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Bringing new life to Old Town

Blog post by [Robert Steuteville](#) on 15 Apr 2015
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Robert Steuteville, Better! Cities & Towns



1. Old Police HQ (1.5 acres)
2. West Parking
3. City Hall
4. Old Town Center (0.6 acres)
5. West Building
6. Old Service Center (4.5 acres)
7. Burselon Higher Ed Center (1.5 acres)

Opportunity sites in Old Town

Old Town Burselon, Texas, has many opportunities for placemaking and new pedestrian-oriented development that could enhance the identity of the suburb 10 miles south of Fort Worth, according to a new urban team led by Mithun|Solomon. The old railroad settlement has good bones, but the area is marred by too many vacant lots and surface parking—and bisected by a large arterial that is not walkable.

Burselon is part of the “Legacy Charrette” program designed to apply CNU’s renowned placemaking expertise to make a difference in the Congress’s host region—which is Dallas-Fort Worth (DFW) in 2015. The program allows municipalities, non-profits, and others to submit proposals for “low-bono” advising from some of the best minds in the field. The goal is to make a lasting difference in the region. New urbanist teams recently led similar charrettes in Garland and Fort Worth.

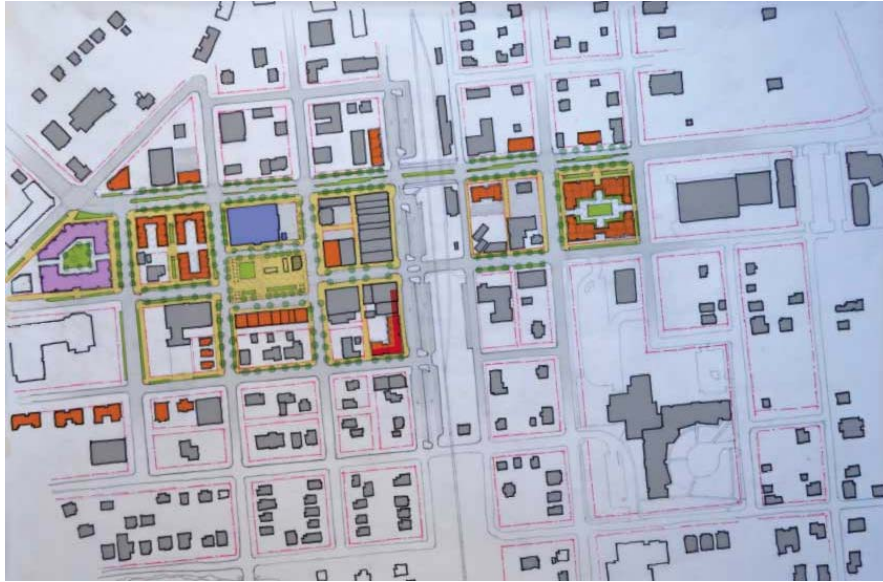
About 35 people attended the recent multiday design session, including residents, business owners, developers, city staff, the Mayor, and councilmembers. Principal John Ellis and two designers from Mithun|Solomon of San Francisco, principal Brad Lonberger from Gateway Planning of Dallas, and seven city officials contributed to the plan. The goal is to update a 20-year old plan for the district with a focus on pedestrian connections across the railroad tracks and Renfro Avenue, a 5-lane east-west arterial.

Up to the 1950s, Burselon was a village with about 700 residents. Now the fast-growing municipality has 40,000 people. Old Town—the part of the city built in the late 1800s—has recently experienced a revival, in part because the street grid with short block lengths is amenable to walkable land uses. “This encourages the eclectic mix of land uses that exists today,” the planners note.

Several destination restaurants have opened on Old Town’s west side, and 60,000 square feet of Class A office space has been built on the east side of the tracks. Old Town has been substantially improved by the addition of Hill College and Texas

Wesleyan University, which operate out of a city owned facility on the east side.

The city owns seven major parcels of land. The City has the potential to quickly develop these lots according to a pedestrian-focused vision. "These uses can be required of developers ... through deed covenants or through long-term lease requirements," the planners note. "Additionally, City-owned properties can be converted to civic uses like parks and plazas and to desirable development without using eminent domain."



Old Town plan by Mithun/Solomon

Charrette participants identified seven major priorities:

- A plaza on the west side of the tracks
- Reinforcing or establishing an Old Town identity
- Safe crossings and improved walkability on Renfro Street
- More student/multi-family housing
- Expanded higher education
- Parking
- Sidewalks and walkability



A new plaza—no such public space currently exists in Old Town—is among the most appealing ideas to participants. The city owns two parcels with parking that could be reconfigured into a public space by rerouting the street into one-way couplets (see plan above) "This has the potential to host events, activities, house a landmark feature such as a clock tower, and be surrounded by retail and restaurants."

Renfro Street currently divides Old Town between north and south, inhibits development to the north, and poses serious pedestrian risks. The team proposed two options for improving pedestrian safety to Renfro, one maintaining four traffic lanes with a median/left-turn lane and improved sidewalks; and another that provides increased parking on-street, improved sidewalks, and calms traffic with two traffic lanes with a median/left-turn lane.



The team examines ways for Burleson to build on its higher education assets using opportunity sites. Hill College is growing quickly. Relocating it to the western edge of Old Town, where the former Police Station is located, would accommodate growth, many have noted. "This site could be built as a pedestrian oriented campus with a central quad and potential for ground floor retail," the planners report. "There could also be student housing built very nearby to eliminate the need for students to commute from other areas."

Although the dense street grid is ideal for walkability, most streets lack sidewalks. This is a barrier for residents to take advantage of Old Town's retail and restaurants and for visitors to take advantage of the 2,000 parking spaces within a quarter mile of the major retail area, leading to the perception of a parking shortage. New streetscape guidelines could enhance walkability throughout the district and enable more visitors to park and walk.

The City has already taken steps to improve parking and circulation in Old Town by adding angled parking to Main Street and widening sidewalks. Several bike lanes and routes exist and more have been proposed. "This provides an opportunity for creative improvements, including protected bicycle lanes and artistic bicycle racks," planners note.

Old Town Burleson is like thousands of mixed-use places in the suburbs across the US: A little attention to design could bring significant economic and social progress, while meeting a demand for walkable urbanism. These topics will be at the center of discussions at [CNU 23](#), April 29 through May 2 in Dallas, Texas.

Robert Steuteville is editor and executive director of Better Cities & Towns

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