

LAND USE & COMMUNITY CHARACTER

Why this Comprehensive Plan chapter is Important for Bellaire:

- ✓ *Communicates the desired character for the community and its neighborhoods, today and in the years ahead.*
- ✓ *Offers predictability to property owners and investors regarding the community's preferred development pattern and character.*
- ✓ *Clarifies ways the City can promote residents' quality of life, such as by providing attractive parks and trails and promoting greater housing variety.*
- ✓ *Establishes priorities for City programs and capital investments to support the desired development pattern and quality.*
- ✓ *Provides the public policy basis for the City's development regulations.*

CHAPTER 2

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the necessary policy guidance to enable the City of Bellaire to plan effectively for future land development and redevelopment. Sound planning is essential to ensure that the community is prepared for anticipated land use transitions and new development, can serve it adequately with public services, and can manage its impacts to maintain compatibility of land uses and preserve community character.

KEY PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

The following facts, assumptions, and considerations provide the context for the goals and action strategies presented in this chapter:

City of Homes. Bellaire is primarily a community of single-family detached residences.

Non-Residential Compatibility. Retail, service, office, institutional, and employment land uses are welcome in certain areas of Bellaire, but non-residential compatibility is a fundamental community priority.



Built Out. Bellaire is nearly built out, with only a few properties currently vacant and available for new development. This means the future focus will be almost entirely on redevelopment of land and existing structures and improvements.

Residential Turnover. Based on building permit statistics through late 2008, approximately 47 percent of Bellaire’s single-family detached housing stock had been rebuilt at that point since work had begun on the City’s last long-range plan in 1993. Since the initial “teardown” wave of the mid 1980s, the percentage was already above 60 percent through 2008.

Land Use Outlook. Much of the existing land use within Bellaire, especially within long-established single-family residential neighborhoods, will likely stay just as it is over the next several decades, with some transition and upgrading of uses via redevelopment activity. The most notable changes and transitions are expected where the City has adjusted its zoning strategy in recent years based on the 2009 Comprehensive Plan, including: (1) within the new Urban Village (UV) zoning districts for the core City Center area and the former Research, Development and Distribution (RDD) zoning district at the City’s northern boundary near Westpark; and (2) within the new Corridor Mixed Use (CMU) zoning district along the Bissonnet corridor and in the balance of the City Center area. In all of these cases, the new zoning provides more flexibility for desired mixed-use outcomes by means other than Planned Development (PD) applications while still retaining the PD option for applicants. Depending on the pace and extent of change, the overall land use allocation, as well as mix and compatibility issues, will remain relatively similar to what they have been across most of the community, enabling a focus on those areas most likely to undergo redevelopment and reinvestment as discussed within this plan.

Residential Demand. As discussed in Chapter 1, Introduction, it was anticipated in 2009 that no significant population growth would need to be accommodated within the community in coming years. This was based on recent trends at that time which did not involve any extensive areas of relatively dense single-family or multi-family residential development. However, given the rezoning initiatives completed since 2009, as described above under Land Use Outlook, the greatest likelihood for increased residential population will be in mixed-use areas depending on the dwelling types and sizes involved. For example, a multi-family component within a mixed-use project could introduce greater residential density, although many of the units could be studio and one-bedroom to cater to single young professionals and given a nationwide demographic shift toward smaller household sizes. On the other hand, the average household size in Bellaire rose from 2000 to 2010. To the extent that Bellaire attracts and retains more families with children in its single-family housing stock, this is another avenue to some increase in residential population. If more homes currently occupied by Bellaire’s most senior and “empty nester” residents gradually turn over to larger family households, this will also reinforce a trend toward



more people living within roughly the same number of single-family dwellings.

Cost of Land. The level of property valuations in Bellaire, given its central location within the Houston metropolitan area and the local development environment, makes it difficult to maintain an older generation of homes, especially given associated tax appraisals and the resulting property tax burden. This also encourages property owners to maximize the value gained from their property via the scale and quality of home construction.

Residential Distinction. The quality of the physical setting in many Bellaire neighborhoods is a key factor in residents' own quality of life. It is the community's attractive neighborhoods and parks which make Bellaire distinct.

Traditional Neighborhood Design. Many communities across the nation are trying to restore or re-create characteristics of "traditional" neighborhoods. As a planned community that has maintained its residential character over time, Bellaire continues to offer "the real thing."

External Development Impacts. Bellaire is an "enclave" community mostly surrounded by Houston—an unzoned city. The zoned community of West University Place abuts Bellaire along a portion of the east City limits. However, the Union Pacific railroad corridor provides some separation between the adjacent cities.

Role of Zoning. Development types and intensities seen just outside the Bellaire City limits, in places, indicate the area's market potential based on location, land costs, area population, and related factors. It also illustrates the benefits of zoning to the extent that Bellaire prefers to limit the type and intensity of development in particular locations to protect residential neighborhoods and control traffic and related development impacts.

Opportunities with Redevelopment. An active redevelopment environment means that Bellaire has the opportunity to address land use compatibility and quality and appearance issues from past development by applying newer standards as properties redevelop.

COMMUNITY CHARACTER

Community character relates to the use of land, but, more importantly, translates to the design characteristics that influence the "look and feel" of development. Instead of simply identifying the land use, such as commercial, a determination of an area's character more distinctly defines the intensity of development and the design features that contribute to its specific nature and appeal. For instance, a traditional downtown with a grid street pattern, streets with sidewalks and street furniture, smaller-sized lots, and mature trees is distinctly different in character—even though both are commercial in use—from a contemporary highway commercial strip that features curvilinear streets with curb and gutter, large parking areas, towering signage aimed at passing automobiles, and smaller, newly planted trees.



It is this combination of basic land use and the physical characteristics of such use that more accurately determine the real compatibility and quality of development, as opposed to just land use alone. Aesthetic enhancements such as the design of buildings, landscaping and screening, sign control, and site amenities also contribute to enhanced community character.

The community character approach can be applied to the typical range of land use types. Examples include:

- a single-family home situated on a relatively large lot, with many mature trees and substantial separation from neighboring homes, versus a single-family bungalow on a small, narrow lot with rear-alley access and minimal yard space or vegetation;
- storefront shops and small cafes in a walkable, neighborhood commercial setting versus “big box” stores and associated pad-site restaurants and retailers in a large-scale shopping center with extensive surface parking and minimal landscaping;
- a master-planned business park in a campus-like setting versus an office building on a site dominated by surface parking; or
- a public library or community center that is designed to be compatible with the surrounding residential neighborhood versus a municipal public works maintenance and storage site that is as intensive as most private industrial sites in a community.

Therefore, examined in this chapter is the basic use of land in Bellaire, along with the character of neighborhoods and commercial areas and corridors. This includes such factors as density (generally determined by lot and building size), building setbacks, building height, lot coverage, levels of open space, and the amount of vegetation or volume of landscaping. This approach allows the formulation of standards to achieve the desired character in both newly-developing areas and redevelopment and infill areas. Character districts better portray the intended outcomes of development, which offers assurance to neighboring property owners and allows quantification of the associated development impacts (population density, traffic generation, water and wastewater demands, etc.).

EXISTING LAND USE AND CHARACTER

Displayed in **Map 2.1, Existing Land Use & Character**, are the results of field inventory work conducted in mid-2008 to document the land uses of all properties in Bellaire at that time, as well as the associated development character of the community’s neighborhoods, commercial areas, and main roadway corridors. In addition, the map also shows the existing use and character of the first ring of properties just outside the City limits in Houston and West University Place.



FUTURE LAND USE AND CHARACTER

The following land use/character designations, which correspond with the categories depicted on **Map 2.2, Future Land Use & Character**, are for the purpose of establishing the pattern and intended character of future development and redevelopment. The associated acreages in each category are compiled in **Table 2.1, Future Land Use Allocation**. The descriptions express the general intent and rationale for the land use designations. Specific dimensional requirements and development and design standards associated with each land use designation are articulated through the City's implementing regulations (primarily the subdivision regulations and zoning ordinance) as they currently exist and may be amended based on this plan. Potential development code amendments should also involve further community dialogue to ensure consensus on the most appropriate and practical strategies for achieving the City's vision and objectives for its development outcomes and desired community character.

Existing places of worship and schools nearly all have a residential designation on the Future Land Use & Character map, reflecting their context and consistent with the City's zoning regulations. However, other government facilities are specifically identified on the Future Land Use & Character map since they are special uses, with unique attributes and impacts, within a community. From a character standpoint, all of these government and/or public assembly uses should be designed to match and complement the character of the areas in which they are situated, whether Urban, Suburban, or more auto-oriented. Appropriate buffering and screening measures should also be employed to ensure compatibility with adjacent and nearby uses of differing types and intensities, particularly residential uses.

TABLE 2.1, Future Land Use Allocation

Future Land Use & Character		
Designation	Acres	% of Total
Suburban Residential	301	17.5%
General Residential	988	57.7%
Small-Lot Residential	141	8.2%
Residential-Office Mix	3	0.2%
Corridor Mixed Use	78	4.5%
Urban Village	40	2.3%
Suburban Office	41	2.4%
Business Park	33	1.9%
Government	15	0.9%
Redevelopment Area	3	0.2%
Parks	46	2.7%
Transmission Lines	26	1.6%
TOTAL	1,715	100%

NOTE: All acreages are approximate.





Suburban Residential character

Suburban Residential

This designation is intended to accommodate single-family detached homes and, through the City’s zoning policy, has typically resulted in approximately one-third acre lots or generally three units per acre. In comparison to General Residential areas, a Suburban character is provided by generally deeper and somewhat wider lots that allow for larger front yards and building setbacks and greater side separation between homes. As a result, driveways are often on the side of homes rather than occupying a portion of the front yard space, and garages are typically situated to the side or rear of the main dwelling. Suburban areas are notable for their balance between green/open space and buildings and other site improvements, with less noticeable accommodation of automobiles (driveways,

garages, on street parking, etc.) than in more dense residential areas. Examples of this character type are found in far southwest Bellaire (Braeburn, Pine, Valerie, Holly, and Maple streets west of South Rice Avenue) and between Mulberry and Newcastle north of Bellaire Boulevard.

The designation also encompasses a few locations in Bellaire where even larger lot sizes were platted, including a series of lots along Maple just west of Loop 610, along the east side of Mulberry north of Bellaire Boulevard (within the Mulberry Residential Estate zoning district), as well as within the Bellaire Boulevard Estate overlay zoning district. The sense of openness is even greater in these locations due to the estate-size lots (generally one acre or more), which are generally wider and especially deeper in Bellaire, have relatively low lot coverage by buildings and paved areas, and have relatively greater separation between homes.



General Residential character

General Residential

This designation covers many of the core single-family residential neighborhoods within the “City of Homes.” The prevailing lot size (allowing approximately five units per acre) allows for less openness and separation between homes than in Suburban and Estate residential areas. However, the extensive urban tree canopy in Bellaire and complementary landscaping on most homesites places these local neighborhood streets more toward the Suburban range of the character scale relative to more auto-oriented and less green housing areas. But the

incremental increase in housing density, and the corresponding increase in lot coverage since lot size typically diminishes more than home size, distinguishes these areas from a fully Suburban “look and feel.” Examples of this residential character type are found in all quadrants of Bellaire, including nearly all properties between South Rice Avenue on the west and Newcastle on the east to the south of Bellaire Boulevard.



Small-Lot Residential

This designation provides for the smallest lot sizes on which single-family detached dwellings are typically permitted by right through the City's zoning regulations (i.e., without requiring a Planned Development review and approval process). A minimum lot of 5,000 square feet yields a gross density of roughly eight units per acre. This category also accommodates single-family attached housing types, such as townhomes and duplexes, as well as patio homes which may have some or no separation between units. All of these types are subject to specific development and design standards to ensure compatibility with the still predominant single-family detached housing pattern. The reduced width and depth of lots usually results in greater lot coverage than in General Residential areas. A corresponding design impact, especially to accommodate larger contemporary floor plans on such lots, is for the garage space to be internalized within the main structure and for front-loading garage doors to become part of the front façade of the home, with a driveway of equivalent width occupying that portion of the front yard area (also solidifying the two-story home trend to increase overall floor area). Along with the associated reduction in trees and overall landscape surface that typically results, this is a key contributor to such areas having reduced green space relative to the grey streets and driveways that must accommodate automobiles in a more dense residential setting. As in the General Residential category, Bellaire is fortunate that its mature tree canopy is evident even in many Small-Lot Residential areas, which helps to offset the more Urban-style development intensity. In fact, at such small lots sizes, an Urban character would be achieved if rear alleys were a part of neighborhood design, allowing dwellings to be placed closer to the public street.

The potential to pursue more creative and non-standard site designs in appropriate Small-Lot Residential areas (whether through Planned Development procedures or a "limited use" approach that allows for more in-depth site plan review) makes this category a prime focus for the community's life-cycle housing objectives in this plan. A certain minimum lot size could serve as the baseline for conventional single-family detached dwellings in Small-Lot Residential areas. Then, proposed lot sizes smaller than this baseline would require corresponding increases in open space on a Planned Development site to maintain area character and avoid crossing over into an Urban residential character. Bufferyard requirements would provide



Single-family detached example in far southeast Bellaire (between Newcastle and the railroad corridor along the eastern City limits)



Another single-family detached example, but with narrower lots and less side separation, along White Street near West Loop 610 and Bellaire Boulevard



An example of attached units, with periodic separation between buildings, in the Pin Oak Square townhome development in northeast Bellaire near Fournace and Innsbruck



separation and screening from other less intensive uses within the district, and, together with design standards, would ensure compatibility. At some point, clustered residential design involving patio homes or townhomes could be necessary for the required open space standard to be met on a site. A minimum site area could also be required as a condition for such clustering to ensure appropriate separation between housing clusters and adjacent uses. Floor area ratios (FARs) can also be used to ensure residential structures of a consistent scale and neighborhood character.

Residential-Office Mix

This designation is included primarily in support of the unique and very targeted Residential-Office Mixed-Use (R-M.2-O) district in the City’s zoning regulations. The zoning district encompasses only about 15 relatively small properties to the north of Bissonnet in the area between West Loop 610 and City Center. The R-M.2-O purpose statement in the zoning regulations describes it as “a medium density mixed residential and small-scale commercial area that serves as a buffer zone between retail/office and residential uses.” While the 2009 Comprehensive Plan contemplated that this zoning district would be folded into the new Corridor Mixed Use (CMU) district along Bissonnet, the R-M.2-O district was ultimately retained and kept separate to continue as a lesser-intensity buffer area between CMU and areas to the north designated for General Residential use on the Future Land Use & Character map.

Corridor Mixed Use

This designation is for properties in commercial retail, office and service uses along portions of Bellaire’s primary roadway corridors, including Bissonnet and South Rice Avenue. These areas are also appropriate for mixed-use development projects which can contribute to the City’s alternative housing objectives. Additionally, entirely residential developments with multi-unit housing types and styles (e.g., townhomes, condominiums, brownstones, lofts, and apartments) may still be considered through Planned Development applications within Corridor Mixed Use areas. Planned Development review would allow for more in-depth site plan evaluation to ensure compatibility with other nearby use types and intensities, and especially between varying housing styles and densities on corridor sites relative to single-family detached dwellings on properties just off the corridor. A Planned Development application also requires public notice and hearings as it is effectively a zone change request for the subject property.

It is recognized that such areas along busy corridors typically develop with an auto-oriented character. However, the application of a higher landscape surface ratio, better landscaping along frontages and around and within



Auto-oriented character along a Commercial Corridor



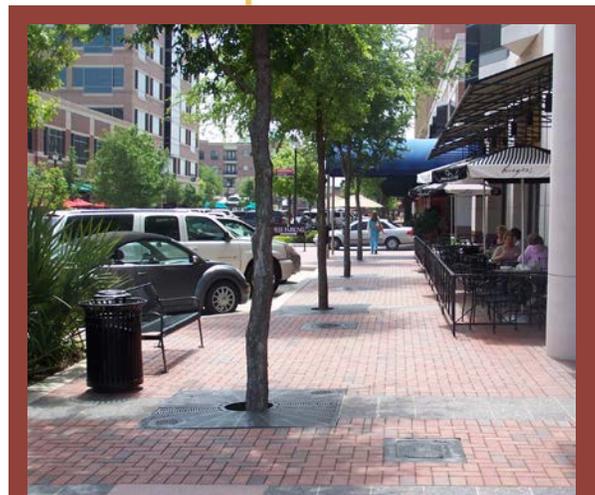
parking areas, sign regulations, access management standards, and other site and building design standards are intended to significantly enhance the appearance of these areas, especially as sites redevelop over time. A relatively low minimum area requirement provides for small business activity plus convenience-focused uses near residential areas, while larger-scale and more intensive uses will naturally require bigger sites to meet parking requirements and other development standards.

Where non-residential and mixed-use developments in Corridor Mixed Use areas are adjacent to residential neighborhoods, site and design standards involving building scale, placement and appearance should be triggered to ensure compatibility.

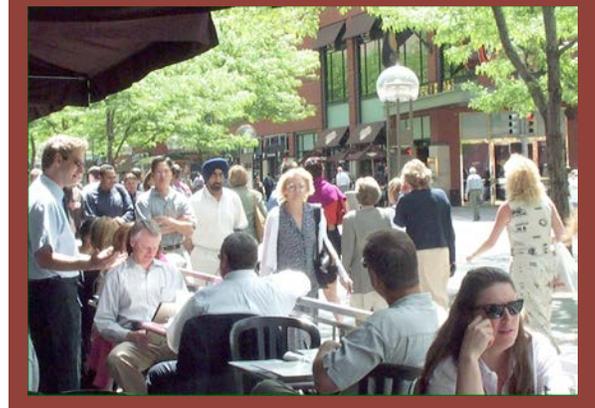
Urban Village

This designation encompasses two areas intended for transformation over time—the City Center and the former “RDD” (Research, Development and Distribution) zoning district in north Bellaire near Westpark and West Loop 610. Both of these areas were the focus of City-initiated rezonings to new “Urban Village” (UV) districts based on this Future Land Use & Character designation recommended through the 2009 Comprehensive Plan. Urban Village provides for the most intensive site development within the community, although the City’s recent rezoning initiative ensures that the nature of redevelopment activity in City Center is somewhat less intense (in scale, height, etc.) to maintain more of a “small town” downtown feel for Bellaire residents. In addition to structures devoted entirely to office, commercial, or service uses, buildings are allowed—and encouraged—to include a mix of ground-floor retail or service uses with upper-floor residential use. Purely residential developments with housing types of an Urban character (e.g., townhomes, brownstones, etc.) were ultimately allowed only in the new Urban Village-Downtown (UV-D) zoning district and subject to certain conditions (e.g., minimum number of contiguous dwellings, located near the district boundary) to provide a transition to less intensive residential types just outside the Urban Village area.

A minimum, as well as a typical maximum building height helps to create and maintain the area’s urban character. This is also accomplished by requiring that buildings be placed close to public streets (with zero setback), which adds to “architectural enclosure” of streets and contributes to a pedestrian sidewalk setting (along with appropriate building entry and window design standards for street-level building facades). Increased building height also allows for higher floor area ratios (FARs) to be achieved.



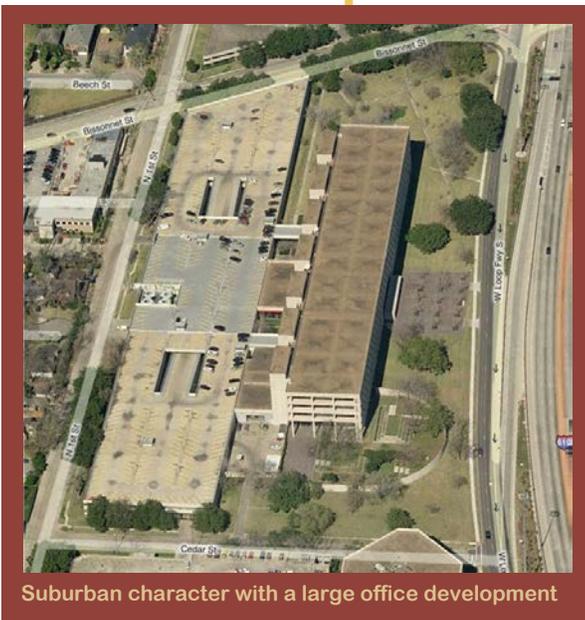
Urban character



Zoning standards can be included that effectively cause building heights and development intensity to “taper off” nearest the Urban Village interface with less intense districts.

Once an Urban development scale and character is achieved, all off-street parking requirements are typically eliminated in favor of on-street parking and/or structured parking (public or private). Structured parking is especially critical to Urban character since surface parking contributes to a more spread-out, auto-oriented atmosphere even when buildings are situated close to streets. Depending on market conditions, development bonuses (FAR and density) can sometimes be used to encourage structured parking. Finally, site and building design standards ensure that all new development and redevelopment maintains the area’s development quality and intended character.

It should be noted that the Urban Village designation in the City Center area is significantly smaller than the area previously within the “City Center” zoning districts (CCD-1 and CCD-2). This reflects the direction of this plan to focus on a core City Center revitalization area that has the greatest potential to transition to an Urban character over time as opposed to fringe “CCD” areas more oriented toward Bellaire Boulevard and Bissonnet that are likely to continue to have an auto-oriented character for the foreseeable future. For this reason, these areas are included in the Corridor Mixed Use designation rather than Urban Village.



Suburban Office

This designation is similar to the Corridor Mixed Use category in that, while focused on larger office uses in this case, it aims to enhance development outcomes in areas that are primarily auto-oriented in nature. This is especially the case along the West Loop 610 frontage through Bellaire. A combination of higher landscape surface requirements, maximum lot coverage, sign regulations, and other site and building design standards—including criteria for building placement and orientation and the location of surface and/or structured parking on the site—is essential along such a high-profile corridor where Bellaire’s image is established every day with thousands of visitors and through commuters. The standards should also address buffering, screening and other measures to ensure compatibility with adjacent residential uses and neighborhoods.



Business Park

This designation is for areas already developed as, or envisioned for office and research and technology-related uses in a campus-like environment. To create and maintain an attractive character, a minimum open space ratio of 30 percent is typically required, which still allows for a significant cumulative building footprint since most such developments involve large sites. The Chevron complex along Fournace in northwest Bellaire is included within this category based on the current use of this property. It is recognized that should this use ever leave its site, this type of property could transition to other long-term uses such as commercial activity along high-profile thoroughfare frontages and residential development on the balance of the site. While the Chevron site is under single ownership, the Business Park designation would also apply to properties with multiple buildings housing a variety of enterprises. Such areas are almost always governed by private covenants as well. Both the public and private standards are intended to create a highly attractive business environment that will encourage investors to build quality structures, which sets the tone to attract additional businesses. The exterior of the park should be heavily landscaped along with any major internal streets and intersections.



Business Park setting

Redevelopment

This designation is shown only for the Larch Lane area, which this plan targets for concerted redevelopment efforts. An adjusted strategy for the Larch Lane Development District (LLDD) zone would encourage the area's transition to alternative housing uses (e.g., smaller minimum lot size for slight density increase, flexibility in parking standards, reduced setbacks where appropriate, height step-back approach to allow greater height where appropriate but maintain compatibility near adjacent single-family detached homes).



Redevelopment scenario on Larch Lane

Reinvestment in this or future designated Redevelopment areas may be initiated by individual landowners or, in some instances and under certain circumstances, may be assisted by the City or another public agency.



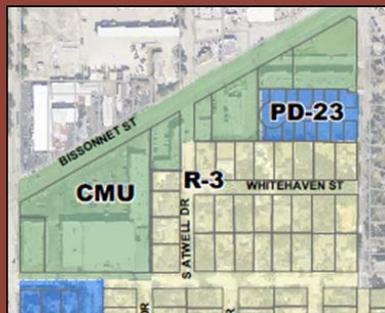
Pathways to Additional Population in Bellaire

Bellaire appears relatively built out today, suggesting limited potential for added population. However, the demographic summary in Chapter 1 of this Comprehensive Plan indicates that Bellaire could have some 1,500 additional residents and be approaching 19,000 total by 2040. Infill development on small remaining sites, and the potential for turnover and redevelopment of some larger non-residential properties for residential use, are the main avenues by which Bellaire might see some net gain in population.

Alder Circle, an infill development on the west side (under construction at the time of this Comprehensive Plan update in 2015), offers an example of a Planned Development approval, PD-23, that enabled new single-family dwellings at a higher density than nearby homes. The Alder Circle site was previously in the former R-M3 zoning district as shown in the lower left clip from the City's 2006 zoning map. The lower right clip from the 2015 zoning map illustrates how the approved PD site plan will yield 13 lots (plus some reserve area) relative to the eight lots along the north side of Whitehaven Street that must be at least 7,400 square feet in the R-3 zoning district.

Another scenario for illustration purposes, even if unlikely for this particular property, is the prospect of the CenterPoint site in northeast Bellaire at some point becoming available and transitioning to residential use. The graphic below shows that if the existing density of single-family residential development to the west of Mulberry Lane were duplicated east of Mulberry, then the CenterPoint property north of Nancy could accommodate just under 100 homes. At Bellaire's average persons per household rate of 2.78 persons, that would equate to 267 added residents.

Potential redevelopment of the nearby Pont Alba Apartments property on the south side of Bissonnet – the sole site in the city currently zoned for multi-family use (R-MF) – could also affect overall population depending on the housing types and densities involved (e.g., small-lot detached homes as at Alder Circle, attached townhomes, a more contemporary multi-family design, etc.). Limited multi-family use is also possible within several mixed-use zoning districts in Bellaire.



GOALS AND ACTIONS

The tables on the following pages present a set of goals and guiding principles for addressing the key issues identified in relation to land use and community character in Bellaire. Potential action strategies are then outlined to respond to particular opportunities and challenges associated with the overall goals. The action options are arranged in six categories that represent the main ways that comprehensive plans are implemented.

