The Williams Drive Master Redevelopment Plan is the result of a focused process that unfolded over a series of months. One key aspect of the process is an emphasis on continuous involvement by area stakeholders, a term that encompasses a wide range of individuals with some interest in the area. Obviously, this includes current property owners as well as people living and working in the area, but it also includes those who visit on an occasional basis, who pass through on their way to other place, who live in neighboring areas, in short, virtually anyone whose life could be affected by the potential redevelopment. Clearly, it will affect some more than most, so those sub-groups had to be targeted for additional involvement.

This chapter will describe the methodology, as well as the results of the planning process.

A. Data Gathering

The initial phase of work involves the consultants becoming familiar with the project area. Much of this is done by reviewing information supplied by the City and other relevant entities. Some of the data furnished to the consultants included:

- Maps and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data of the study area and surrounding areas.
- Aerial photographs of the area.
- Current land development regulations and comprehensive plan governing the properties within the study area.
- Any previous studies or information compiled on the area specifically. As previously mentioned, the City of Georgetown had completed a very helpful compilation of data on the study area specifically, with a view to facilitating the master planning process.
- Census Bureau information on population and demographic characteristics.
- Independent review and verification of selected data by the consultant, with their own field work.

B. The Project Steering Committee

An integral part of the future success of any planning effort is the quality of the local involvement and the follow-through to implement the plan. Since the consultant’s work is limited to a relatively short time frame, it is of critical importance that the client group become very familiar and invested in the process. Ultimately, it is the City of Georgetown, the property owners, and other key parties such as the Georgetown Independent School District and the Texas Department of Transportation that will have to take the concrete steps necessary to realize the plan. It is therefore important that these parties be an integral part of the formulation of the plan, remain well informed at all stages of its development, and understand their roles in the overall implementation strategy. To accomplish this, the consultant’s recommended the establishment of a Project Steering Committee.

The Steering Committee acts as a small working group of all of the key entities that will be responsible for adopting and implementing the plan. They meet at intervals during the course of the project to be briefed on the progress of the plan, offer their critiques and suggestions, and to understand their role in the ultimate implementation of the plan. The Steering Committee members include representation from the public jurisdictions and policy makers affecting the area as well as key staff who will be responsible for carrying out the policies. The Williams Drive Gateway Steering Committee included the following members:

- Gary Nelon, Mayor of Georgetown
- Gabe Sansing, City Council Member – District 2 (includes the study area)
- Joe Dan Lee, Superintendent, Georgetown Independent School District
- Tom McDaniel, Williamson County Commission– Precinct 3

Williams Drive Gateway Redevelopment Plan | Georgetown, Texas
III. The Planning Process

Paul Brandenburg  City Manager, Georgetown
Tom Yantis       Assistant City Manager, Georgetown
John Wagner      Texas Department of Transportation
Roy Jones        Georgetown Chamber of Commerce
Rick Smith       Georgetown Economic Development Commission
Fred Henry       President, Gabriel Heights Neighborhood Association
Angie Estlack    Texas Department of Transportation

C. Stakeholder Interviews

Opportunities for involvement and input from members of the community with knowledge of the study area are critical to understanding the dynamics of the study area. While most of the public input is concentrated during the charrette process, certain stakeholders are identified that have a particular expertise, whether by professional focus, or by virtue of being investors, business owners, etc., within the area. A series of small group meetings was conducted to hear from certain segments of the community. These meetings, lasting about 1 to 1½ hours, offer the consultant a chance for in-depth exploration of various aspects of the project area.

Stakeholder sessions were conducted for the following groups:

Elected and Appointed Officials
City Administration and Staff
Real Estate Brokers
Developers
Neighborhood Associations and Representatives
Property Owners
Georgetown Independent School District

Although the groups represented different interests, a number of points emerged as common perceptions. Traffic and access difficulties were cited by almost all groups as being a major impediment to the success of the area. All agreed that the location was potentially a good one, if the access issues could be solved.

Both the City administration and elected officials agreed that the redevelopment of the area was a priority, and were willing to adopt policies and strategies to facilitate it. The real estate community confirmed that many of the properties in the area were actively on the market, but that interest had been lukewarm so far. Despite the central location, the access issues as well as the mixed quality of the existing uses were cited as being impediments to redevelopment. The area is in need of a vision, and for the City to be an active champion for that vision.

Some selected comments from the stakeholders will indicate the range of discussion:

"The one-way frontage road killed the uses."
"Drainage is an issue." (This was mentioned by several groups; the City maintains that the problem is solvable with a regional detention scheme.)
III. The Planning Process

“The growth has been on this side of town, historically. It used to be that 90% of the building permits issued were west of I-35. Now the split is about 60/40.”

“Georgetown is a real town, not a bedroom community. People are very proud of the courthouse square, although they may only go there once a year.”

“Many of the existing buildings are for sale, but the owners want too much money.”

“Absorption has been slow in the apartment/condo market. This is still a single-family home market. There are no jobs here to support urban lifestyles. Most people commute to Austin or Round Rock.”

“There’s nothing to do here at night.”

“Georgetown does not have what draws employment – not enough lifestyle amenities.”

“Rivery Boulevard did alleviate some of the traffic on Williams, although if you’re getting on I-35 southbound, many still use Williams to get a longer distance to change lanes.”

“People will avoid Williams Drive if they can.”

“Bridging across I-35 at Northwest Boulevard has been discussed in the past. The financial climate is probably more challenging than the political climate.”

“While the population growth has been strong, the school district growth has been much slower – due the high proportion of retirees.”

The discussions were wide ranging, but kept returning to the same themes. Georgetown is growing up. It needs more diversity in uses, housing types, and activities. So far, no one wants to be the first to take the plunge, so growth keeps using the same time-tested models. The Williams Drive Gateway is ideally located to offer a new denser, mixed-use development model. The Gateway area is in need of a boost, but a piecemeal approach is not likely to result in anything different. It clearly has larger scale issues that need to be addressed, issues that must be tackled by the City working in coordination with other jurisdictions.

D. The Charrette

The planning process culminated in a week long charrette. Charrette, the French word for cart, traces its use in this context to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, after the cart that was wheeled through the design studios when the projects were due. It has come to mean an intensive design effort conducted in a relatively short time. The consultants have found it to be an effective technique that combines a full immersion into the project with a high level of public visibility and opportunity for involvement.

The charrette schedule includes three public meetings to allow for opportunities for members of the community to learn about the process and project background, provide input and design ideas, and to react to the initial design concepts. Public meetings occur at the beginning and the end of the process, with a design workshop in between. During the charrette week, the consultants are on-site more or less continuously. A design studio is set up at an available facility within the project area, which serves as the consultant team’s headquarters during the week. The public meetings are also held within the study area, in this case, at the La Quinta Inn on the I-35 access road. Many members of the team also stayed at the La Quinta during the charrette.

The first public meeting was held on the evening of Thursday, December 1. Approximately 50 citizens attended this session. The first meeting serves as an orientation to the project area as well as a presentation on the dynamics of the development process and an outline of general design principles.
Before the public has a chance to be introduced to the project, however, they are asked to complete a “community image survey,” designed to gauge their reaction to various types of urban development. This is essentially a preference survey, conducted by presenting the audience 40 photographic slides of urban conditions to be “graded” according to the extent to which each participant liked or disliked the image. The slides, for example, included pictures of housing, streets, sidewalks, retail stores, office buildings, architectural styles, parking lots, park spaces, and other subjects. The participants were asked to grade on a scale of minus ten (-10, indicating strong dislike) to plus ten (+10, indicating a strong affinity) their opinion or preference for each condition. The results are compiled the following day and presented at the beginning of the Saturday workshop session.

The image survey is designed to elicit reactions to various types of development, but also to place a variety of images in the public’s mind as they proceed to identify what they like and don’t like about the project area, and how they would like to change it. Invariably, images that show active, pedestrian oriented spaces score well, while sterile, single-use, and automobile-centric images don’t. The result is not especially surprising, except when it is noted that much of contemporary development models yield the latter rather than the former. Understanding this phenomenon, and explaining how the public must work in tandem with local officials and the development community to get better results, is really the central objective of the charrette process. Strong public support for a particular vision will generate political will to affect the outcomes of private development decisions, in a result that is positive for all parties.

The second public meeting occurred on Saturday, December 3. Unfortunately, attendance was not as strong as the first night, owing primarily to a crucial football game for the local favorite Texas Longhorns scheduled for early that afternoon. (The Longhorns won handily and went on to win their first national championship since the early 1970s.) For the benefit of those attending, it was decided to compress the schedule somewhat in order to have everyone home in time for kickoff. The consultants organized the citizens into design teams of 8 to 10 persons, and each team was given a table, maps and drawing tools. Four teams were formed, and each team presented their schemes of a redevelopment plan of the study area (in both written and drawing form) to the entire group. Approximately 25 citizens participated in the Saturday planning session.

The following is a summary of the major points discussed at each table. The table numbers are not necessarily in sequence, due to the limited attendance not occupying all of the available tables. Many of the comments were repeated by other tables; this is indicated by the number in parentheses, which signifies the total number of mentions.
III. The Planning Process

Table 2

- Improve northbound traffic flow from Williams Drive on east side of I-35
- Improve north-south circulation and connections to I-35 at quarter-mile points
- Consider redeveloping the school site into commercial uses (2)
- Encourage mixed-use development at Northwest Boulevard and I-35 (2)
- Clean up Williams Drive visually with a median (2)
- Consider adding a traffic signal at Williams Drive and Morris Street

Table 3

- New uses should include pedestrian oriented retail and sit-down restaurants rather than fast food (2)
- Take advantage of the river views and access to trail system (2)
- School site can remain a school, but should be remodeled
- Encourage office uses and employment (2)
- Establish venues for arts, entertainment, and museums (2)
- Consider redevelopment of the homes along Park Lane
- Add an overpass over I-35 at Northwest Boulevard (4)
- Make the district a destination

Table 4

- Add a southbound exit ramp near Northwest Boulevard
- Connect Rivery to Northwest Boulevard by extending through the neighborhoods (3)
- Establish an interior grid of streets
- Build a road along the bluff to preserve the view for the public
- Reconfigure the school on the site
- Develop condos and townhomes backing up to the existing neighborhood
- Encourage the redevelopment of the hotel property to a denser format
- Provide a pedestrian tunnel under Williams Drive
- Connect Northwest Boulevard to FM 971 and SH130 with an overpass over I-35
- Encourage retail along the bluff
- Leverage the GISD funds to redevelop their site

Table 5

- Encourage a Town Center mixed-use area at I-35 and Northwest Boulevard
- Build for-sale townhomes for young professionals and empty nesters
- Develop fast food restaurants along southbound frontage road south of Williams

Many of the comments were clearly concerned with addressing the circulation and access issues facing the site. There were a range of ideas expressed, but clearly, there was a consensus for creating better connections, even if that meant impacting certain properties.

There was broad agreement that the area should accommodate a range of uses form residential to various kinds of commercial. Several groups felt that the school property should be part of the discussion due to its close proximity and strategic location. In general, it was felt that the Gateway area could be transformed to be something unique in the Georgetown area, a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly, mixed use district.
Following the Saturday workshop, the consultants retired to their on-site design studio to assimilate the results of the workshop and distill it into a consensus design solution. The team worked intensively for the next week, and was prepared to present some initial solutions by the third public meeting, held on Thursday, 8 December. The Steering Committee met in the design studio on Monday of that week to be briefed on the general direction and have an opportunity to express any concerns. The unveiling of the design concept was generally well received, but, of course, there were concerns about feasibility, timing, disposition of certain properties, etc. A detailed description of the design concept is contained in the following chapter, and subsequent chapters will address the implementation issues.