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Consultants reveal plans for 'new urbanism' in The Reserve

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Picture four- to six-story buildings, short blocks with wide sidewalks and tree-lined streets. It's a place where residents can buy coffee on the corner, cross the street to get to the office, unwind at a local restaurant and go upstairs to their loft home at the end of the day.

Sound like a bustling downtown area?

It's actually the vision Mansfield planners and consultants have presented for portions of The Reserve at Mansfield, the area bounded by East Broad Street, U.S. 287 and Texas 360.

The proposed zoning guidelines, which were presented at a special meeting Wednesday, represent a radical departure from traditional suburban planning.

The idea is to create a self-contained community where residents can live, work and play that would provide alternatives to commuting to Dallas or Fort Worth every day for work.

"The commute in and out of Mansfield is getting harder," said Felix Wong, director of planning, who has worked for Mansfield since 1984 but lives in Arlington. "Now it's taking me twice as long."

Members of the City Council, Mansfield Economic Development Corp. board, Planning and Zoning Commission and the Mansfield Parks Facilities Development Corp. board heard from consultants for RTKL, an architectural design firm hired by the city to study the area.

The Planning and Zoning Commission is scheduled to have a public hearing and make a recommendation on the guidelines at its Dec. 5 meeting. The city plans to have the guidelines in place before the moratorium on building permits and zoning changes in The Reserve expires Jan. 11.

Consultants from RTKL have divided The Reserve into five regions: the central district, workplace district, two neighborhood centers and a business district. Each would have its own set of design guidelines. The most concentrated section would be the central district, which would have buildings a minimum of 35 feet high and allow them to be up to 120 feet tall.

The central district would be located on both sides of the future extension of Matlock Road, south of the Methodist Mansfield Medical Center, which is currently under construction at the intersection of Matlock Road and East Broad Street.

The residential area would be a mixture of lofts, located above offices or retail shops, multi-family town homes and apartments and single-family homes.

The proposed guidelines could change the way people go about their shopping and entertainment, said Paris Rutherford, vice president of RTKL. Traditional suburban sprawl separates residential and commercial uses with pad sites surrounded by parking lots and fences, which means people have to go to main arterial streets to go to the grocery store or out to eat.

"By doing so, I've just added to the congestion. By adding to congestion, you have to make sure you have eight to 10 lanes at that intersection," said Rutherford as he addressed the city boards. "You get your gallon of milk and go home. The end experience of that was, 'I had to sit in traffic.'"

The guidelines the city is considering for the neighborhood districts would create shorter city blocks with intermittent streets connecting to residential areas. The emphasis would be to encourage motorists to use the smaller streets for routine shopping trips – keeping them off the main roadways such as Broad Street or Matlock Road. The integrated residential and commercial sectors would flow seamlessly, allowing easy pedestrian access, Rutherford said.

These "new urbanism" concepts would be more sustainable than traditional strip centers that often lose value after 15 to 20 years, Rutherford said.

Zoning is already in place for the master planned South Pointe community, which occupies 800 acres in the southern tip of The Reserve. The developer, Cadence Capital Partners, is waiting for infrastructure to come to the area.

Laurie Gillespie, executive director of South Pointe, said she couldn't announce any businesses coming to the project, but there is "extreme amounts of interest."

City staff and elected officials toured several Metroplex projects last year that used new urbanism concepts such as the Southlake Town Square. The purpose was to draw positives and negatives from the various projects as Mansfield drafts the regulations for The Reserve. "I think this has corrected every one of them," said Councilman Dick Littell.