

Monday, October 15, 2012

## **Arlington's challenge**

*Division Street makeover will test downtown, college growth plans*

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When Arlington Planning and Zoning Commissioner Clete McAlister was growing up in the 1950s, Division Street was promoted as Arlington's Auto Aisle.

By the time Robert Cluck was elected mayor of Arlington in 1993, Division Street – aka Texas 180 – had developed into a giant used-car lot.

"That's OK if you want car lots there," Cluck said. "But there are so many other things that can be done."

Other city leaders agreed.

While Division Street had been included in a dozen thoroughfare or master plan studies, the City Council decided to do one more to pick up where the others left off.

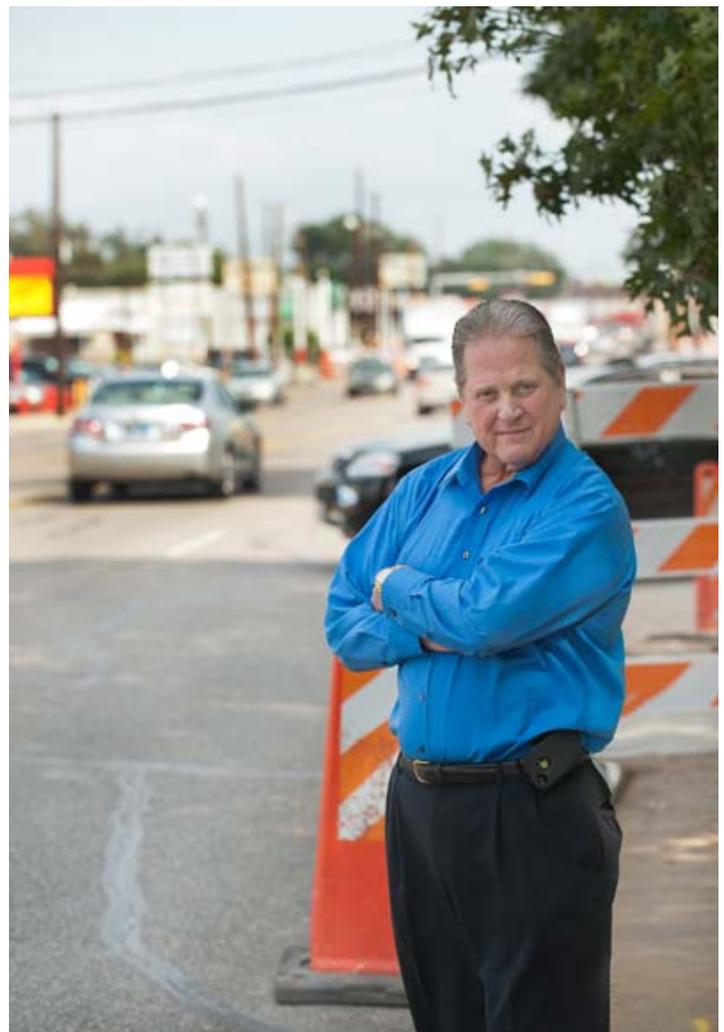
With a grant from the North Central Texas Council of Governments, the city hired consultants Freese and Nichols and Catalyst Urban Development to identify potential uses for Division Street that could be marketed to private developers.

"A lot of plans had been done for Division Street in the past," said Tony Rutigliano, president of Downtown Arlington Management Corp. "People talked about it a long time but no one really suggested what the market could do.

"This plan actually says the only way Division Street can improve is if the market comes in and does something."

Working with an 18-member advisory committee, the consultants analyzed market conditions in a 124-acre area bounded by North Street, the Union Pacific railroad corridor, Cooper and Collin streets. The area encompasses a one-mile stretch of Division from Cooper to Collins.

Paris Rutherford, president of Catalyst Urban Development, said the group's goal was to show the



**Arlington Mayor Robert Cluck** Photo by Burce Maxwell

city and would-be developers what could be done along Division.

Recent developments in downtown Arlington, the entertainment district and the University of Texas at Arlington have made expansion into the Division corridor more likely, Rutherford and Rutigliano say.

"UTA has done a lot to invest in its new College Park District," Rutigliano said. "The entertainment district, UTA, downtown and Division have that kind of linkage.

"It's how we get them to take advantage of the development going on."

Rutherford said the state's goal to make UT-Arlington a Tier 1 research university makes the Division Street corridor ripe for development.

As UT-Arlington partners with private research firms, more housing will be needed for both staffs, Rutherford said. That will drive the need for more restaurants, retail and other development, he said.

"As the largest employer in the immediate area, UTA met its 20-year anticipated growth in population in the last six years," Rutherford said. "I'm a big believer in building on assets and momentum that already exist."

John D. Hall, UT-Arlington vice president for administration and campus operations, acknowledges that the school has been a catalyst for future development.

While it does not have a direct role in the overall strategy, Hall said, the university might later develop a mixed-use area south of Vandergriff Plaza for research offices.

"It is important that we continue to build strong relationships with industry partners and the redevelopment of the Division Street corridor could incentivize industry partners to relocate to the downtown/university district to be in closer proximity to the campus," he said in an email.

Consultants prioritized their recommendations through numerous meetings with property owners, the advisory committee and the public and with an online survey.

Another public hearing is scheduled at the Oct. 30 Arlington City Council meeting with a council vote on the recommendations set for Nov. 6.

The 19 recommendations, identified as "opportunities" in the draft report, range from new parking and signs to an automobile mall to incorporate smaller auto sales lots up and down Division.

The auto mall, which drew some rumbles when proposed, is not among the high-priority recommendations.

"There's no effort here to displace the used-car dealers on Division. They are viable businesses," said Planning and Zoning's McAlister, who represents the commission on the Downtown Arlington Management Corp. board and the Division Corridor Advisory Committee.

The high-priority "catalyst" recommendations are a luxury senior living center near First United Methodist Church at Mesquite, North, Elm and Division streets and a residential loft development at Mesquite, North, Elm and a relocated Front Street.

Charles Clawson, a former Arlington community development director who represents the church on the advisory committee, said he supports the recommendations but wonders how soon they will come to fruition.

Clawson said his church would be thrilled to add a senior living center to its "one mile mission" area around its campus.

"I don't think there's any question it would be good for the city if it does happen," he said. "But unless you have incentives to encourage development such as the senior living center, it will take a while for that to happen."

UT-Arlington's Hall said the city needs to improve its infrastructure, parks and green space before focusing on residential development.

"I think the chances of getting private developers to undertake some of the recommendations are much improved with infrastructure improvements being addressed first," he said.

Cluck said he is optimistic that city staff and downtown business leaders can bring this study to life.

"There's no hard line between downtown and Division Street," he said. "We're trying to start in the middle of the city and redevelop out. We can't do everything at once.

"But the fact we've seen so much success with downtown, I've got a lot of optimism."

Rutigliano said his group will be there to help city staff promote the recommendations to potential developers.

"This is a visionary project," he said. "Once the plan is adopted, I'll suggest that we task ourselves with coming up with the right developer. I suspect we have some waiting, following this and anxious to get going."

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