

In the Loop

A neighborhood publication serving the Northfield and Ridgetop communities of Austin, Texas

Fall/Winter 2011

Airport Redesign Ready For Take-Off

Local groups strive to reconfigure our main corridor

By *Sebastian Wren*



An artist's rendering of a more pedestrian-friendly Airport Boulevard

Thanks to the active leadership of Councilmember Chris Riley, the City of Austin has been working in conjunction with Gateway Planning Group to design a new urban corridor from what is now Airport Boulevard. The plan is to rebuild the street and sidewalks so they are safe, inviting, and conducive to multiple forms of transit, and rezone the near-by properties to entice the property owners to build structures that are more vital and appropriate in an urban setting.

Now that Austin Community College (ACC) has finished purchasing Highland Mall, they are also joining in the conversation along with their partners in development, Red Leaf Properties. ACC and Red Leaf have been developing a long-term plan to convert the existing mall building into an ACC campus, and convert the sea of asphalt that

surrounds the existing mall into mixed-use buildings and public green space.

Stakeholders for properties along Airport Boulevard are many and diverse. The City of Austin has a stake, of course, as do ACC and Red Leaf, but there are also many acres of land owned by Travis County, there are train stations and the bus transfer center that are operated by Capital Metro, and then there are myriad small business owners, residents, and other interested parties who all have an interest in the future of Airport Boulevard.

With so many different stakeholders involved, this project could be easily be confusing and contentious, but what is amazing about this project is that so many different stakeholders are coming to the table with a unified voice, all asking for the same thing, namely a more dense, transit-friendly, pedestrian-friendly, bicycle-friendly space, with a mix of uses, a feeling of vitality,

built around "new urbanist" design standards.

What is also interesting is how the different stakeholders and members of the official Advisory Group immediately recognized the need to expand the scope of this project beyond the Boulevard itself. People recognized that part of being pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly is creating pathways and transition zones so people who live nearby can easily access the new amenities that will be available along the boulevard. The scope of the project has expanded to include properties along Koenig Lane, 53rd Street, 51st Street, and 46th Street.

Many properties that are not directly adjoining Airport Boulevard will also benefit from this initiative as we think about how to transition into nearby neighborhoods.

On October 3, Gateway Planning Group revealed some of the preliminary plans that will likely go into a new design for Airport Boulevard and neighboring properties. Among other things, these plans included a public green space on what is now a Highland Mall parking lot, a small forest of trees and a network of sidewalks along the corridor, a dramatic change to the structure itself with center medians and more clearly defined pedestrian crossing areas, and more buildings designed for humans rather than cars. Public transit, safety, and walkability (with lots of shade for those hot summer months) will be the defining characteristics of the new Airport Boulevard.

Gone will be seas of asphalt, sidewalks and bike lanes that come to...*Cont'd on Page 2*

Important DATE!

December NNA Meeting
Come vote on Alliance's variance request for the residential development at Koenig and Avenue F.
Mon. December 5th | 6:00 PM
Dayspring Chapel, 5500 Avenue G

2012 NNA Meetings:
January 2, 2012 | February 6, 2012
March 5, 2012 | April 2, 2012
Meetings held at Dayspring Chapel
beginning at 7pm

A Note From The Editor

By Nissa Brown Reback

We believe a neighborhood newsletter should not only keep its readers informed but also spark discussion and encourage participation in neighborhood events, and we're happy to report that our summer edition did just that. In response to the lead article about the proliferation of "Stealth Dorms" in the area we received several passionate responses, which we are excerpting below along with a statement from the Northfield Neighborhood Association's President Mike Wong. If you'd like your thoughts heard and considered for publication in future editions of the newsletter, please email them to news@northfieldna.org.

[When we bought our house, my wife and I] understood the high probability we would be living amongst a revolving base of renting students. We have lived through the construction changes and gladly welcome the new development over the structures that were once in their place. Your assessment of all neighbors trying to sell their homes or property values drop because nobody wants to live near a Stealth Dorm was a bit excessive. As neighbors I believe we should approach the property owners with any grievances we have with their tenants. [I believe] the results you seek through local government action can be handled simply on a friendly neighbor-to-neighbor basis.

**James & Ingrid
Zennia Street**

I was shocked to see some of the suggested courses of action [to resolve the Stealth Dorm problem]. The most troublesome suggestion is

the inspection aspect. This is a gross invasion of private property rights. The requirement to register renters with the city also presents a significant issue regarding privacy of the renter. Much as people of many political ideologies fight the increases in government databases with personal information, I would suggest that this is just another layer of invasion.

**Bryce
Avenue F**

Whenever considering an issue, Northfield Neighborhood Association (NNA) has always looked at creating solutions with low or no government involvement first, and only resorting to advocating increased enforcement or additional regulation when other plausible ideas have been exhausted. Unfortunately, the problem of Stealth Dorms has become an unsustainable blight on our community.

I'm certainly willing to give it another go at a low-key solution and welcome help and ideas. However, I don't think the burden should be put on the community to continually remind the developers, owners, and managers of these properties about the negative impact their business has on our neighborhood.

NNA has previously tried to engage various property and management groups in the past. Unfortunately, we typically get no response from them. Sometimes, we'll see slight improvement for a few months, but then the situation reverts very quickly back to the status quo. NNA has formed a sub-committee that investigated the Stealth Dorms issue and a position paper was prepared and adopted by NNA. It has been submitted to the Austin Neighborhood Council for consideration for further action.

**Mike Wong, President
Northfield Neighborhood Association**

Redesigning Airport Boulevard

(Cont'd from Page 1)

an abrupt end, and to buildings designed around the automobile. Instead, there will be taller buildings for both business and residences, public plazas and outdoor spaces where people can enjoy the nice weather that we do occasionally have, and an efficient and attractive network of sidewalks and bike paths to make it easy for people to access and enjoy all of the great amenities.

If you want to see the plans and drawings that Gateway Planning Group have created for the future of Airport Boulevard, go to AirportBoulevard.com. And if you like what you see, be vocal about it. In order to make this plan a reality, we will all need to get involved and give the city our full support to make these proposed changes a reality.

In the Loop Staff Fall/Winter 2011

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Howard Nursery Site Development

By Sebastian Wren

The property at 111 E. Koenig Lane (corner of Koenig and Ave. F) is a piece of land with a storied and rich history. In 1939, it was developed as an airfield where a pharmacist-turned-flight-enthusiast named "Doc" Haile taught people to fly. In 1961, it became the much-loved Howard Nursery, and when Mr. Howard passed away 5 years ago, it was put up for sale.

What will become of this property next is hard to predict with certainty, but a prospective buyer, Alliance Residential Development, has expressed an interest in redeveloping this prime piece of real-estate (2.4 acres of undeveloped land in the middle of Austin) as mixed-use commercial and residential. However, their proposed development would violate the compatibility restrictions that exist on the property.

The property is zoned "Vertical Mixed Use," which normally would mean that a structure 60 feet tall could be built on the property. However, single-family residential properties across the street automatically limit the height of allowed development to 30 feet on the north and south side, and 42 feet in the middle of the property. These height compatibility restrictions are designed to keep very tall buildings from being built next-door to single-family detached housing. Even across Koenig Lane, these compatibility restrictions would prevent a very tall structure from being built on this property without a variance.

Alliance has approached the neighborhood to ask for support for a variance that would allow them to build their structure to 40 feet on all sides (instead of just the center of the property). After hearing from concerned neighbors, Alliance subsequently agreed to modify their proposed plans, agreeing to limit the building to 30 feet on the south side of the building (along 56th Street), but they are still asking for a variance to build to 40 feet along the north side (along Koenig).

Neighbors have also expressed concerns about the increase in traffic that a new development would create, but Alliance has said there is not much they could do to prevent increases in traffic that will accompany their development. The Neighborhood Association has expressed a commitment to continue to work with the City of Austin to find effective traffic-calming measures for our area. Clearly, no matter what new development occurs on this site, traffic in the area is going to increase.

Neighbors heard a presentation about the proposed development at the November 7th NNA meeting, and they voted at a special meeting held on November 21st. At the time of publication, neighbors had not yet voted to determine whether the Northfield Neighborhood Association should support or oppose Alliance's request for a variance. If you want to learn more about this project, you are encouraged to join the e-mail discussion list and check the Northfield Neighborhood Association website (www.NorthfieldNA.org).

Road To Nowhere

The jury is still out on the fate of Bruning Avenue

By Cindy Black

The first week of June marked the beginning of the temporary closure of Bruning Avenue, which cuts at a diagonal through the gridded streets in Northfield Neighborhood. The closure was enacted by the Transportation Department and Assistant Director Gary Schatz, and came about after a series of discussions with the Northfield Neighborhood Association last spring.

On September 12th a stakeholder meeting was held to discuss the next steps in reviewing the temporary closure. About ten Northfield residents and two Hyde Park residents came to the meeting. Gary Schatz and other representatives from the Transportation Department listened to feedback and shared their own observations and public input from the last three months.

The majority of the feedback in the stakeholder group was positive, especially from those who experience the intersections of 51st and Bruning on foot or bicycle. Several people remarked how the formerly five-way intersection has been simplified and is much easier to understand. Traffic along 51st is moving along at a manageable speed for vehicles and at pedestrian crossings. Bruning is much quieter, and the crossings at Martin, Evans and Eilers are not nearly as dangerous

at these acute angles. The food trailers near 51st and Bruning, one of which opened during the temporary closure, are doing well and attracting walk-by customers. It's now possible for residents to park along Bruning, relieving some of the parking congestion on the perpendicular streets.

On the opposing side, two businesses have reported being negatively affected by the closure. Snappy Mart reports a decrease in sales and drive-through customers, although a review of tax data did not indicate a correlation with the temporary closure. HSR Construction at Eilers and Bruning experienced significant problems with drivers cutting through their parking lot during the first few weeks of the closure. This problem was somewhat resolved with additional barriers and signage.

On October 3rd the issue was discussed at the City Council's Comprehensive Plan and Transportation Committee. Five neighbors spoke at the meeting, including a representative from HSR Construction, Northfield residents Rick Black and Scott Johnson, and Hyde Park residents Seth Johnson and Bob Breeze. Gary Schatz presented findings from the follow up traffic study, which revealed only 100 trips-per-day

increase along 51st Street, while North Loop increased by 1300 trips-per-day. Council members were glad to hear both sides of the issue.

There will be a public meeting this fall to announce the outcome of the temporary closure, so please stay tuned to NNADL or attend a Neighborhood Association meeting to learn more info.

For additional resources and information related to the Bruning closure:

Bruning Temporary Closure slideshow:
http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/planning/neighborhood/downloads/northloop/temp_closure_bruning_ave_031011.pdf

North Loop Neighborhood Plan on the Bruning closure (see page 89):
http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/planning/neighborhood/downloads/northloop/appendix_a_c.pdf

Contact City Council:
<http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/council/place1/>

Keep Chesterfield Beautiful

Neighborhood group hopes to give street a facelift

By Leif Johnson

As part of the 2011 Austin Neighborhood Habitat Challenge, a group of Northfield residents has been working on a neighborhood beautification project along Chesterfield between North Loop and W. 55th St. Having obtained support for this project from the neighborhood association, Keep Austin Beautiful, Backyard Salvage & Garden, and the Austin Energy Urban Forest Grant, the group hopes to transform the corridor, which is currently overgrown and littered with pet waste, into a lovely promenade along Waller Creek for all the neighborhood to enjoy.

To help this vision come to life, 10 Northfield residents met at the corner of W. 55th and Chesterfield on October 22 and started hacking away at the weeds with their shovels, rakes, and other implements of destruction. Passersby stopped and asked about the project, and a few even spontaneously jumped in to help out. At first, the amount of work seemed insurmountable, but these volunteers were no slouches!

By noon everyone was collectively amazed to find what many hands and a few hours of hard work can accomplish: the work group weeded the entire southwest corner of the intersection, planted three new trees, installed a few perennials, and mulched most of the area. A neighbor even donated a lovely bird bath (unfortunately, this was stolen shortly thereafter), and another neighbor has volunteered to build and install two benches.

And this is just the beginning! In the spring, we will have another workday to complete the vision at this corner and to perform similar work at the other (smaller) corners on Chesterfield. We hope that anyone who enjoys a little physical labor and the idea of beautifying our neighborhood will join in. Information about upcoming workdays will be posted on the neighborhood listserv.

If you happen to walk past on a day when your fellow neighbors are working out on Chesterfield, don't be afraid to lend a hand and help create a more beautiful neighborhood.

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Extreme Make-Over: Ridgetop Edition

One Family's Journey from Fixer-Upper to Dream Home

By Patricia Borowicz



The transformation of the Borowicz residence: before, during and after

Over the past few years, our area has enjoyed a number of slow and steady improvements. Young urban professionals who love our central location are moving here in droves. Parents pushing strollers down the street has become a common sight. Sleek new shops and office buildings have replaced tired old ones. And it seems like just about everyone is fixing up their houses with a fresh coat of paint here, a bathroom remodel there, or even entirely new construction.

My husband and I recently opted to give our house an extreme makeover, and I thought it might be helpful to share our story with others who might be looking to do the same. Eight years ago, we bought a two-bedroom fixer-upper in Ridgetop, which suited our needs at the time, but as our family grew we faced a difficult choice: build an addition or buy a bigger house. When our second child entered elementary school, this issue took on a heightened sense of urgency, but after doing some house hunting we realized that our home and neighborhood were more pleasing to us than all the other options at our disposal. So we decided to do a complete renovation and build an addition that would stay within our budget and look exactly the way we wanted.

To come up with a design, we studied our lifestyle needs and prioritized using the space we already had more efficiently. We found Susan Susanka's Not So Big House books to be particularly helpful and strongly recommend them to others who are looking to design a home tailored to the way they actually live.

My husband and I also had long discussions about homes that appealed to us and reminded each other of the importance of not overbuilding. A market analysis report showed that the 3/2 homes in our area that have sold in the past couple of years averaged about 1,433 sq. ft.

Collecting images ripped out of architecture and design magazines and organizing them by room became one of our favorite pastimes. Gathering such images can help define your style and communicate your ideas to an architect, contractor, or spouse. To gain further inspiration, I loaded my Google Reader with design blogs such as Design Sponge, Remodelista, Pinterest, decor8, and Houzz.

After completing our architectural plans, we interviewed several contractors, a decision we felt was the the most critical one of the entire process. We asked them the sort of questions that will inevitably arise during the building phase, like how they deal with difficult situations. While choosing a contractor, our main concern was finding one that would meet our budget and finish the project on time. We got bids from three companies, visited a few of their construction sites, and checked their references.

After exploring our financing options at our local credit union, we

took out a home improvement loan that had a low interest rate. We made sure to include a contingency fund (5 percent of the total construction cost) in our budget for upgrades and additions and were glad we did when we found out that we needed to replace a sewer line. We also made a last-minute decision to upgrade to marble countertops. Needless to say, we managed to spend all our contingency money. And then some.

But thanks to good planning on our part as well as the contractor, our house remodel came in only \$300 over budget and was completed in three months. Now we can enjoy the same friends and neighbors we've come to know over the years, watch the neighborhood develop and change, and still have a little more space for our family to play.

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Business Beat: New Food Trailers Liven Up 'Hood's "Quick-Bite" Scene

By Scott Ross

As far as our city's vibrant food-trailer scene goes, our neighborhood has always lagged well behind South Austin and the east side, but the arrival of Counter Culture two years ago helped set in motion a local upsurge that continues to this day. Now two new food trailers—Against the Grain and Biscuits & Groovy—have opened for business in our neighborhood within the past six months, and both are welcome additions to an area that has limited food options within its inner core.

Located in the Snappy Mart parking lot just east of the intersection of 51st St. and Duval, Against the Grain is owned and operated by Caswell Presley, a one-time Northfield resident who has tried his hand at nearly every role in the restaurant industry, including manager, cook, and butcher. Based on his extensive experience with animal parts, it's hardly a surprise that his menu of made-from-scratch sandwiches features a wide variety of meats, including beef, pulled pork, chicken, and bacon. Homemade guacamole can also be found in several of the sandwich options. The beef slider (\$2.50), in particular, deserves mentioning as it was a hit at the recent neighborhood get-together at Bruning Green on National Night Out. Presley's trailer is open every day for lunch from 11 a.m. until 2 p.m. and for dinner Thursday-Sunday.

Located directly across 51st St. from Against the Grain adjacent to the Peddler Bike Shop, Biscuits & Groovy specializes in breakfast items piled atop homemade biscuits. Customers can choose from recommended combinations such as the "Donna Summer," which features biscuits smothered in gravy, sausage (real or vegan), cheese, eggs, and chives, or make a meal of their own design, picking from two

choices of gravy and a plethora of hearty toppings, including vegan chorizo, sausage, and bacon. And to wash it all down customers have plenty of drink options to choose from, including French-pressed coffee, fresh-squeezed orange juice, packaged tea, sodas, and a variety of juices. On weekends when it's busiest, this trailer's loyal following can be observed waiting patiently for their meals—all the food is made to order, so fast food this is not—as well as online where they have managed to maintain a four-star rating on Yelp. Biscuits & Groovy is open for breakfast and lunch every day (9 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Friday, and 8:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday) and provides limited outdoor seating.



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Meet Your Neighbor: Jim Mansour

By Storms Reback

How many times have you walked down North Loop, gazed up in the air, and said, "What the heck is that?" In the last three years that has been, at one time or another, an arrow, a Blow Pop, a Teddy Bear head, and a skull, each blown up to larger-than-life proportions. While these temporary art installations are beautiful and interesting in their own right, to fully appreciate them you need to understand the man who created them.

At first glance Jim Mansour doesn't look like the military type, but he actually spent five years in the Marine Corps Air Wing fixing computers on F-18 jets right after high school. He went on to get a degree from UT in mechanical engineering, which he put to use while working at Applied Materials. It was there that he made a life-altering discovery—he and the 9-to-5 grind weren't a very good fit—and shared his philosophy with the world by creating a website whose name says it all:

www.jimhateswork.com.

Applied's upper management ended up "sending his job to India," but something good ultimately came from his three-year stint in the corporate world. He was able to save enough money to purchase a house on North Loop, and he wasted no time before starting to fix it up.

"I told them to stop painting the cabinets," he said during a recent conversation. "They were painting them burnt orange for renters. It was such a dump, but I had so much energy back then. I was like, 'It doesn't matter to me how bad it is because I'll fix everything.'"

He remodeled the bathroom and the kitchen. He replaced all the plumbing. He redid all the wiring. He even installed a central air and heat system himself.

Having unleashed his inner Mr. Fix It, Jim started his own handyman business, which in addition to the occasional roommate helped keep him afloat.

"I coasted for seven years without an official job," he said with equal parts amazement and pride.

During this idyllic period Jim discovered Burning Flipside, an art festival and experiment in radical self-expression and temporary community that takes place every Memorial Day weekend in Central Texas. Inspired by the event, he made it his goal to attend Burning Man, the much larger and better known festival upon which Flipside is modeled. But two things stood in the way of his making the trip to the high desert of northern Nevada where Burning Man takes place every Labor Day weekend.

"You have to have time and money... at the same time. In '08 I got hail damage on my roof and got a \$1,700 check, and I was like, 'I can go!'"

Arriving before the event had even started, he helped erect the temporary metropolis known as Black Rock City and stayed for ten incredible days.

"The city and the people, what they bring, what they do for your enjoyment, it was just overwhelming my first year. I was like, 'I can't believe this is happening. I can't believe this city. Walking through it is like a dream world.' I wasn't ready to leave."

One of the sights that had the greatest impact on him was a 120-foot-tall freestanding projector stand and screen that had slide shows continually playing on it. Back in Texas, Jim vowed to create

something similarly magnificent, and on a trip to Marfa inspiration came to him in the form of a giant steel arrow stuck in the ground outside an RV campground. Jim borrowed the design but chose to make his out of PVC and Masonite.



Jim Mansour (right) proudly shows off the giant Teddy Bear head he erected on North Loop.

The arrow in his front yard soon gave way to a Teddy Bear that was designed to lose its fur and morph into a blood-splattered skull. The skull loomed over North Loop staring directly at Epoch Coffee for over a year until Jim turned it into a jack o' lantern this Halloween. These creations along with such curiosities as the giant smoke-ring shooter he made out of a rubber trash can, a tarp, bungee cords, and an electric fog machine have helped make Jim's house a fixture on the Austin Art Yard Tour each spring and an iconic neighborhood landmark the rest of the year.

"That's why I do it because it attracts attention. I love that people take pictures of my place all the time. And I love that people are

like, 'There's that dude with the bear head.'"

Is your neighbor worth knowing? E-mail us at news@northfieldna.org and let us tell his or her story in an upcoming issue of In the Loop.

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Yoga Pose of the Season

By Heather Darden



Fall brings fun parties, trick-or-treating, and family visits. Hectic running around and indulgent foods can upset digestion, unbalancing body and mind. By breathing deeply in the yoga positions below, you massage back muscles and intestines from the inside out, relieving pain and indigestion. Done in 5 minutes a day, they can help relieve stress. Breathe deeply in and out of the nose.

Wall Hang: stand with your back against the wall, feet 12-18 inches away from the wall with hips, back, shoulders and head touching the wall. Hinging at your hips, fold forward while bending the knees slightly. Take 3 breaths or stay 3 minutes, listen to your body. Roll up slowly, allowing arms to hang heavily as you place each vertebra on the wall one at a time. Do not do this if you have glaucoma, sciatica or disc issues.

Heather Darden, RYT, has been teaching yoga for five years and practicing yoga for twelve. She is certified in Vinyasa Flow, Restorative Flow, and Ayurvedic Yoga Therapy.


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