

Leander rail stop attracts big-time development

Contributed by Heidi Schoonover

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Developers are beginning to announce significant transit-oriented projects near the proposed rail stop in Leander.

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Leander Transit Development has won a Capital Metro contract to develop the land surrounding the first rail stop on the line. "We're building a new urbanist community that is different, where people relate together and work together, play together," said Lance Hughes, one of the Leander Transit Development partners.

The mixed-use projects being planned around the Leander commuter rail station represent a substantial bet that the new rail line will be a powerful magnet for residential and commercial development.

"You have an open-minded city in Leander that is progressive," Wunsch said. "Not many places have two highways come together" to create a prime location.

Wunsch's projects are two of several in the works for a 2,300-acre transit-oriented site in Leander. They also represent a substantial bet that the new rail line will be a powerful magnet for residential and commercial development, just as rail lines have in Dallas and other cities.

In a related project, the Leander Transit Development LLC recently landed a Capital Metro contract to develop the 14 acres surrounding the first rail stop on the line, and secured another contiguous 150 acres for a mixed-use development, the Leander Transit Village.

The transit-oriented district "at this point is slowing evolving," said Kirk Clennan, the city's director of economic

development. "We're building on the momentum that we've generated over the past three years. Leander continues to be open for business. We invite everyone to come along for the party and enjoy the possibilities."

Also in the works is the nearby Villages of Messina. The W.Y. Atlantis project, a 342-acre mixed-use development, will have 750 homes priced from the mid-\$200,000s to the upper \$600,000s. The project will also have 90 acres of retail and office space, as well as multifamily units. An elementary school site is proposed for the project.

"We're excited about the area and all the energy and all the things happening in the area," said Wyatt Henderson, principal with Dallas-based W.Y. Atlantis. "Growth follows where the roads are and where utilities are going to be."

In the new Wunsch project, ground will be broken in September on 150 single-family homes to be built by the Joseph Rutledge Co. Inc., with prices expected to be from \$180,000 to \$260,000. The plans also include up to 1,200 apartments, 500,000 square feet of retail and a 22-acre church site.

Wunsch is well known in Austin business circles, having co-developed the Avery Ranch community near Cedar Park. He is also planning to build 2,400 homes in Somerset Hills, a new Georgetown master-planned community.

Already in place on Wunsch's Leander property is Jim Plain Elementary School. The development will include 36 acres of open space and a community park, four lakes with fountains and waterfalls surrounded by pedestrian walkways, and a hotel with at least five stories. Up to 400,000 square feet of office space also is designated for the project.

As for the restaurant, Wunsch said, "I'd love for it to be a Salt Lick."

"The big thing was all this was going to be residential," Wunsch said. "We're changing it to a much denser project. With the success of H-E-B (a store south of the project), people are knocking our doors down."

Capital Metro, which reviewed bids from other developers, selected Leander Transit Development for the land around the Leander rail stop.

"We're building a new urbanist community that is different, where people relate together and work together, play together," said Lance Hughes, one of the Leander Transit Development partners, noting that putting dense development near the rail will encourage residents to ride the train. "This type of community is an alternative to sprawl."

The developers and Capital Metro's staff will work out details of the project over the next few months, which will include financial arrangements as well as what the development will include. "The station itself and the TOD concept and the planning guidelines that have been adopted will all combine to make this a successful development in the long run," said Charles Heimsath, president of Capitol Market Research, an Austin real estate analysis firm, who is consulting on the Leander project.

Heimsath said there is a strong demand for higher-density apartments and condominium developments, as well as office use and some retail. However, because it might take time for the market to accept high-density development in a suburban location, the most prudent approach would be to start with lower-profile development and move to higher density as the market proves itself, he said.

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