In the fall of 2005, the City of Georgetown engaged Civic Design Associates, in association with Land Design Studio, to prepare a redevelopment master plan for the Williams Drive Gateway. This 70-acre area along the west side of Interstate 35 occupies a highly visible and strategic location between the original downtown area and the high growth areas to the northwest. While the surrounding region has been experiencing sustained strong growth over the past several decades, the Gateway area has remained largely unchanged, hampered by poor access, a fragmented property ownership pattern, and the lack of a clear vision for its future.

The City’s goals for the area are to redevelop the aging, highway-oriented uses with a livelier mix of uses arranged in a denser, and more pedestrian friendly environment. This should serve to boost property values for the area, as well as introduce a model for a more sustainable compact form of development in a region that is challenged by explosive growth.

The Williams Drive Master Redevelopment Plan presented here is the result of a focused process that unfolded over a series of months. One key aspect of the process was an emphasis on continuous involvement by area stakeholders, a term that encompassed a wide range of individuals with some interest in the area. It included current property owners as well as people living and working in the area, but it also included those who visit on an occasional basis, who pass through on the way to other place, who live in neighboring areas, in short, virtually anyone whose life could be affected by the potential redevelopment.

Stakeholder involvement was accomplished by a series of different strategies that culminated in a week-long design charrette that was conducted in early December of 2005.

Key Elements of the Master Plan

An illustrative view of the master plan is depicted in Figure 1.1, which shows the eventual long-range redevelopment proposal for the area. Some of the key elements include:

- An expanded network of streets to improve the mobility and access within the study area, as well as enhanced connections to surrounding areas. This includes a new north-south “Main Street” connecting Williams Drive and Northwest Boulevard, a bridge over Interstate 35 connecting Northwest Boulevard to FM971, and improved traffic flow and access management along the service road and Williams Drive.

- The redevelopment of the McCoy Elementary School parcel to provide part of the Main Street roadway alignment, a civic square on Williams Drive, and new facilities to house proposed GISD functions as well as commercial uses that could provide an additional revenue source for the District.

- An emphasis on multi-story, mixed use buildings whose primary orientation would be toward the new Main Street, and away from the access road.

- Introduction of new, denser housing types such as townhomes and flats above commercial space to help integrate the commercial uses into the neighborhood fabric, and to make a compatible transition to the neighboring residential areas.

- Capitalizing on the view and the natural amenities of the bluff overlooking the river at the southern edge of the area, by introducing higher value residential uses and a public parkway and walking trail to link to the trail system in the canyon.

- To establish the Gateway area as a destination area, strategically located between downtown and the northwest areas, to serve as a focus for neighborhood service uses such as restaurants, smaller retailers, and smaller residential units to create a vibrant, around the clock activity cycle.
Overall, the plan as shown proposes about 600 residential dwelling units, 300,000 square feet of office and commercial space, 250,000 square feet of retail space, and a 200 room hotel.
Benefits of the Plan

Georgetown and Williamson County are among the fastest growing areas in Texas, with the rural, small town character rapidly giving way to a more suburban and featureless landscape that erodes the natural beauty of the area while replacing it with a homogeneous pattern that looks very much like other contemporary development all over America.

While this overwhelming momentum is not likely to be stopped by the revitalization of areas like the downtown and the Williams Drive Gateway, such areas provide an important alternative for a denser and more sustainable development pattern that mixes uses together and allows for a more urban lifestyle less dependent on the automobile. Other similar developments in the United States have proven to be well liked by the public, with an attending increase in value. Since this is inherently a denser development pattern, it also had benefits for the City in the form of concentrating property values while being more efficient for providing services.

This plan will take an underperforming area and transform it into a destination. The revitalized Gateway area will also function as a fully functional community in and of itself, where it would be possible to live, work, shop, and be entertained all in close walking proximity. Such urban lifestyle areas are essential to a growing town that, for the moment, houses a number of residents who commute elsewhere to work. This places a strain on the City’s finances, since low density residential areas typically cost more to service than they yield in tax revenues.

Figure 1.2  The Gateway redevelopment will consist of traditional urban forms.
I. Executive Summary

Financial Implications

The redevelopment of property is a capital intensive proposition that takes many years to unfold and generate a positive return. Nevertheless, it is a huge industry constantly looking for new opportunities. The growth momentum of the Georgetown region make it an inherently attractive area for real estate investment, but for the most part, this investment prefers to develop raw land, because it is easier and more straightforward.

In contrast, an area like the Williams Drive Gateway presents obstacles to easy redevelopment such as a fragmented property ownership pattern that makes it more difficult to assemble a significant parcel, relatively expensive land cost, the presence of existing uses that contribute to the cost but must nevertheless be demolished, and the need to work around existing constraints. For these reasons, it is quite common to find such underperforming areas in almost any city, while vigorous development activity may be happening nearby.

One inherent problem with denser development such as what is proposed here is the significantly higher cost of structured parking as compared to surface parking. Once a certain development intensity threshold is exceeded, a development has to incorporate a certain percentage of structured parking, at significantly higher cost. This is financially feasible when land costs are very high, because structured parking inherently requires less land than for an equal amount of surface parking. This is common in established, successful downtown areas, but in an area like the Williams Drive gateway, this premium will have to somehow be absorbed within the financial framework of the project.

The redevelopment of such an area usually requires a public jurisdiction to contribute financial and other incentives to promote development. The various financial scenarios explored here assumed that the City would have to absorb all infrastructure costs, and perhaps a portion of other development costs such as land acquisition and parking structures in order to make the overall project attractive to a private developer. In the long run however, the City will realize a return on its investment in the form of higher ad valorem taxes, higher sales tax revenues, and an inherently lower cost of providing services to denser developments.

Figure 1.3 The plan provides for denser, but livable residential options.
Key Implementation Strategies

Thus, the ultimate success of this project relies on the City taking an active role in promoting the redevelopment of the area, and taking certain key actions to that end. Among the strategies discussed are:

- Working with the GISD Board to arrive at an alternative redevelopment strategy for the McCoy Elementary School campus that reallocates some of the land for public right of way and a civic square.

- Facilitating the exchange and assembly of properties within the area by acting as a clearinghouse for development and relocation plans.

- Revising the land development regulations for the area to permit higher intensities, a mix of uses, and higher overall yields than other competing areas.

- Coordinating with TxDOT to complete the necessary mobility enhancements needed to improve access and circulation in the area.

- Forming a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone to capture added tax revenues generated by the area and allocating them to the funding of public improvements for the area.

- Devising and implementing a regional stormwater management strategy that alleviates the need for individual properties to do it on a piecemeal basis.

- Designing and funding the necessary infrastructure improvements needed for the project.

- Engaging and partnering with a master developer to provide the private capital and expertise needed to complete the project.

The redevelopment of the Williams Drive Gateway area has great possibilities, but will not be realized without a focused and sustained effort.

Figure 1.4  The Civic Square on Williams Drive. A transformation of this magnitude requires extensive coordination and cooperation. The square and the Main Street shown here are currently on the McCoy Elementary School site.