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A. The Georgetown Area Context

Georgetown, Texas is located approximately 25 miles north of Austin along Interstate 35, the major highway between Austin and Dallas. It is the County seat of Williamson County, which according to the 2000 US Census figures, was the second fastest growing county in Texas during the decade of the 1990s. Georgetown has likewise experienced persistent and significant growth for the past several decades. The United States Census Bureau estimates the current population of Georgetown at about 37,000 persons, up from 29,000 in 2000, which was almost double the 1990 population of about 15,000.

Figure 2.1 Aerial view of Georgetown, circa 1964.

An aerial photograph of Georgetown circa 1964 is shown in figure 2.1. This photo shows the Interstate still under construction, passing just to the west of town. The town itself is clearly distinguished from the surrounding farm and ranch land, laid out along a traditional grid of streets centered on the courthouse square. The downtown area still retains this historic character to this day, and is a great source of local civic pride.

The growth of the city since that time has primarily been focused in the areas beyond the traditional urban boundary. In particular, there has been strong growth in the northwest direction, along the current Williams Drive. Since Georgetown occurs right at the transition line between the rolling agricultural land of East Texas and the Hill Country located to the west of town, residential growth has tended to occur on the west side, widely considered to be the more attractive natural setting. A current map of Georgetown shows this tendency very clearly (Figure 2.2.)

This rapid growth, while offering new economic opportunity, has also come with its attendant problems. Traffic has gradually increased to the point where many key areas are chronically congested. This is particularly true since much of the growth has occurred along conventional suburban patterns, with segregated land uses, very low densities, and a street hierarchy that concentrates traffic on just a few arterial roads. The city is also beginning to lose some of its traditional feel, with residents increasingly moving here to find less expensive housing, but commuting to Round Rock or even Austin for work. More and more, the town is transitioning from its own discrete center of activity to being a subdivision of the Central Texas metropolitan area.
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The development pattern is a departure from the clear, regular grid of the original town. Residential subdivisions tend to come in first, and occur where land was available. This is not necessarily contiguous to existing settled areas, but may leapfrog large parcels of open land. As residential numbers reach a certain critical mass, commercial uses begin to come into the area to serve the growing residential base. While the residential subdivisions tend to be fairly insular, with a limited number of entry points, the commercial uses tend to congregate on the major collector streets, so that they are readily accessible to several nearby subdivisions. In the early stages of this development cycle, the so-called arterial roads are the two-lane rural roads that occur at intervals throughout the area. As the development fills in, these roads are eventually improved and widened, but usually some time after the traffic has achieved an inconvenient level of congestion. Williams Drive, from which the study area takes its name, still bears its original designation as Ranch to Market Road 2338.

This development pattern is clearly evidenced in Figure 2.2, which demonstrates how far beyond the original town the modern development has spread. The residential development is predominantly single-family detached housing, typically on lots of at least one sixth of an acre. The commercial development is highway-oriented, with generous amounts of parking. It goes without saying that this pattern of development is almost entirely dependent on private vehicles for almost any purpose. The typical population density of this development pattern is around 1000 households per square mile.

All indications are that this momentum of growth will persist into the foreseeable future. It is widely expected that an additional 8 to 10 million people will be added to the Texas population within the next 20 years. The great majority of this population growth will occur in the three major metropolitan areas, Houston, Dallas – Fort Worth, and Austin – San Antonio, which is increasingly considered to be one large metropolitan area. While the urban areas will see the greatest growth in raw numbers, in percentage terms, the counties that are contiguous to the principal urban county will see the most radical transformations. Counties such as Williamson County are in the process of changing – within the space of a single generation – from a quiet rural area to a busy, developed area, albeit in a low density, suburban pattern.
B. The Study Area

The Williams Drive Gateway study area lies on the west side of Interstate 35, on either side of its intersection with Williams Drive. As stated before, Williams Drive was the principal farm to market road that led from areas northwest of Georgetown to the downtown area. About 30 years ago, it was the edge of town, and many of the buildings that exist there today date from this time. As the Georgetown area has grown, development has moved many miles to the northwest, so that the study area is now centrally located in the Georgetown region. As often happens in such situations, it is easier for new development to keep moving outward on undeveloped land, rather than to rebuild in areas that are already established. As one moves further out Williams Drive today, one can see numerous commercial development that are newer, better maintained, and do a better job of serving the residential areas.

The study area, as originally defined by the City of Georgetown, contains approximately 70 acres of land. It stretches approximately one half mile along the southbound frontage road of Interstate 35, between Northwest Boulevard on the north end and the north fork of the San Gabriel River on the south (figure 2.3.) About two thirds of the total study area lies to the north of Williams Drive, and one third to the south. Many of the existing buildings, particularly those fronting on the access road, are highway oriented uses, such as motels, gas stations, fast food restaurants, and other such commercial establishments that serve the highway traffic. When they were first developed, these uses were well located for such a purpose, with good visibility and convenient access from the highway.
As the surrounding area continued to grow, however, several changes occurred that hurt the highway orientation. The first was that the southbound off ramp from Interstate 35 was moved several miles to the north. Where it was once possible to see the uses along the frontage road and then exit the highway in a straightforward manner, it is now necessary for this traffic to exit well before these uses come into view. Needless to say, this is highly detrimental to uses such as gas stations that rely on drive-by traffic for a significant portion of their business.

The second major change to the access road configuration was the conversion from a two-way road to a one-way road (going southbound,) which occurred about ten years ago. Two-way access roads, sometimes occurring only on one side of the highway, are relatively common in rural situations, but as an area becomes more heavily developed and traffic volume on the frontage road increases, one-way roads are preferred. The combination of these two changes has made the existing uses along the access road hard to access. It’s actually not that difficult, but it requires foreknowledge of the area and the location of the uses to get there. For uses that rely on spontaneous, drive by traffic, the effect has been negative. Some of the uses have failed, some have experienced rapid turnover, and others continue to hang on. Few uses in the study area, particularly those fronting directly on the access road, could be said to be thriving. In fact, there are, to this day, large areas of vacant, undeveloped land in the north portions of the study area. Much of this is for sale, but until the overall access to these parcels improves, the prospects for commercial development are not favorable.

Meanwhile, Williams Drive evolved from a rural ranch to market road to become the principal arterial road connecting the new development on the northwest side of town to the downtown and to the Interstate. The original two lane road has been widened to four, with a center turn lane, and experiences significant congestion at peak times. At such times, it is difficult to turn off of Williams to either side, which has inhibited access to buildings within the study area.
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of uses directed to creating an inviting and comfortable environment for the pedestrian.

The vision is to redevelop the area into a counterpoint to the surrounding suburban development pattern. Neighborhood service uses are needed, as well as other housing arrangements that cater to a more urban lifestyle. The area is well located within the Georgetown area, is highly visible, particularly for traffic approaching the city from the north, and could serve as a model for a new development pattern that offers new choices for the citizens of Georgetown.

C. Market Conditions

Understanding the basic market conditions of the study area, as well as of the surrounding region, is critical to making sound planning decisions for the future of the area. Accordingly, it is important to ascertain not only the current conditions of the Georgetown market area, but also make reasonable projections as to the viability of the proposed redevelopment scenarios.

To that end, a market assessment was conducted within the scope of this redevelopment study. The assessment was conducted by Capitol Market Research of Austin, Texas. This was an independent assessment, published in a separate report.

The results of this market assessment are summarized here in brief. The market assessment defined the Georgetown area in terms of eight census tracts that extend somewhat beyond the city limits, particularly on the west side. The census data confirm the strong population growth trend, rising from about 23,000 in 1990 to over 42,000 in 2000, an increase of 81%. Projecting this trend forward implies annual population growth of about 17% annually, to reach about 93,000 by 2015. Average household income is higher than the Austin regional average, at about $80,000.

For specific real estate market segments, the study finds:

- Retail space has not kept pace with the population growth, although the recent completion of Wolf Ranch and Rivery Towne Crossing has created a short term oversupply. Nevertheless, the continued strong growth will create a demand for an additional 3 million square feet by 2015.

- The multi-family housing market has historically not been very strong in Georgetown, both in sheer numbers and in financial performance. This has been a predominantly single-family market, with multi-family units making up less than 10% of total housing units in the area. Rents have lagged somewhat behind the regional average, inhibiting further development of new units. Demand will continue to increase, however, and should result in an improving market as well as a deficit in available units.

- Townhome and condominium units have typically not been widely available in the Georgetown area, thus it is not currently seen as a particularly strong market. As the area matures, however, the overall proportion of these units should increase. Demand should be fairly strong for well located and well designed units.

- Office uses were not specifically surveyed in the market assessment, as the market area is still considered relatively immature as an office market. This will change as growth in the area continues, so a modest amount of office demand can be anticipated, particularly for the smaller, professional tenants looking for an alternative to downtown high-rises and suburban office parks.

Overall, the Gateway area can be expected to capture at least 10% of the overall market area growth, but has an opportunity to emerge as a location of choice for certain uses if it is able to create a unique and compelling atmosphere.
D. Regulatory Framework

The study area lies entirely within the corporate limits of the City of Georgetown. Existing land uses include a range of commercial uses, a few residential properties, and a relatively large amount of vacant land. The existing zoning consists primarily of a combination of commercial districts, mostly local commercial on either side of Williams Drive and General Commercial primarily on the large vacant areas near the north end of the study area. The currently adopted future land Use Plan for the area designates almost all of the land as commercial, with a few parcels designated as office/service and residential, located away from the highway on the western edge of the study area.

A number of existing uses are identified as nonconforming. Mostly, these are residential uses. Comparing the existing land uses to the exiting zoning as well as the Future Land Use Plan, a picture of an evolving area emerges. What had once been a residential area (for those parcels once removed from the highway) has gradually transitioned to a commercial area. Many of the commercial uses on the interior, are smaller, neighborhood oriented businesses, while the uses lining the frontage road, as noted before, are more regional in scale.

The existing zoning (figure 2.4) is predominantly C-1 Neighborhood Commercial on either side of Williams Drive and C-3 General Commercial at the north end of the study area. These zoning districts are fairly liberal in terms of the permitted uses, allowing for a wide variety of commercial uses as well as townhomes and multi-family residential buildings. Upper story residential is permitted over commercial, although it is limited to no more than 50% of the total building area, and must provide additional parking for the residential use. Building height is limited to 35 feet in the C-1 district, while the C-3 district allows heights up to 45 feet. The C-3 requires a 25 foot front setback, while C-1 stipulates a minimum 15% of the building width to be built to a 5 foot front build-to line.

Figure 2.4. Existing Zoning Map.
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Of the two commercial zoning classifications, C-1 seems to be more closely aligned to the desirable zoning for the proposed redevelopment, despite the lower height limit. Nevertheless, some changes in the regulations will be necessary in order to accommodate the proposed redevelopment. The City code provides for the creation of a Special Area Plan, with its own overlay regulations, to accommodate such situations. One such overlay, the Gateway Overlay District, is already in place in the study area (among other places) but refers to a landscaped buffer requirement along major highways entering the city. Its particular requirements can be accommodated within the scope of the proposed redevelopment.

E. Constraints and Opportunities

The Williams Drive Gateway area exhibits a number of characteristics that make it a good choice for a large-scale redevelopment effort. This, however, is not something that will happen spontaneously. It will require a coordinated and sustained effort by both the public and private sectors to be successful. Success must begin by understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the area.

Constraints.

1. The area is already developed. To the extent that the redevelopment requires changes to the exiting development pattern, this places it at a disadvantage to open, undeveloped land.

2. The property ownership pattern is fragmented and independent. The existing uses do not necessarily have any natural affinities to each other; they are simply located in close proximity.

3. The area has severe challenges in terms of convenient access to all points within the study area.

4. Many developed areas have limits on the capacities of the existing infrastructure, although in this case, these can be addressed at moderate expense.

5. The proximity to existing single-family housing may present some difficulties in adequately buffering these uses from the effects of more intensive, and perhaps incompatible, development.

6. Property values, as reflected by the current owners, may not be realistic from a redevelopment perspective. This is particularly true of properties which have an existing use that can be maintained at little to no cost, and the longer term depreciation of the improvements are not fairly valued.

Opportunities.

1. The study area is well located, at the intersection of a major highway and one of the principal arterial roads in the region.

2. The location is also geographically advantageous, between the original downtown area and the most affluent growth corridor.

3. There are large amounts of undeveloped land in the study area, including some large tracts under unified ownership.

4. The Georgetown ISD property, under consideration for extensive modifications, could mesh well with other redevelopment efforts.

5. Most of the existing uses are older, nearing the end of their useful lives without extensive and expensive renovation.

6. There are some notable gaps in the variety of housing choices available in the Georgetown area, as well as in certain commercial uses, particularly entertainment options.
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Figure 2.5 Williams Drive looking north.

Figure 2.6 The Interstate 35 frontage road.

Figure 2.7 Juxtaposition of uses on Park Lane.

Figure 2.8 Large vacant tracts near the north end of the study area.