

# COMMERCIAL AREA DEVELOPMENT & ENHANCEMENT

## ***Why this Comprehensive Plan chapter is Important for Bellaire:***

- ✓ *Highlights particular areas of the community that are likely candidates for commercial redevelopment activity and where the City, therefore, should concentrate its revitalization efforts to ensure outcomes desired by Bellaire residents.*
- ✓ *Anticipates the potential construction of a new METRO transit center along Westpark, just outside of Bellaire, and the implications for redevelopment opportunities at Bellaire's north City limits closest to Uptown Houston.*
- ✓ *Emphasizes the importance of both commercial development quality and attractive design of public infrastructure and streetscapes along Bellaire's major corridors as this is where first and lasting impressions of the community are formed.*
- ✓ *In conjunction with Chapter 2, Land Use & Community Character, provides the basis for potential adjustments to the City's zoning strategy for its prime commercial areas and corridors.*

## CHAPTER 5

The purpose of this chapter is to consider the outlook for commercial development and redevelopment activity in Bellaire, both in terms of local community-serving needs, as well as in the context of broader Houston-area development trends. This includes consideration of strategic locations such as the "City Center" area (within new zoning districts CMU and UV-D) and the new UV-T zoning district in north Bellaire, plus key corridors where the City's non-residential development has traditionally been focused. This chapter serves to reinforce Chapter 2, Land Use & Community Character, by documenting the types of commercial development residents anticipate and would like to see in their community in the future—and where such development and redevelopment activity should be focused to ensure compatibility and protect the character of the "City of Homes."

This chapter also addresses the City's role in encouraging and guiding desired development types and forms, in terms of preferred location, scale



and quality design. This includes consideration of aesthetic treatments on both private development sites and within the public realm that can improve image and appearance along the community’s major corridors (e.g., “context sensitive” roadway design, landscaping, signage, building and site design, and other amenities). Lastly, through the 2009 comprehensive planning process, this chapter pointed out the need for a dedicated City staff or contract position focusing on ongoing commercial redevelopment efforts in Bellaire and to interact with potential commercial development prospects. This was cited by noted Houston area development community representatives as one of various impediments to City Center redevelopment in a 2007 market study, which is also referenced further in this chapter. Since 2009 the City engaged a consultant to help assess Bellaire’s approach to and explore its priorities for commercial revitalization. Based on that effort and as part of updating this Comprehensive Plan in 2015, this plan recognizes that the City Manager and the Director of Development Services are primarily responsible for commercial redevelopment efforts as part of their overall duties and—in close collaboration with the Mayor and City Council—can speak on behalf of the City and advance its interests in this area.

## KEY PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

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

### Bellaire Urban Village at Westpark

In the Comprehensive Plan adopted in November 2009, this section included extensive discussion on the potential for a “transit-oriented development” (TOD) scenario near the north Bellaire City limits along Westpark, focused around an anticipated new Bellaire Rail Station. This was because it appeared, at the time, that METRO’s east-west University light rail line and a complementary north-south Uptown light rail line were proceeding toward near-term construction, with necessary funding lined up and final regulatory approvals pending. Updates to this Comprehensive Plan during 2015 highlight that the City, in 2011, adopted a new zoning strategy for the TOD area by replacing the former Research, Development and Distribution (RDD) zoning district with a new Urban Village-Transit Oriented Development (UV-T) district.

In the interim between the City’s 2009 and 2015 comprehensive planning efforts, METRO’s University and Uptown light rail lines were postponed indefinitely. More recently, Uptown Houston chose to proceed with broader mobility improvements for its area that include implementation of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service along Post Oak Boulevard. The ultimate Uptown Houston vision, as presented to and discussed with City of Bellaire officials, is to tie the BRT service into a proposed new METRO transit center along Westpark. At the time of the 2015 update of this Comprehensive Plan, it appeared that the transit center would be located farther west, within the



City of Houston, versus at the earlier rail station location along Bellaire's northern City limits. It also appeared that Uptown Houston was pushing back the timeline for the transit center while focusing first on BRT design and construction.

The passage of time has also led to different market calculations and real estate decisions by owners of property within the City of Houston, just west of the UV-T area toward South Rice Avenue. Larger tracts on the Houston side that were once part of the TOD vision along Westpark have already developed in a more typical, auto-oriented fashion with large-footprint retail stores, associated pad sites along South Rice, and expansive areas devoted to parking. Properties conducive for redevelopment in Bellaire's UV-T district could still follow a different path, with a more mixed-use and walkable design. Developer inquiries to the City demonstrate this potential and also reflect build-out of the Uptown area and continued interest in strategic sites for upscale and mixed-use projects in areas west of River Oaks and Upper Kirby. As with the earlier RDD and TOD scenarios, the introduction of east-west traffic circulation across the UV-T district, all the way from Loop 610 to South Rice, could be an additional impetus to new real estate investment in the area. Uptown Houston has continued to recognize this critical element in its planning for the potential transit center, but recent development activity between South Rice and the Bellaire City limits impedes this connectivity.

Through the 2015 update of this Comprehensive Plan, the Goal 5.1 table is now annotated to indicate action items already accomplished since the 2009 plan update related to the Bellaire Urban Village area near Westpark.

### City Center Area

As a precursor to the 2009 Comprehensive Plan process, Bellaire's City Center area was the focus of a special study during 2007 that included a physical assessment and visioning process, led by Kendig Keast Collaborative (the City's consultant for this Comprehensive Plan), as well as a market analysis conducted by CDS Market Research. Besides assessing current conditions and the future outlook for City Center, this strategic planning process was also intended to yield a consensus vision and goals for the area as presented in the sidebar on this page. The vision and goals were crafted to suggest a balance between commercial redevelopment objectives and the community's desires for City Center.

The study process included review of previous plans and studies, dating back to significant "Town Center" planning and implementation efforts during the 1980s (including the creation and later dissolution of a tax increment financing district); a property ownership inventory and history; field inventories of the area; a series of stakeholder interviews; and a special workshop with members of all City-appointed Boards and Commissions. The study results were reviewed and finalized in coordination with the Strategic Planning & Development Committee of City Council, which also included the Chair and Vice Chair of the City's Planning & Zoning Commission. The study helped to confirm:

NOTE: The information in this City Center Area section, from the Comprehensive Plan update in 2009, is retained here as background. As noted at the end of the section, City-initiated zoning ordinance amendments based on these City Center priorities and guidance were adopted by City Council during 2014.



**City Center Vision and Goals**

*VISION:* A revitalized City Center that enhances the quality of residential life in Bellaire by providing attractive and convenient shops, services, entertainment and residential options.

*GOAL 1:* A City Center that is directly linked to Bellaire’s immediate and long-term well-being and is realistically achievable.

*GOAL 2:* A City Center that fills a local market niche that responds directly to the needs and desires of Bellaire residents.

*GOAL 3:* A City Center that attracts desirable commercial, retail, mixed use and residential development.

*GOAL 4:* A City Center that provides safe and convenient pedestrian, bicycle and vehicular mobility.

*GOAL 5:* A City Center that balances the space and parking needs of various commercial activities with the community’s desire for an appealing downtown. Key elements would include “pockets of green,” attractive site development and building design, signature corridors, and intersections with exceptional streetscapes.

*GOAL 6:* A City Center enlivened by the presence of residential options.

*GOAL 7:* A City Center that links municipal facilities to the community’s commercial core.

- ◆ The degree of development interest in Bellaire’s City Center, but with suggestions from local and regional development community representatives that the City of Bellaire needs to take a more active role to encourage significant reinvestment (e.g., by setting quality standards, establishing a more walkable setting, addressing area aesthetics in terms of streetscape and signage, providing public parking, and exploring public/private partnership opportunities).
- ◆ The economic and market reasons for limited property turnover or improvements in the area for an extended period.
- ◆ Receptiveness among Bellaire officials and residents to potential residential development in City Center (whether stand-alone or in mixed-use scenarios).
- ◆ The City’s two current “CCD” zoning districts do not allow a stand-alone residential development in City Center.
- ◆ Scenarios under consideration (through a concurrent Bellaire Town Square facilities study) in which some City facilities might be relocated to City Center.
- ◆ The fundamental desire to achieve some tangible improvement of the area and ensure that any revitalization effort enhances residents’ quality of life (versus a typical economic development focus on expanding commercial tax base and associated revenue).

A prioritization exercise involving members of City Council, the Planning & Zoning Commission, and members of other City Boards and Commissions resulted in the following items rising to the top as the desired focus for City Center revitalization:

1. Housing diversity and opportunities in City Center.
2. A comprehensive strategy for renewing the area.
3. Pedestrian mobility.
4. A more green and attractive setting.
5. Truly unique businesses (specialty stores, boutiques).

The Existing Physical Conditions element of the City Center study identified 10 key factors in considering how best to enhance the area, some of which mirror the prioritization results above. These are summarized as follows:

1. **Urban Character Without the Benefits of a True Downtown Setting:**
  - Urban feel from “intensity” of area (traffic, hardscape).
  - But spread out and auto-oriented.
  - Regional arterials pass through area.
  - Area lacks “critical mass.”





Bellaire City Center area, in yellow (as defined by the previous zoning districts CCD-1 and CCD-2), and the “Urban Village” area, in dark red (now the Urban Village-Downtown zoning district), to be a prime focus of ongoing revitalization efforts.

- No anchor use(s) or activities.
  - Some edges of area directly abut unzoned City of Houston properties.
2. **Difficult Building Sites:**
- Bissonnet diagonal the dominant physical feature.
  - Resulting street and block pattern.
  - Some unusually shaped and undersized parcels.
  - Minimal development potential on some sites (especially after setback and parking requirements applied).
3. **Parking Arrangements:**
- Extensive surface parking.
  - Adds to extent of “hardscape.”
  - Adds to spread-out nature of area.
  - Some under-utilized parking areas.



- Opportunities for:
  - shared parking
  - freed-up space for more productive use
  - green space and amenities

4. **Marginal Conditions:**

- Limited maintenance or upgrades in some locations (e.g., facades, pavement).
- Image of substandard property upkeep.
- Detracts from the area’s appeal.
- A mismatch with improvements to Bellaire’s residential stock.
- Undermines residents’ quality of life.

5. **Lack of Residential Presence:**

- Would create more foot traffic during evenings and on weekends.
- Also demand for retail, services, and entertainment.
- Residents living right in the area would expect a safe, inviting setting.
- Current CCD zoning only allows residential uses through “combined retail/residential,” which also requires navigating a Planned Development review and approval process.
- An urban residential renaissance is occurring in central Houston.

6. **Lack of Bicycle/Pedestrian “Friendliness” and Safe Neighborhood Access:**

- CCD-1 purpose statement in the zoning ordinance refers to “... a predominately retail commercial area ... easily accessible to city residents.”
- Lack of marked bike/pedestrian routes and walkways to/from and within the area.
- Traffic is a positive for retail, but most vibrant downtowns have a pedestrian orientation.

7. **Lack of Municipal Presence:**

- All Bellaire civic functions elsewhere.
- Another common generator of visitation and daytime (and evening) street activity.
- A potential means for adding more “green” and other amenities to the area (e.g., public squares, fountains), as well as public parking.
- Another potential anchor, including for a master-planned development approach (public/private mix).

**Other City Center Study Findings**

The Market Analysis portion of the study included the following findings:

- With a median parcel size of 0.3 acres, the area was divided among 73 property owners. The top eight landholders controlled about half of all private land.
- Of the roughly 81 acres within the CCD zoning districts, 28.5% of the area is within publicly owned streets and easements.
- The gross taxable value of area properties was \$54.2 million in 2006, which yielded approximately \$238,000 in property tax revenue for the City. Tax delinquencies totaled \$71,849.
- City Center rents ranged from \$9 to \$13 per square foot for older space to \$20 to \$28 per foot for newer space. Despite the lower rentals for older retail properties, the property owners appear to be satisfied with their current revenue streams given the low-cost environment and with their properties carrying low tax values relative to the highest-and-best-use values.
- At the time of this study, the City was planning \$3 million of infrastructure improvements, including upgraded traffic signals, sidewalks, and pedestrian street crossings.
- Also at the time of the study, retail businesses in the area appeared to be doing well, particularly “upscale” shops (e.g., Magpie’s, Starbuck’s, Lemongrass) that are most often mentioned as desired by Bellaire residents.
- The City of Bellaire has no program of developer incentives.
- Condemnation of land is also not available as a redevelopment tool following a November 2006 City Charter amendment prohibiting the use of eminent domain to acquire properties for economic development.



8. **Lack of “Green” Areas and Amenities – Despite the Extent of Public Space:**

- CCD-2 purpose statement in the zoning ordinance refers to the City Center area as “... the focal point of the City’s visual character.”
- Limited open space or vegetated areas.
- Excessive street sections.
- More streetscape and image/identity enhancements needed.
- Another benefit of residential uses in the area (private landscaping and visible flowers, plants on porches, in windows).

9. **Wide Range of Building Styles:**

- All types of architecture in area.
- Partly due to different eras, but also the level of sophistication in building types and quality in some cases.
- Contributes to area’s disjointed appearance.
- How far to go with potential design standards?
- Building orientation relative to streets is another consideration.

10. **Dramatic Retail Market “Drop-Off” and Change in Community Character to the West:**

- Definite change in housing, retail, and general physical conditions past Chimney Rock.
- A fundamental factor beyond an enclave community’s control.
- City “Center” is actually at west edge of community.

The goal, guiding principles, and associated action strategies in this chapter related to City Center (under Goal 5.2) are intended to build upon the results of the 2007 study and consensus-building effort. Through the 2015 update of this Comprehensive Plan, the Goal 5.2 table is now annotated to indicate action items already accomplished since the 2009 plan update. Further details on the market analysis phase of the earlier City Center study are available in the full CDS Market Research report, *Independent Market Analysis - City Center District - Bellaire, Texas* (June 2007).

### **Commercial Development in General**

Bellaire City Council periodically refines and agrees on a set of goals and objectives to focus its efforts and guide City staff functions. The City Council Goals and Objectives for January 2008 through January 2010—the timeframe when this Comprehensive Plan was previously updated—addressed commercial development issues most directly through Objective D3, as highlighted in the sidebar on the next page. Priority initiatives associated with this objective included ongoing coordination with the Greater Southwest Houston Chamber of Commerce and others “to identify and investigate potential development interest,” plus preparation of an Economic Development Plan for Bellaire’s commercial districts. (It should be noted that



business development and networking efforts in Bellaire previously supported by the Chamber now occur through the Bellaire Business Association, or BBA.) The list of considerations for this suggested plan was very much in line with the opportunities and challenges discussed within this chapter for the Bellaire Rail Station and City Center areas:

- ◆ more mixed use;
- ◆ revitalization of older buildings;
- ◆ better mix of retail offerings;
- ◆ traffic flow accommodation;
- ◆ new development possibilities;
- ◆ walkways;
- ◆ green areas with pedestrian seating;
- ◆ possible architectural standards that are uniform, but unique;
- ◆ mixed usage residential and commercial;
- ◆ connection to other surrounding urban centers;
- ◆ architectural and/or art features built into City rights-of-way and commercial businesses that identify “Bellaire” (i.e., gateways, pavers, special lighting, benches, landscaping, etc.); and
- ◆ easy access parking, such as underground parking.

**City Council Goals and Objectives**

The Council’s adopted Goals and Objectives for January 2008 through January 2010 included the following goal for the Strategic Plan and Development Focus Area:

*The City Council of the City of Bellaire, Texas, will take a proactive role in the long-term development of the commercial and residential areas to make Bellaire the most desirable city in Harris County.*

Then, the following objective focused specifically on commercial development considerations:

**OBJECTIVE 3:** *Encourage development of commercial areas.* There is a significant commercial value and potential in our extensive commercial districts within the City. Develop recommendations for a long-term economic vision plan.

Additionally, the other primary commercial area in Bellaire is the Bissonnet corridor, east of City Center between 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and Loop 610, and then east of Loop 610 to the east City limits past Mulberry. As illustrated by the photo examples in this section, this commercial corridor, in its current state, also underperforms in terms of general aesthetics and contribution to community character. This is partly due to shallow lots along much of the corridor, but especially because of limited design-related standards in the City’s development regulations.

This situation was addressed through a key implementation step resulting from this chapter within the 2009 Comprehensive Plan update—the adoption by City Council, in 2014, of two new zoning districts, the Corridor Mixed Use (CMU) and Urban Village-Downtown (UV-D) districts. These districts encompass much of the Bissonnet corridor within Bellaire and, along with the new UV-T district in north Bellaire, are the mechanism for applying new site

and building design standards in these areas (as codified in Section 24-513a., Design Standards in Commercial and Mixed-Use Districts, within the City’s Code of Ordinances). As stated at the beginning of the new City Code section, “The purpose of this Section is to establish reasonable design standards and related guidance to address community desire for visually appealing non-residential and mixed-use development that enhances the overall quality and character of the City, while balancing the legitimate development and commercial needs of property owners.”



### Houston Urban Corridor Planning

The City of Houston Planning & Development Department in 2009 was proceeding with a multi-year initiative intended “to change the City’s land development regulations and infrastructure standards to accommodate a broad range of mobility options—walking, bicycling, public transit, and driving—in order to improve access to jobs, services, entertainment and recreation, now and in the future.”

The corridor planning effort was concentrating on areas near METRO’s expanding light rail system, with a special emphasis around the transit stations, to create a more transit-supportive built environment. While it is not surprising that this program was explicitly described as not involving zoning, it was a commendable effort by the City of Houston to explore ways to improve community appearance and residents’ quality of life as described in this brochure excerpt:

*The way the city grows is directly related to the rules that regulate land development and the standards for the infrastructure that supports development. These dictate things like the width of streets and sidewalks, the distance between buildings and the street, how many parking spaces a business must have, what type of landscaping must be added, and much more. Each of these items may seem like a minor issue on its own, but when taken as a whole, they create the world we live in and make the difference between having communities we can walk in or where we have to drive everywhere. Changes to regulations and standards can positively impact how growth is distributed, the way the city looks, and how we get around.*



This stretch of Bissonnet east of Avenue B exhibits many common features of a “strip development,” auto-oriented corridor: (1) stand-alone, single-use buildings surrounded by paved parking areas with minimal landscaping (although the structure is pulled close to the street in this case, with some parking to the rear); (2) entire site frontages devoted to paved parking areas, with no green space relief of any kind; and (3) commercial sites with extensive frontage area devoted to vehicle access, which further limits landscaping potential and leads to access management concerns through the cumulative impact of this situation along a roadway corridor.



From ground level, the typical outcome is an “Anytown, USA” appearance, with minimal attention to aesthetics or establishing a unique image for Bellaire. Indeed, there is little to distinguish this scene from a commercial corridor in many other communities. However, the office building site across Bissonnet (below) demonstrates the value of generous front yard landscaping, attractive signage, and skillful site design in which parking is placed under and behind the main structure.





These conceptual images illustrate how street redesign and added streetscape and site design features can dramatically transform corridor aesthetics and the community's overall image and appeal. Examples depicted include installation of landscaped esplanades, more extensive landscaping within public rights-of-way and on private sites, special street lighting and traffic signal fixtures, enhanced traffic signals and street signage, overhead utility wires moved underground, and distinctive designs for intersection crosswalks and widened sidewalks.



## 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 commercial area development and enhancement 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.



The City's wastewater treatment facility is a prominent visual element that shapes first impressions of Bellaire at one of the community's busiest gateway locations along Beechnut.



This example at the corner of Bissonnet and N. 3<sup>rd</sup> Street illustrates the beneficial effect, in terms of neighborhood compatibility and corridor quality, of designing a small corner office use with residential-style architecture and scale. The restaurant example below (from another community) shows how attention to development character, as well as the particular use, can complement nearby neighborhood and corridor development.

