



Slowed by downturn, cities again turning to projects around transit stops

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Many aging North Texas communities have tried to redevelop areas near DART rail into hip, urban-style projects only to stall amid the economic downturn.

But a number of projects now appear to be moving forward across the region, offering signs of a broader thaw.

Two large-scale efforts totaling as much as \$60 million are advancing along the Red Line in Plano, anchoring revitalization on the city's older eastern side. Garland is planning to redevelop land around its Blue Line rail station at Forest Lane and Jupiter Road. After a pause, momentum is growing again for mixed-use developments at DART stops in Richardson and along the Green Line in Carrollton.

Other efforts are in the works in Dallas as well, including new projects at Mockingbird Station and along the Blue Line on Lancaster Road south of downtown, DART officials said.

"There are still some financial hurdles to get through, but we're seeing a lot more action compared with a year ago," said Jack Wierzenski, director of economic development for DART.

With gas prices high and younger generations shunning suburbia in favor of more walkable communities and lifestyles, city planners and developers alike have flocked to concepts that are denser and have an urban flavor.

Many of those efforts came to a screeching halt during the downturn, when financing dried up for even the hippest, most in-demand real estate projects — such as the popular mix of restaurants, offices and living space at Mockingbird Station in Dallas.

The recent activity across the region offers proof that transit-oriented development will play a major role in revitalizing aging car-centric suburbs.

No North Texas city typifies the whims of the market better than Plano, which was ready to break ground on a downtown apartment and retail complex adjacent to DART rail at the leading edge of the economic downturn in 2008.

The \$30 million endeavor, which will include about 280 apartment units as well as shops and/or office space, encountered numerous delays.

With funding now secure, Tennessee-based developer Southern Land Co. recently announced it plans to break ground in the spring.

The delays were "100 percent tied to the economy," said Dustin Downey, project manager for Southern Land. "We really felt like this was a great project. Like everybody else, we had to turn back our pipeline. But the project is now ready to go again."

Scheduled to finish in 2013, the project is the latest in a series of shops, restaurants and apartments that have breathed new life into downtown Plano since DART's arrival in late 2002. Plano is expected to kick in as much as \$1.7 million in public funding for the effort.

Farther north, Plano officials have entered into negotiations with Dallas-based Prescott Realty Group to build on a vacant 4.5-acre plot adjacent to the Parker Road DART station. The city owns the property.

City officials hope the \$30 million project will anchor a turnaround in an area long defined by empty parking lots and aging strip centers.

"We think Parker Road has tremendous potential," Deputy City Manager Frank Turner said.

Plano had considered a number of short-term uses for the land, including a farmer's market, as well as pay parking for the nearby DART station. As the northern end of the bustling Red Line, the Parker Road stop has struggled to cope with a parking crunch.

But the long-term plan has always been for the city to transform the land into an urban-style development.

Up to now, Plano has focused on projects that include residential and retail space. Turner would not rule out other possibilities, such as a medical center, that would drive foot traffic to the area.

The city expects to draft a more formal plan for development at the Parker Road stop sometime next year.

Of course, no guarantees exist for Plano and the other North Texas cities chasing the next big urban project. DART officials say putting together urban-style projects often presents logistical challenges, regardless of the economy.

"Mixing retail and housing: It's one of the more difficult things to put together," DART's Wierzenski said. "Retail is the hardest to lease out because you've got to have the rooftops to support it. ... Sometimes you have to lease out the apartments first before you can get the retail in. The timing is a challenge."

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