

Neighborhood Planning in Northeast Texas: Denton, Plano and Dallas

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Neighborhood planning in northeast Texas is undertaken differently in Denton, Plano and Dallas. Each city has a unique approach to the planning and implementation process. Strengths and weaknesses are apparent at each city.

Denton is the smallest and most rapidly expanding city. It operates on a comprehensive plan and has the least refined method for incorporating neighborhoods into the planning process. They face challenges of balancing equity between older central deteriorating neighborhoods and newer neighborhoods on the outskirts. Residents in the central city are dissatisfied with the neighborhood planning process. Denton would benefit by incorporating better code enforcement into the plan and by facilitating the creation of non-HOA neighborhood organizations.

Plano is an affluent city that has nearly reached its growth capacity. Therefore, the comprehensive plan is shifting away from expansion and more towards maintenance. Plano empowers its neighborhoods to take care of themselves by providing them with city services and funds. These are determined through a Neighborhood Action Plan. In addition, they have another successful plan for dealing with deteriorating neighborhoods. It is called the Fast Track Planning Program. The program takes a preemptive approach to dealing with declining neighborhoods and eliminates the problem before it becomes an issue.

Dallas is the largest city in the region and serves as an anchor to the surrounding metropolitan area. They have a neighborhood planning process that is included in the comprehensive plan. A strength of their neighborhood planning is in their implementation process. All neighborhood plans follow the same format in order to standardize the process. Dallas has benefited from the creation of the Office of Neighborhood Communication, which serves as a central point of communication between the City and its residents.

INTRODUCTION

The neighborhood planning process can vary widely between cities. The process can be specifically based on neighborhoods but most of the time it comes from the comprehensive plan either as a dedicated section or an extrapolation of planning values. Focus on neighborhoods versus the city as a whole is approached differently among cities. This paper examines the neighborhood planning process in three northeast Texas cities. Denton, Plano and Dallas are located within a short distance from each other and make up part of the DFW Metropolitan area. Each was established around the same time period of 1850 – 1865 A.D and has unique features and issues that contribute to the neighborhood planning process. Denton and Plano are suburban cities and play a dependent role on Dallas in the regional dynamics.

DENTON

Denton is the smallest of the three study cities, yet it is one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. The estimated 2005 population was around 100,000. Regional pressures may cause the city to double or triple in the next twenty years. Almost half of the current population comes from the colleges of the University of North Texas (UNT) and the Texas Womens University (TWU). Demographic character can be attributed to the college presence. For example, Denton has young residents; the median age is 27. The average household size is 2.35 with a median household income of \$35,422.

Neighborhoods in Denton can be characterized as those near the campuses that have the feel of a college town, those on the outskirts that are newer and constitute the rapidly expanding urban fringe, and the older deteriorating neighborhoods close to the center.

Deborah Viera, City of Denton Planner, explained that they addressing neighborhood planning by striving to preserve existing neighborhoods through zoning and create new neighborhoods after the “neighborhood center” idea with mixed use and commercial development making up the central core of the neighborhood.

Two small area plans have been adopted in the past seven years. The Fry Street Plan was adopted in 1999 was the first neighborhood plan that spearheaded the city's undertaking on neighborhood planning. The Fry Street Plan comprises a mixed-use district with special needs due to its proximity to the UNT campus. Two additional plans comprising residential districts were processed. However, only one plan of the original two was adopted. The other adopted plan is the Downtown Master Plan (2004). It includes existing residential neighborhoods that are identified as cohesive units with strategies and policies responding to their unique characteristics and needs.

The 1999-2020 Denton Plan mostly drives Denton's planning so the approach is based on a comprehensive policy. Within neighborhoods, all zoning changes correspond to the future land use component; new thoroughfares must comply with the mobility plan, and so forth. The Denton Plan encourages the development of small area plans as vehicles of preserving existing neighborhoods and stirrers of community involvement and pride. Any new development occurring in the areas is subject to approved small area plans and must comply with the policies and guidelines established by the plans.

Neighborhood planning issues are generally brought to the city unsolicited. Homeowners associations (HOAs) and organized business owners interested in small area plans usually approach the city about their interests. Staff has preliminary meetings explaining the purpose and scope of small area plan. If there is consensus, staff will approach the City Council about the request. Some times the City Council is the initiator of the small area plans. If this is the case, staff identifies existing HOAs and potential stakeholders within the neighborhood and start processing the small area plan (neighborhood meetings, individual meetings with community stakeholders, research, draft proposals, work sessions with city board members and council, meetings with city departments and other governmental entities, public hearings, etc).

Small area plans can address a myriad of community issues. Revitalization of existing commercial uses, capital improvements, neighborhood protection from new development, code enforcement, redevelopment of existing structures or infill lots, mobility plans, pedestrian and bicycle access improvements, solid waste collection and screening, public safety, building aesthetics, ADA sidewalk compliance, parks and open space, and flooding are common issues included in small area plans. The city sees small area plans as opportunities for partnerships between the city and the community, developers included. The city participation on the implementation of specific components of small area plans depends on the availability of funds and staff, and/or identification of available fund sources (grants, CBDG funds, etc). As new developments occur, developers are also responsible for complying with the standards adopted on the plans.

In Denton, there is no real formal relationship between cities and neighborhoods. The City continues working with HOAs when projects that could impact their neighborhoods are identified. Staff attends HOA meetings when residents inquire about city's available programs or projects. The Denton Neighborhood Alliance is an overarching organization grouping various HOAs and is actively involved in the city planning process (rezoning, small area plans, comprehensive plan amendments, etc).

Some of the issues that stick out about Denton are rising deterioration of older neighborhoods and the lack of non-HOA neighborhood organizations. The City seems to work more often with private HOAs than it does with traditional neighborhood organizations. The City of Denton is making headway on some levels, yet many residents dispute this. They do not agree that neighborhood planning has been effective in Denton. The City recently acknowledged rising claims of complaints from lack of code enforcement. The code has holes in it and has allowed neighborhoods to go uninspected and deteriorate. Residents have also voiced concern over the lack of support from the city council.

The City recognizes success in two ways. First, neighborhoods coming together and be partners in the preparation of neighborhood plans are by themselves great successes. This has been done on two occasions. Many plans are not adopted because of lack of consensus among the residents. Even when plans are adopted, the vigilant eyes and constant inquiries of residents make the difference between a successful implementation and the plan collecting dust on a shelf. The second success is also measured based on the accomplishment of the plan goals. In this regard, the small area plan for the Denia neighborhood included capital improvement program (CIP) projects and mobility plan amendments among many other things. Some of the CIP projects and mobility plan amendments have been accomplished. For most part small area plans and other plans are still going on as new development is proposed in those areas.

PLANO

Plano is a very clean and desirable place to live with high standards for community and quality of life. It is over twice the population of Denton and is one of the most affluent cities in the U.S. The 2000 U.S. Census shows the population to be 222,030 residents. The median age is 34 and the average household size is 2.73, with a median household income of \$78,722.

Neighborhoods in Plano have transitioned from farming communities to those of a residential suburb to major economic center. Neighborhoods contribute to the community feel of the city; they support excellent quality of life, and have access to a top-notch service program from the city. Over the past forty years Plano has been home to the fastest growing population in the DFW Metroplex. Unlike Denton, Plano is approaching its growth capacity, and the focus of planning efforts is shifting from future growth and development to redevelopment and revitalization.

Planning in Plano is done comprehensively with continual updates of the Land Use and Transportation plans every two years. Three major themes that guide the plan are:

Livability, Organized Development, and Transition to an urban city. In Plano, neighborhoods represent a relatively small percent of the demand for participation in the planning process. Traditionally businesses and commerce play a larger role in the thirteen planning areas. The City of Plano sees the neighborhood planning process as a way to educate residents on the availability of city services. By keeping neighborhoods informed problems can be prevented.

They follow the Broken Window Theory. This assesses neighborhood characteristics as a signal for future problems. For example, deteriorating neighborhoods show evidence of decay (accumulated trash, broken windows, deteriorated building exteriors). If these conditions remain a long period of time, the area can begin to feel rundown and vulnerable, causing residents and businesses to move away. They become less willing to participate in the preservation of the neighborhood. Indicators are used to proactively prevent deterioration of at risk neighborhoods.

Sam Ball, the Neighborhood Planner in Plano described how Plano's neighborhood approach differs from other cities. The neighborhood strategy in Plano focuses more on community outreach than grassroots planning. The Neighborhood Planning Program was established in 1998. It uses a strategy of cooperative problem-solving and mutual responsibility. It creates an opportunity for citizens to shape the type of neighborhood they would like to live in and their overall quality of life. Residents participating in the program use a systematic planning process to develop a Neighborhood Action Plan - a multi-year, neighborhood based plan that identifies the visions, goals, objectives and strategies. Strategies are then used to address neighborhood priorities and guide city service decisions. The goal is to have the ultimate neighborhood plan to be self-sustaining.

The four main focuses in the program are to guide redevelopment and revitalization, provide opportunities to improve the quality of life, to protect neighborhoods from decline and to coordinate services by bringing attention and resources to neighborhoods.

The process begins with a representative from Neighborhood Planning contacting representatives of several organizations (Neighborhood Associations, Homeowners Associations, apartment complexes, boards, congregations, etc.) within the planning area to describe the program to them. City staff then co-hosts a meeting with these groups and other residents to formally introduce the planning program. A “visioning process” is conducted with the neighborhood for the future of the neighborhood. Recommendations represent the consensus of the stakeholders (residents, business owners, citizens, organizations and institutions, and City departments) who have participated in drafting the plan. The visioning process typically includes the topics such as land use, zoning and neighborhood character; transportation and traffic; housing; environment; crime and safety; history and quality of life. A typical plan can be completed in four to six months.

Once complete, the Neighborhood Action Plan is presented to the Planning and Zoning Commission for review and recommendation and then to City Council for adoption. The action items help determine the allocation of funds to be devoted to neighborhood improvement projects and programs. The actions are prioritized based on the immediacy of impact, level of commitment and action taken by the individual neighborhoods toward partnership objectives.

Plano is unique in that once funding and parameters are established, the responsibility for maintenance and upkeep of the plan shifts primarily to the neighborhood. Planners conduct bi-annual meetings to ensure progress in implementing the Neighborhood Action Plan. The neighborhood should be working independently to actively improve the conditions of their community. Staff is available for assistance and consultation, however, the final responsibility for plan implementation lies with the residents. Some elements of the Neighborhood Action Plan are implemented by direct neighborhood action, often with City support. Neighborhood clean-ups, community festivals and Crime Watch are a few examples of projects that might be accomplished by the neighborhood. Other elements, such as street maintenance, are the City’s responsibility.

Neighborhoods revitalization and achieving the neighborhood vision is a continuous effort by all involved. Regular neighborhood organization meetings, periodic review, progress reports to City Council, and annual review of the overall Action Plan are important factors in judging the success of the plan.

Mr. Ball said that there was not much of a formal relationship between cities and neighborhoods because neighborhoods typically interact through one of the city planners. Indirectly, the Community Relations Commission serves as a hearing board to address significant issues as directed by the City Council. The Board oversees the administration of federal funds as well as the City of Plano's Community Service Grants. They also make recommendations to the City Council concerning issues related to human/social needs and significant community problems that could impact the quality of life within the community.

Plano is proud of its Fast Track Planning Program. It differs from the Neighborhood Action Plan and is new and unique to the City of Plano. Using the Broken Window Theory, it is designed to address the issues of older neighborhoods that have yet to develop "critical" issues but may be on the verge of deterioration. It is a preemptive strategy that has been successful to date. The Fast Track program functions similar to the larger comprehensive approach but is more specialized and faster. After a survey is conducted, the neighborhood participates in series of meetings over four weeks. Meetings are designed to address issues and concerns of the residents. The neighborhoods are educated on topics such as crime, traffic, maintenance and waste disposal by the department heads of each city program. When needs are discovered that require funding, a budget is constructed and presented to the city council for adoption. This strategy has been successful in saving borderline neighborhoods from falling into disrepair. It effectively saves significant costs that would be associated with vacancy and rehabilitation.

DALLAS

Dallas is a world-class city and is the eighth largest in the U.S. with a population of 1.1 million. It serves as the anchor of the region. It is the most ethnically diverse of the three study areas. The median age is 30 years old. The average household size is 2.58 and the median household income is \$37,628. Neighborhoods in Dallas are well known for their unique identities. They are rich with history and can be noted for the mature tree canopies and preservation of the rich architecture that has been introduced over the years.

Dallas operates on a comprehensive plan called Forward Dallas! It has a specifically outlined neighborhood component in the plan that is built on a series of guiding principles ranging over housing, community, social equity, economic development, the environment, transportation and public infrastructure. Neighborhood plans have traditionally been done on an individual basis. While effective for specific local issues, they may not be applicable to larger citywide goals or those of adjacent neighborhoods.

The neighborhood planning process aims to conserve and protect older existing neighborhoods near the city core, guide development and integration of new neighborhoods, and identify degenerating neighborhoods in order to address needs. Plan creation follows a typical process of establishing boundaries, facilitating community participation, identifying strengths and weaknesses, taking an inventory and analysis of area, creating a vision, and outlining the civic responsibilities.

Neighborhood workshops in Dallas had the highest attendance and interest during the comprehensive planning process. Small area plans are geographically defined throughout the city; neighborhoods fall into this category. Most often, the neighborhood planning process is initiated once a new development or institutional expansion threatens the land use stability of the existing area. In addition to land use, neighborhoods have specific needs for city services. Consensuses are formed amongst residents and businesses in the neighborhoods to determine priorities for education, housing and human services.

Stakeholders then work with the city to address these needs. The neighborhoods plans must fall in line with the comprehensive plan. Requests are evaluated based on evidence of deterioration and vacancy, anticipated change, need of public facilities, and opportunities for stabilizing older, established neighborhoods.

Dallas requires that neighborhoods plans are all standardized in order to improve the efficiency of implementation and relativity to other plans. Each plan contains a section about the implementation process for that area. This section outlines the timing and methodology for implementation, potential funding methods, responsible parties and an evaluation and monitoring program. Implementation policy is also outlined in the comprehensive plan. It is the responsibility of the city to support and facilitate the creation and maintenance of neighborhoods groups and to target non-English speaking residents. A database of neighborhood associations shall be maintained and made available to the public. The database is to be used by the city to encourage dialogue with and between the residents. The Office of Neighborhood Communication is currently in the creation process in order to have a point of contact for neighborhoods. The City of Dallas is required to increase community participation by educating residents on how to become involved in the planning process. Specific requirements for community involvement require notification to residents early in the process to encourage grassroots participation from the very beginning of the development phase of planning.

In addition to neighborhood outreach and involvement, the city is responsible for promoting neighborhood compatibility by balancing land uses and locations of services and open space. Identity and sense of community are encouraged through community based events and physical amenities.

Neighborhood planning is incorporated via the zoning department. A formal communication mechanism between the city and neighborhoods is being developed called the Office of Neighborhood Communication. This will allow citizens to effectively address neighborhood issues. The Office will provide annual updates of the

implementation plan and have designated points of contact within the city. Neighborhood organizations that are registered with the Office will receive notification of decisions that will affect their area.

The Fair Park neighborhood is often used as a successful example of the Neighborhood Planning Process. Fair Park has a rich history of neighborhood involvement. In previous years the area was characterized by blight, poverty and crime. On many levels it was the poster child for inequity in Dallas. A neighborhood plan was adopted in 1987 and a Planned Development District was established in 2001. A wide array of community organizations can be credited to the success of the area. In addition several community development corporations have contributed to the stability of the neighborhood by developing affordable single family and multifamily projects to deteriorating areas. During the neighborhood planning process for Fair Park, sixty residents attended a workshop. The charette resulted in a neighborhood vision that is guiding ongoing coordinated private and public action. Rehabilitation has cost the city of Dallas over \$315 million dollars. This has resulted in private investments of \$8 to every \$1 spent by the city. Anticipated public investments include the expansion of the DART light rail line into the area, three new housing projects and improved access into the neighborhood from the Trinity Parkway. The area continues to face challenges but progress is evident.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The City of Denton would benefit from a better neighborhood planning process, code enforcement, interaction between cities and residents. City should facilitate a neighborhood organizing process to empower residents on the local level. Plano is more geared towards outreach and awareness than grassroots planning and development. Unique from Austin in sense that Plano is almost already completely developed so focus is shifting from expansion and planning to infill and maintenance. Austin could benefit from understanding their preemptive strategy of promoting awareness and empowering neighborhoods to utilize available city services in order to preserve and support themselves. Dallas is highly focused on historical preservation of the character of each

neighborhood. Their standardized format of neighborhood plans helps to streamline the implementation process, which can often be the most difficult part in planning. They also have created the Office of Neighborhood Communication, which is essential to resident-city interaction in the neighborhood plan.

RESOURCES

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