearing the Whittaker presentation, Liberty resident John Fisher walked away intrigued by the concept, but aware of its limitations.

"I think it's an exciting development," Fisher said "I think there are definitely people that will be interested in it, But I think there are also definitely people who enjoy their vehicles and maybe their space more, so that this area won't be appropriate for them."

Outside the public interaction, the design team toured the New Town site and numerous areas around Liberty and the metro area — including Parkville, Weston and the Brookside neighborhood in Kansas City — to find inspiration for New Town's street design and architecture, said Tim Busse, Whittaker's vice president and director of architecture.

In public meetings and private conver-



Above: the masterplan shows the development between A highway and I-35 in northwest Liberty. Below, an artist's rendering of a commercial area in New Town.

sations, residents and city leaders raised a variety questions. Among the most issues most frequently raised were traffic and connectivity to “old town” — the rest of current Liberty and the downtown square in particular.

Interstate 35 borders the New Town site along its entire eastern and southern borders, effectively cutting it off from the rest of Liberty.

Traffic engineers working in advance of the charrettes process and throughout the week in Liberty overcame this barrier, Busse said, by designing a series of four roundabouts connecting I-35 to U.S. 69 and Lightburne Road to the New Town site.

By the last charrette, on Tuesday night, the design team had condensed all its ideas, studies and calculations into a single master plan that to direct development on the site for years to come. The plan calls for significant commercial development along I-35. The heart of the site includes five distinct neighborhoods, each anchored by a central community space and some degree of commercial or retail development. The plan calls for ample green space, and strives to preserve the site’s natural topography, said Marina Khoury, the project manager for DPZ who will oversee the New Town development.

Residents who attended the meeting Tuesday said they were impressed with the level of detail the team provided.

“They have given us a lot of information, and from what I know about developers around Kansas City and Liberty and other communities, these people really have their hat on straight,” said Harold McGuire, a Liberty resident and husband of Planning and Zoning Commissioner Anna Margaret McGuire. “It seems like they’ve thought of every possibility and seem to know ways to satisfy any concerns that are brought up.”

