

Elgin lays groundwork for growth from commuter rail

Austin Business Journal - December 8, 2006 by [Kate Harrington](#)

Elgin's name has traditionally been associated with its famous sausage, but city manager Jeff Coffee is hoping something else will put the small town east of Austin on the map: commuter rail.

The city has put 85 acres under contract -- at a cost of \$680,000 -- southwest of Elgin's center, hoping to turn the area into a transit-oriented development that could contain dense buildings filled with shops, offices or condos.

Like many cities in Williamson County, Elgin is anticipating the advent of a commuter rail line in several years that will run from Georgetown to San Antonio, and is working to parlay its rail stop into new development that could usher in revamped urban centers and abundant property tax profits. Elgin has followed in the footsteps of Round Rock, Georgetown and Leander in pursuing land for a TOD.

The city has until September to exercise an option on the contract. Coffee says he hopes to exercise that option before September and before land prices go up. By securing the land, he says he thinks Elgin can create a successful TOD.

"The bottom line would be to ... replace existing land-planning codes to be more of an urban design code and create more flexibility," says Scott Polikov, president of Gateway Planning Group, the planners working with Elgin officials on the TOD. "It would make it easier to do mixed-use and ... to make it more accommodating so that growth around rail stations can be leveraged to be more of a town village."

Polikov says dense development in a TOD will yield urban environments with pedestrian-friendly areas, and bring revenue from property taxes, he says.

In addition, the ability to connect centers of higher education -- from the Williamson and Hays County Texas State campuses to the University of Texas -- and share faculty and research will also have a huge impact on the area, he says.

In Leander, Polikov says the planned 2,000-acre TOD will bring together the rail and toll road developments to create an entirely new urban environment that's denser than the one-acre lots planners have traditionally pursued in growing rural areas like Williamson County.

First Southwest Co., Leander's financial adviser, is helping the city create a tax-increment financing zone based on projections that Leander's TOD could bring in more than \$1 billion by build-out in 20 years, Polikov says. Elgin will likely follow a similar financial plan to help pay for its TOD and related infrastructure.

State Rep. Mike Krusee, R-Taylor, says TODs will be increasingly common in Williamson County and the Austin area as commuter rail lines go from the conceptual stage to reality in the next five years.

"TODs develop a kind of consistency for the commuter rail in that they market to people who want to use it," Krusee says. "You can't do traditional design around a rail stop ... because people will ideally be walking or driving a short distance, so you'd like to have a denser development."