

DENSITY BY DESIGN: HOW TO DO DENSITY WELL ADDISON CIRCLE

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The result of several years of planning, Addison Circle is an 80-acre planned development district located 20 miles north of downtown Dallas. It is an example of a public/private sector initiative aimed at creating a sustainable 4,000 unit medium density mixed-use urban neighborhood within a classic “edge city” setting. Unlike other bedroom communities in North Dallas with their sprawling subdivisions and acres of undeveloped land, Addison is a land-locked community of approximately four and a half square miles that is 80 percent built out. Since the mid-1970’s, the town has been at the epicenter of Dallas’s northward growth corridor and the resulting land use pattern reflects predominately commercial development with a small residential population of approximately 10,000 persons.

The idea for a special mixed-use urban residential district on this property was first suggested by the planners in the Town of Addison’s 1991 Comprehensive Plan, and in a community-based visioning program (Vision 2020). These studies identified several public policy goals including the need to build up the residential base of the town to support its restaurant/entertainment business and to create a focal point for community life on one of the last large parcels of undeveloped land. The property had several favorable characteristics for the creation of a mixed-use district:

- within walking distance of existing centers of employment, retailing and entertainment;
- adjacent to a proposed DART (Dallas Area Rapid Transit) station;
- close to Addison’s conference and arts center, which serve as the community center and as a temporary home for town sponsored activities, artfests, festivals, and special events;
- it is small enough for pedestrian linkage, yet large enough to support a critical mass of mixed-use activity;
- controlled by a single land owner.

The town, however, was not interested in attracting typical garden apartments, the citizens of Addison had consistently rejected garden apartment development in the past; rather, they were seeking the development of a more comprehensively planned, sustainable, residential development that created urban fabric engendering a sense of community. Through a public input process, a community plan emerged that would permit mid-to-high density housing in four to eight story configuration; the mixing of residential and commercial uses including street level retail; cafes and offices; a reduction in the size and scale of residential streets; and much higher street landscaping standards than was typically the case in North Texas communities.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

Those involved in the planning process realized that several important tactical steps had to be taken to reach an acceptable development agreement for this type of public/private enterprise. To serve this end, a strategic planning team was put together. Using the State/Thomas District as a model, the team moved forward with a consensus based planning process that worked through the following five-steps:

- Step One - a survey to explore the potential demand and rental rates for urban housing in this suburban location. This step was necessary to satisfy the town and the community that public sector investment in the project was based on sound business and market demand assessments.
- Step Two – numerous presentations and public workshops to educate and promote the planning concepts to elected officials, city staff and the larger community.
- Step Three - preparation of a generalized development planning framework and a set of mutually acceptable design/development standards that were eventually encoded into the final zoning ordinance for the district. These addressed a range of items including density, lot coverage and urban form, exterior building materials, and street landscape standards.
- Step Four - a cost/benefit analysis identifying the impact of various site development options and phasing strategies upon municipal operating and capital budgets, outlining an assessment of potential financing and funding gaps which needed be resolved in order to undertake private sector development; and finally
- Step Five - a development agreement with the town on their contribution towards a public improvement funding strategy that provides the “seed” for the initial development.

THE PLAN

The final plan for Addison Circle contained elements important to all the stakeholders, including several distinctive design elements and development requirements that set it apart from typical mixed-use suburban developments. The plan had five main components:

1. A development framework composed of a high quality public infrastructure incorporating a district-wide, pedestrian-friendly, closely spaced street grid made up of collector streets, residential streets, and a series of more randomly spaced garage access mews.
2. A land use plan with two subareas; the first being an interior zone planned for approximately 4000 rental and owner occupied mid-rise residential units with restrictions on larger scale commercial uses to avoid traffic generation that impacts the scale and character of the pedestrian friendly street system. The second subarea fronts the Dallas Tollway, and is also planned as a mixed-use zone permitting up to 4 million square feet of commercial space and residential space.
3. An urban form designed to encourage street life and a self-policing environment by layering and mixing uses. All residential buildings are consciously designed to address and overlook the public streets and public parks with front doors, balconies, stoops and porches. All supporting functions and amenities like health spas, leasing offices, neighborhood retail, and “in-home” office spaces deliberately externalized and located at street level in flex spaces along the street frontages of apartments and commercial buildings.
4. Development controls that go beyond typical zoning and building code requirements that set standards for exterior finishes, site landscaping, parking supply and distribution, and the compatibility of building scale regardless of use, and
5. A public open space system that works at both a neighborhood and community scale that includes urban parks, jogging trails and a large public space for the town sponsored special events. In addition, the central feature of the district, a circle, provides an opportunity to create a unique signature for the town that, when combined with a major public art commission, will be recognized as one of the major landmarks in the Dallas/Ft. Worth Metropolitan area.

Addison Circle represents a planning and urban design process which helped discover and direct community goals, matched the economic necessities of the developer with the policy direction of the town, while aiming to create a visually exciting mixed-use urban environment with a sense of authenticity of place. Through a program carefully planned to extend the activity cycle well into the evening, the plan creates a strong public identity by activating the sidewalks and other public spaces. As a result, the environment has become more self-policing as it matures, allowing many “eyes” to be focused on the street. The development provides alternatives to the suburban lifestyle around it, and emphasizes an environment in which one may work, live, shop and recreate within a walkable distance.