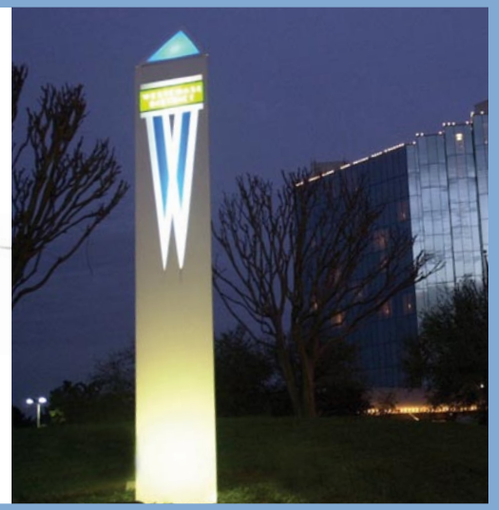
building higher value

ensuring a vibrant future for the westchase district



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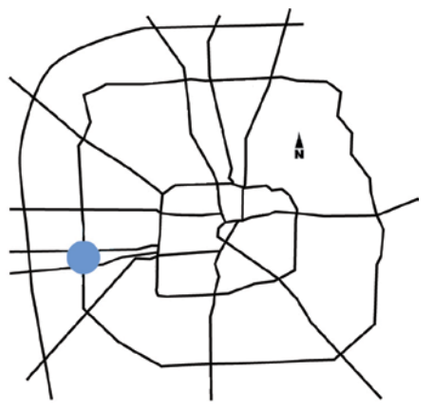
Public-sector improvements will attract private-sector investments that attract people and businesses.



Westchase forms the heart of West Houston.

© 2006 The Westchase District

I. introduction:

enhancing economic vitality in westchase

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Success is a Choice

Fostering Quality Growth, Defying Decline

The property owners and developers of the Westchase District have observed the cyclical nature of development in Houston. Areas are born. They grow quickly and thrive with multiple activities and land uses. Then they follow one of two patterns:

- They enter a period of decline or…
- They evolve into even more productive, dynamic areas.

The Westchase District Board of Directors wants to ensure the District's future follows the latter path. The District therefore embarked on a two-year project designed to identify why some areas succeed and others fail. During the project, the Westchase District also created a framework for future development – detailed within – to help guide reinvestment here during the next 20 years.

Framework for Future

This framework began with a vision defined collectively by constituents in the community as well as all public-sector parties with an interest in the area. It also contains a series of recommendations that could benefit both public and private sectors – whether implemented in whole or in part. Both specific and general benefits are identified in Section V of this report.

Creating Catalysts for Investment

This framework provides an attractive vision for the future. By making several changes to the public environment that developers can leverage, it will accelerate investment and economic values in Westchase and make it the location of choice in West Houston. It encourages property owners and developers to make individual decisions that maintain and improve the District and add up to a vibrant future.

Ensuring the Vitality of One of Houston's Most Important Areas

The Westchase area, originally developed in the 1970s, now forms the center of West Houston. And in the heart of Westchase lies the Westchase District, one of the city's largest employment centers. By 2006, the District's 4.2 square miles were home to more than:

56,500	employees
14.2	million square feet of office space
2.4	million square feet of retail space
17	hotels
65	residential properties that are home to 25,000 people
12	houses of worship
5	private schools
5	colleges/universities
3	public schools

Westchase's economy significantly affects Houston's and the Gulf Coast region's. A number of Houston's premier energy, technology and engineering firms call the District home. The health and prosperity of Westchase's employers and residents are important to the economic health of Houston.

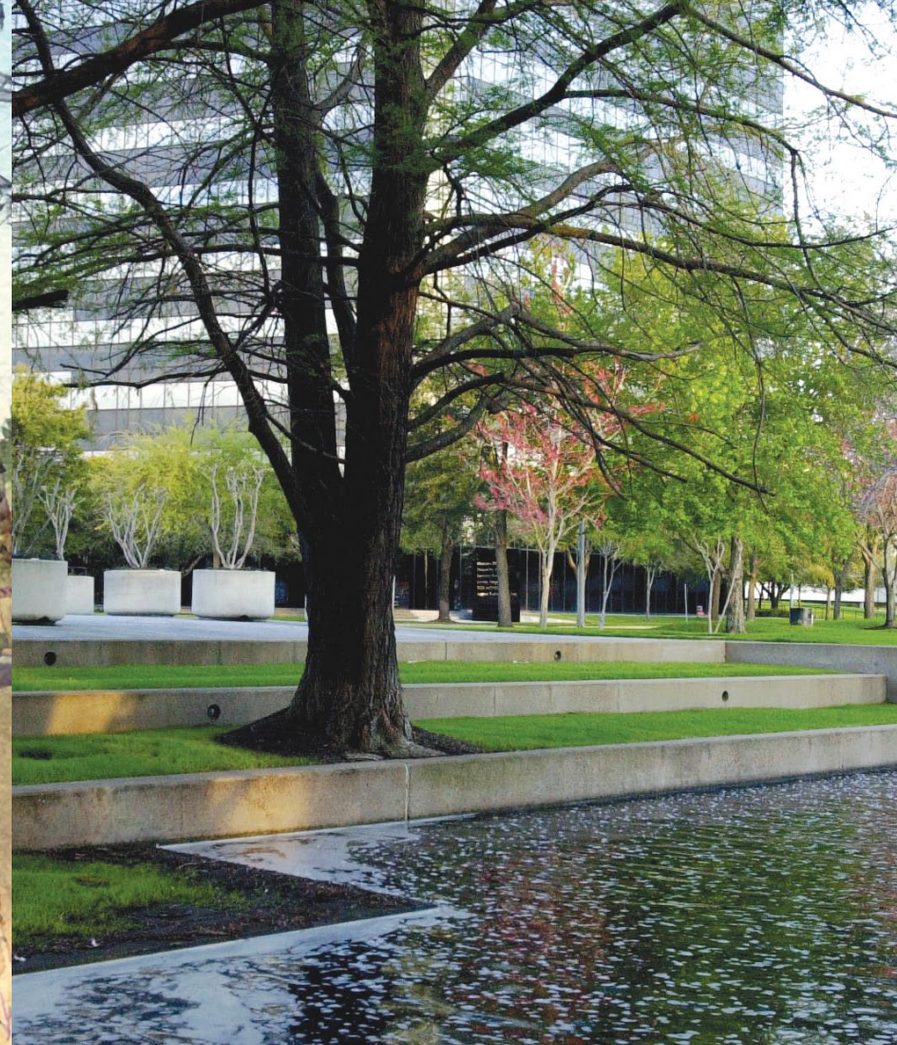
Improving Westchase: Our Mission

To help manage and improve this bustling area, Westchase property owners created the Westchase District in 1995. Funded by an assessment on commercial properties within its boundaries, the District hired a full-time staff that has assumed the stewardship and planning functions of the area's original developers. The District focuses on public safety, economic development, beautification, mobility and the improvement of public infrastructure.

Westchase will offer people opportunities to live near where they work.

II. our vision for the future:

becoming the commercial and cultural heart of west houston



Become a "Brand Name" Urban Center…

…that has a clear sense of place and a unique identity achieved through public-realm improvements.

Become West Houston's Downtown…

…offering a vibrant urban lifestyle by increasing density and cultural richness through mixed-use, high-quality, retail, lifestyle and entertainment centers.

Become a Livable Downtown…

…with public gathering places, plenty of things to do and places to see;

where people can walk to parks, cultural events and work while feeling secure.

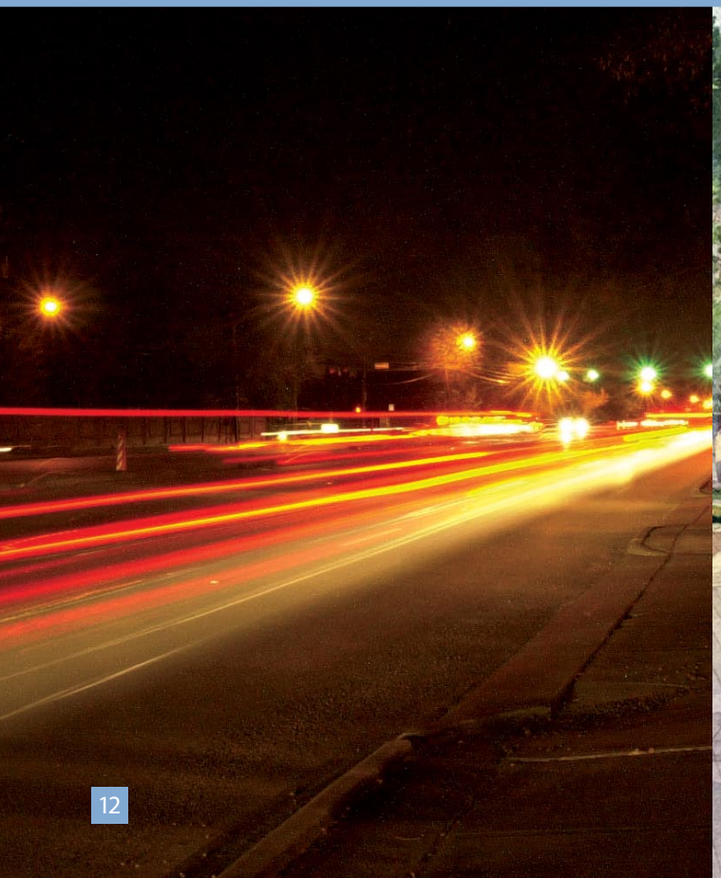
Become a Center of Gravity…

…by making the whole District a regional "destination"

that people want to experience.

Become More Mobile and Connected…

…with street and parking improvements that respect the central role of the automobile;
with open spaces, walkways and bike paths that improve pedestrian and bicycle circulation;
and with public transit that can quickly move masses of people.



Become a Destination that Adds Value…

…by creating a memorable, pedestrian-friendly, quality environment that becomes a catalyst for private development and offers a premium return on investment.

III. achieving the vision:

creating catalysts for investment

A vision without a clear plan to implement it is nothing but a dream.

Creating Public-Sector Initiatives that Encourage Private-Sector Investments

A vision without a clear plan to implement it is nothing but a dream. Likewise, expecting hundreds of entities with different agendas to implement a plan voluntarily is wishful thinking.

Not a Plan, A Framework

Accordingly, this "plan" is not a plan at all; it is a framework for development based on six achievable public-sector elements. Leveraging the elements in this framework will improve the value of private-sector properties and help owners achieve better returns. Each element gives owners an economic incentive to cooperate when the time comes to (re)develop their properties.

Catalysts for Investment

These public-sector elements are the only areas over which the Westchase District, the City of Houston and other agencies have the ability to implement improvements. They comprise catalysts for investment and will encourage owners to fund high-quality projects that support the Westchase vision.

Six Achievable Public-Sector Elements

The public-sector elements include:

- Developing a canal network
- Creating a connected network of open spaces
- Transforming streets into more attractive and convenient places
- Breaking up superblocks into a smaller grid
- Improving transit and shared parking
- Branding the District

Incentives for Private Sector to Leverage

Property owners can tie into and leverage these elements for their own benefit and on their own timetables as opportunities arise. Doing so will:

- Give developers and property owners more flexibility, not less
- Prevent decline of property values and neighborhoods
- Generate real estate market premiums and enhance property values
- Reduce flooding
- Improve mobility
- Make a safer, more enjoyable place for everyone to work, live and play

Developed with Community Input

This framework will succeed because it reflects the wishes of the community. It reflects extensive input from property owners, developers, public agencies and the public – all of whom were part of the process. It was refined successively over a period of two years based on their input. (See Appendix D.)

Flexibility for the Future

This framework capitalizes on opportunities that already exist in Westchase. It is flexible in phasing. It is sensitive to political and regulatory realities. And it will self-adjust to the dynamics and trends of the marketplace.

The Rationale for Incremental Implementation

Not even property owners and public agencies working together could transform the District's 4.2 square miles as a single project. Thus, we designed this framework for incremental implementation, as public-realm opportunities and private-sector development initiatives intersect. We envision dozens of separate projects over a period of 10 years or more, each guided by this framework.

All parts of the District will benefit for decades to come. See map.

IV. six achievable public-sector improvements

Instead of being hidden and ignored by surrounding development, storm drainage canals will be turned into amenities and new high-value frontages for a variety of developments – all while improving their flood control capabilities.

Developing a Canal Network

Capitalizing on Unimproved Assets

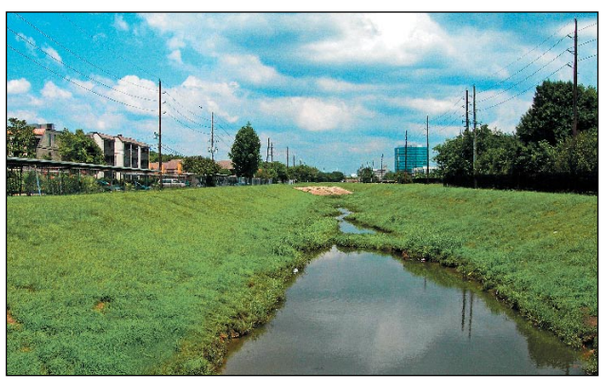
Westchase has an existing network of publicly controlled drainage channels designed to facilitate storm water runoff and prevent flooding. To date, these channels have remained obscure and otherwise unimproved.

Adding Value Through Transformation

The Westchase District proposes enhancing this network into a system of flowing canals and constant-level water amenities while retaining and even enlarging the network's drainage and flood control functions. Transforming this network into attractive greenways, enhancing pedestrian and transportation corridors, creating collective detention areas, and adding "front doors" for (re)development projects will benefit everyone in the area.

Banking Off-Site Detention

Such a canal and detention network could provide a financial incentive for developers by offering a "bank" of off-site detention capacity. This would eliminate the need for on-site detention. This will also benefit people downstream from the District by reducing their risk of flooding.



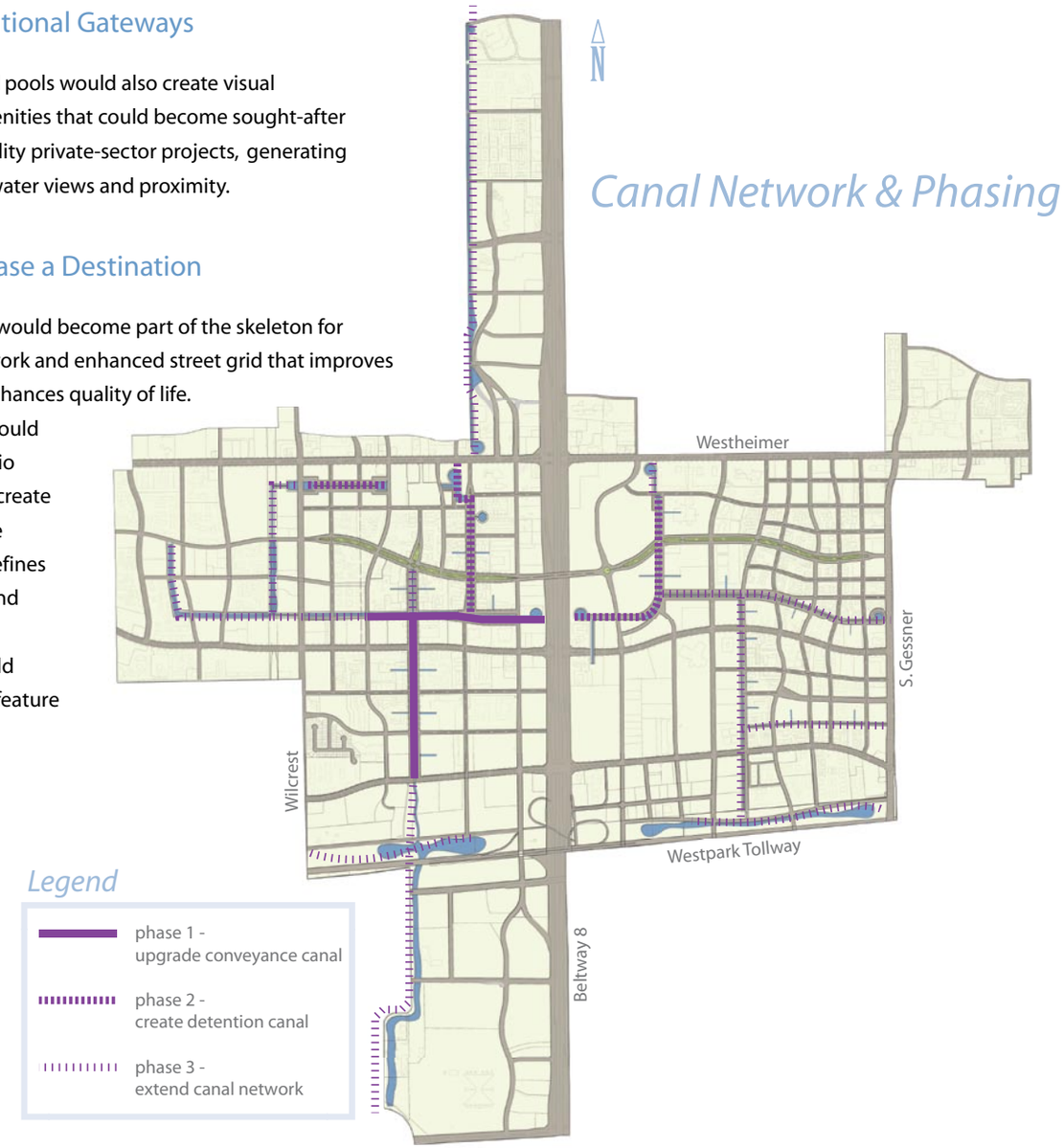
Unimproved drainage canal

Creating Recreational Gateways

Attractive canals and pools would also create visual and recreational amenities that could become sought-after settings for high quality private-sector projects, generating price premiums for water views and proximity.

Making Westchase a Destination

Finally, the network would become part of the skeleton for the open space network and enhanced street grid that improves local mobility and enhances quality of life. The canal network would dwarf the San Antonio River Walk. It would create a visual stamp on the community that redefines Westchase's image and makes the area a "destination." It would become a signature feature of the community.



Existing public property corridors and utility easements will be transformed into welcoming open spaces. These will add aesthetic and recreational value. They will also connect pedestrian and bicycle thoroughfares through Westchase.

Creating a Connected Network of Open Spaces

More Greenery and Recreation

A connected network of open spaces will provide the greenery and recreational opportunities that Westchase needs to support denser development while providing residents and workers with a refuge from the hectic pace of today's busy world. It will also create opportunities for higher-value private development and facilitate increased densities.

Multiplying Uses for Canals, Utility Corridors, Rights-of-Way

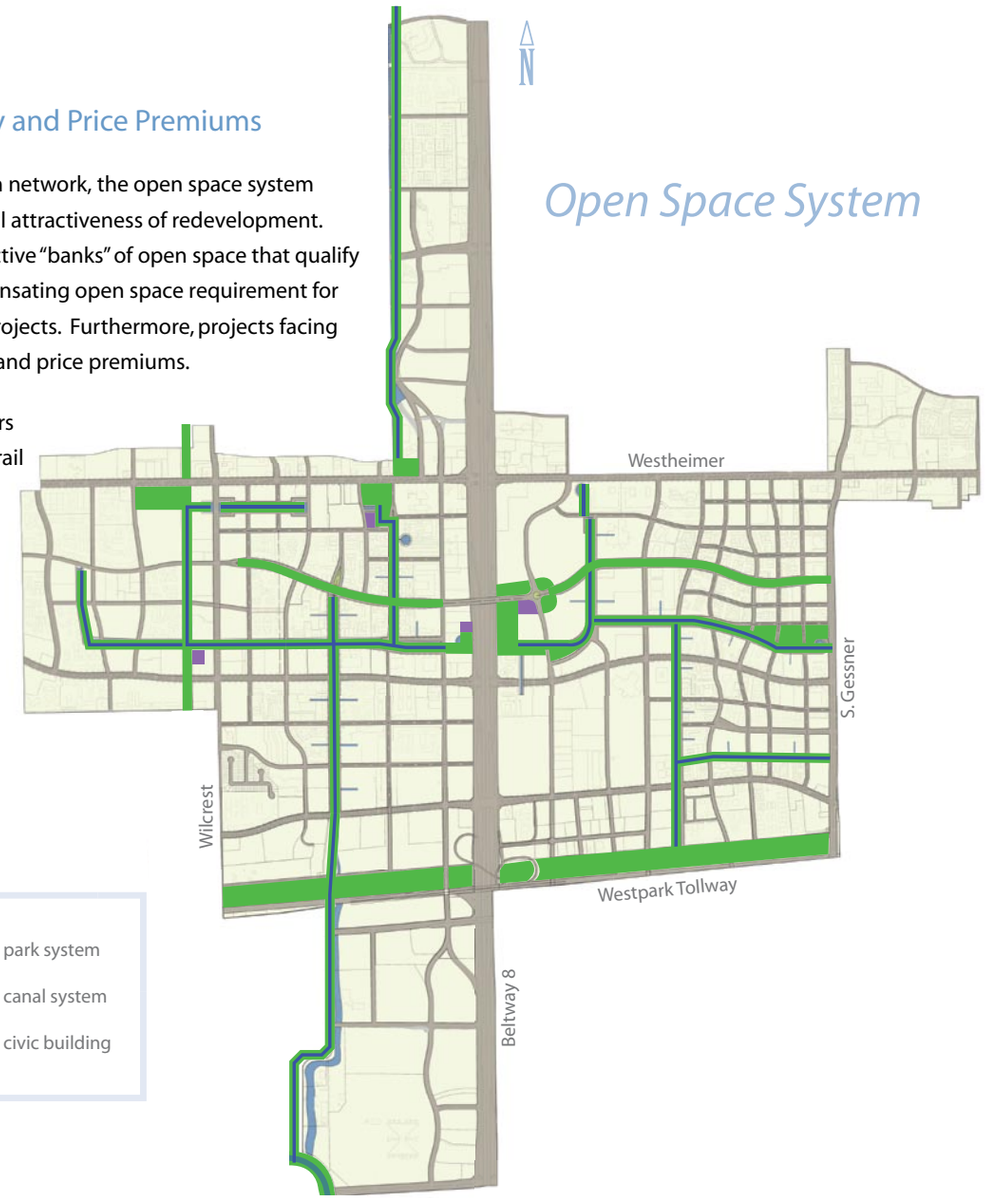
One of Westchase's greatest needs is more open space. Fortunately, the canal/storm water detention network, electric utility transmission corridors, and street rights-of-way create opportunities for a system of linked open spaces. These could include active and passive recreational areas; pathways for pedestrians and bicycles; plazas; landscaped corridors and natural habitats.

Existing Wilcrest electric utility easement

Creating Higher Density and Price Premiums

As with the canal and detention network, the open space system could also enhance the financial attractiveness of redevelopment. It could do so by creating collective "banks" of open space that qualify for the City of Houston's compensating open space requirement for moderate-density residential projects. Furthermore, projects facing open space would likely command price premiums.

Developers and property owners will be able to carry a canal or trail into their projects by creating pocket parks, plazas and landscaped paths. This will enhance public systems, private projects and the quality of life for everyone.



Improving sidewalks, adding on-street parking and creating a park environment will support and encourage dense mixed-use development while enhancing mobility within Westchase.

Transforming Streets into More Attractive and Convenient Places

Adding Character

Streets will be more clearly defined and stratified in terms of physical structure and ambient character. Roadways, sidewalks, landscaping, and other streetscaping will closely match transportation functions and encourage (re)development.

Enhanced streetscaping will help diversify and define the character of Westchase's streets – from large thoroughfares to small neighborhood connectors. The canals, refined street grid and open space system all support this hierarchy.

Becoming More Pedestrian Friendly

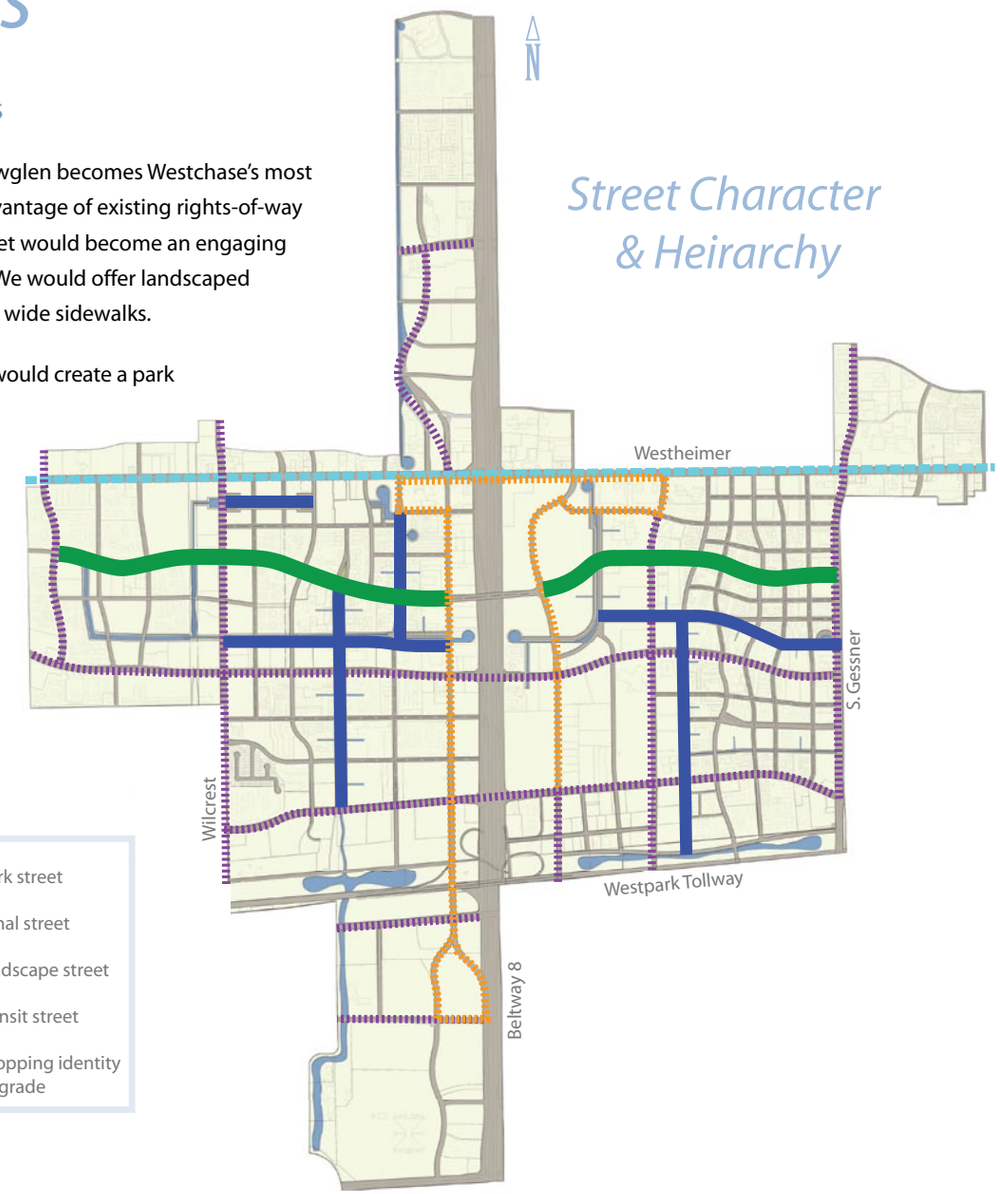
Certain streets could be targeted for mixed-use redevelopment and receive a treatment calling for wider sidewalks, street trees and pedestrian amenities. Small neighborhood streets, especially those created by the new street grid, could have a "mews" design that seamlessly blends automobile, pedestrian and building environments.

Existing Meadowglen

Supporting Mixed Uses

Within this framework, Meadowglen becomes Westchase's most distinctive street. By taking advantage of existing rights-of-way and building setbacks, the street would become an engaging and convenient public space. We would offer landscaped medians, curbside parking and wide sidewalks.

Meadowglen and its medians would create a park setting, allowing the street to function as part of the open space system. The appeal of Meadowglen would encourage both residential redevelopment and higher-density mixed-use projects.



The addition of small scale "mews" streets can improve connectivity for both pedestrians and vehicles while creating an appealing, intimate residential environment.

Breaking Up Superblocks into a Smaller Grid

New Local Streets Break Up Superblocks, Improve Community

Westchase's current "superblock" layout impedes mobility in places. Local automobile traffic has fewer direct routes. Major thoroughfares must carry heavier loads. Long and indirect connections to neighborhood destinations discourage walking.

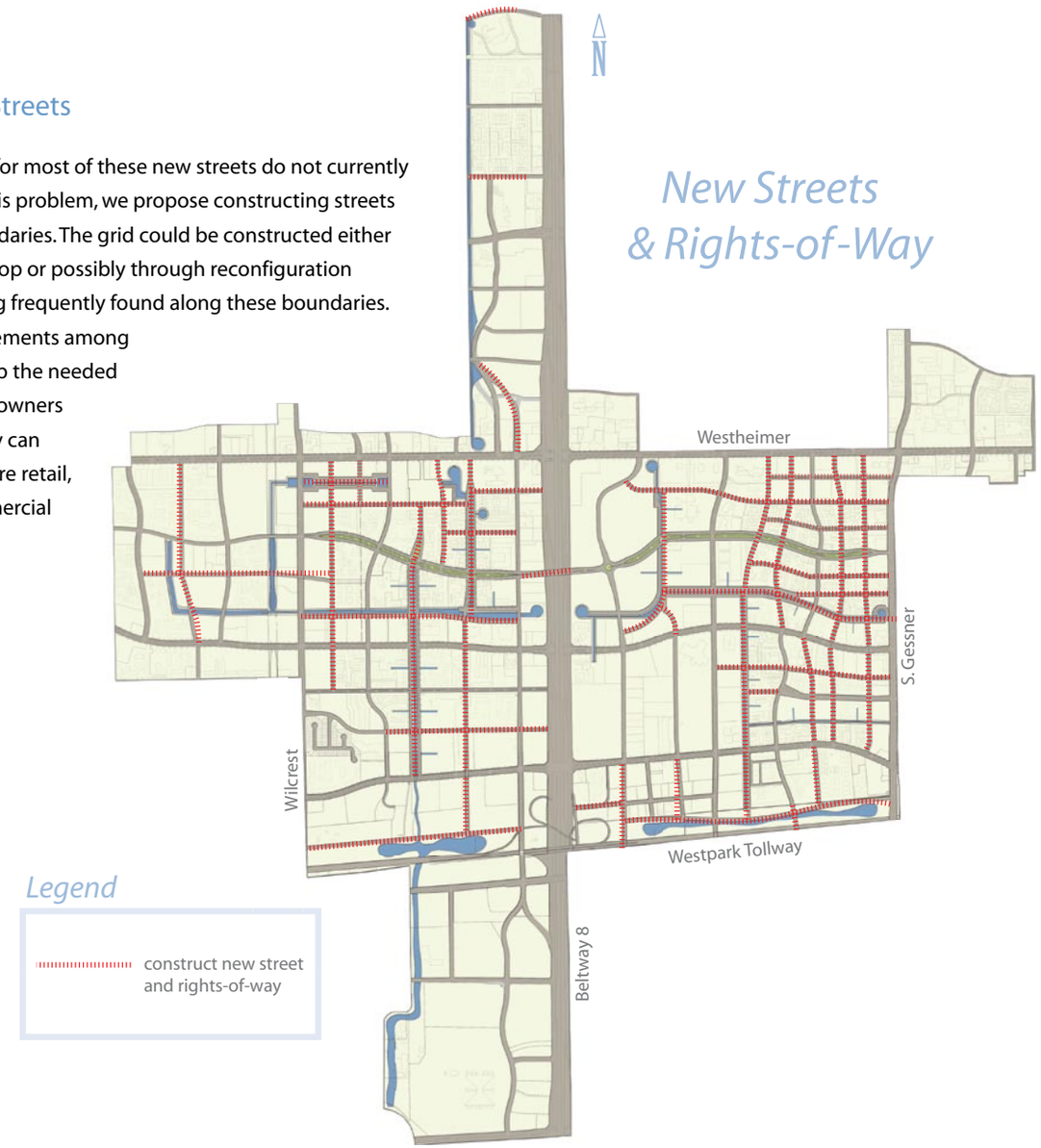
To break up "superblocks" and improve mobility for both motorists and pedestrians, this framework proposes the addition of a network of small-scale neighborhood streets, laid out along existing property parcel boundaries.

New streets will create new connections and frontages that facilitate a mixed-use, denser environment. This network will contain many more options for pedestrian and automobile travel, development frontage and parking arrangements.

Potential infill street

Space for New Streets

Public rights-of-way for most of these new streets do not currently exist. To overcome this problem, we propose constructing streets along property boundaries. The grid could be constructed either as properties redevelop or possibly through reconfiguration of the surface parking frequently found along these boundaries. Shared parking agreements among properties can free up the needed land. What property owners "give up" in land, they can "make back" with more retail, restaurant and commercial space facing streets.



Thoroughfare expansion, mass transit improvements, additional shared parking, new bicycle lanes and wider sidewalks will improve mobility and support higher density.

Improving Mobility and Parking

Thoroughfare and Highway Improvements

The Westchase District will continue working to improve intersections and manage access along major thoroughfares. We also hope to expand the capacity and enhance operations of the Sam Houston Tollway, its frontage roads and the Westpark Tollway. We will work with the Harris County Toll Road Authority and the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) to examine long-range options. Such improvements are vital to the long-term health of Westchase as an employment center. We must maintain and enhance our excellent regional access to suburban residential areas and other business centers.

Mass Transit Expansion

The Westchase District also plans to expand transit service to and within Westchase by working with the Metropolitan Transit Authority (METRO) and other transit organizations. Such service should include:

- Regional commuter service into Westchase
- Bus Rapid Transit service on key crosstown corridors, including Westheimer, Gessner and Bellaire
- Eventual connection to the urban core light rail system and, if implemented, commuter rail service from the western suburbs
- Internal circulator service within Westchase

Thoroughfare expansion will enhance mobility.

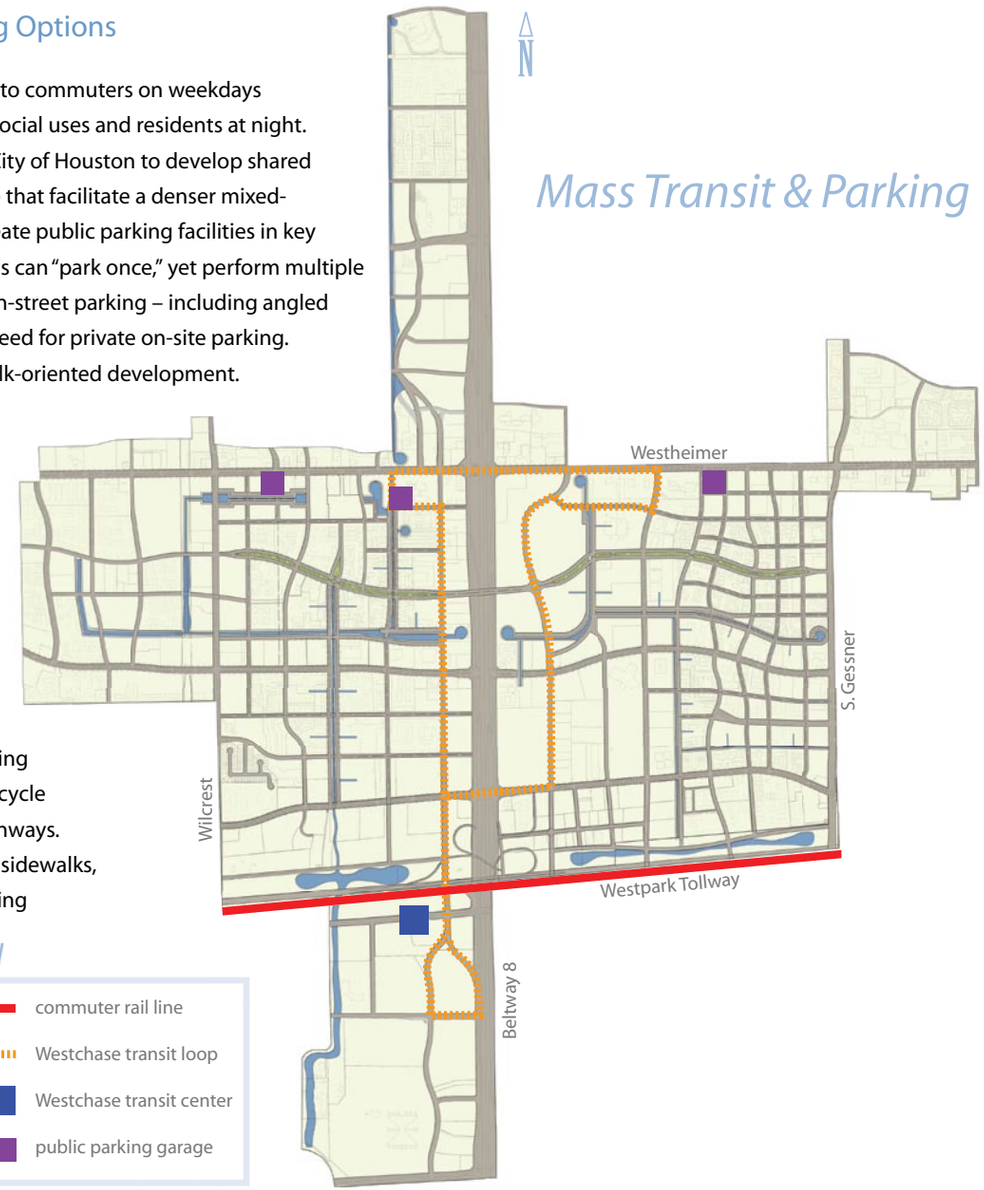
More and Better Parking Options

Parking can be built that caters to commuters on weekdays while accommodating leisure/social uses and residents at night. The District will work with the City of Houston to develop shared parking standards in Westchase that facilitate a denser mixed-use environment. One goal: Create public parking facilities in key commercial areas so pedestrians can "park once," yet perform multiple tasks. Another goal: Increase on-street parking – including angled parking – that can reduce the need for private on-site parking. This will also encourage sidewalk-oriented development.

Parking shared by businesses during the day and residents at night will free up more land for development, green space and other amenities.

Bicycle and Pedestrian Enhancements

Our framework calls for enhancing standards for pedestrian and bicycle facilities along streets and greenways. We plan to do this by widening sidewalks, improving crosswalks, and adding amenities like benches, street trees and lighting.



Common detention facilities that maintain minimum water levels, combined with architectural features distinctive to Westchase, will create memorable urban experiences that enhance commercial activity.

Branding the District

Creating a Sense of Place and Pride

Westchase already has an aggressive branding campaign in place with boundary markers and street signs. We plan to continue this program and look for opportunities to improve it. This will "advertise" the area to those passing through it. To those seeking the area, it will say, "You've arrived." For residents, it will create a distinctive sense of place and pride that also aids navigation.

Building Perception of Value that Stimulates Demand

Through this branding program, the Westchase District will become synonymous with the highest quality. Property owners will be able to merchandise this identity. It will support demand for office space, retail space, apartments and for-sale homes. That, in turn, can help break cycles of price-cutting that undermine property values. Owners will be able to charge rents that support better maintenance, longer-term leases and more stable neighborhoods.

Keeping Tax Dollars in the City

Creating this type of branded environment will help sustain and increase property values. It will give City of Houston residents an incentive to remain residents and taxpayers. It will give suburban residents reasons to move back into the City. And it will keep jobs in the City that are essential to the City's tax base.

Distinctive Westchase branding elements

V. public- & private-sector benefits:

win-win opportunities

Redevelopment within the City remains attractive compared to greenfield development in suburbs.

Public-Sector Benefits

Implementing this framework would provide many benefits for the City of Houston, METRO, Harris County Flood Control, TxDOT, the Houston Police Department and other public agencies. Where similar plans have been implemented, numerous benefits accrued. (See Appendix A.)

This framework will ensure that redevelopment within the City remains attractive compared to greenfield development in suburbs. It will make a place that already has a special character even more special.

Preserve and Increase Tax Base

All of the proposals in this framework support higher density while increasing the quality of life.

Cycles of decay and decline are not inevitable. When determined people work together, property values can go up instead of down. The key to success is creating a public infrastructure that supports redevelopment of property once the first wave of development nears the end of its economic life. In most cases, that means thirty years; many properties in Westchase are approaching that age as of this writing in 2006.

In a high-quality, high-value environment, higher density is an economic incentive to developers. Being able to build a five- or ten-story building on a piece of property that once held a one- or two-story building means they can achieve higher returns from the same parcel of land. Higher population density also encourages more retail activity. As property values and retail sales increase, so does the tax base.

However, in Houston, which contains huge tracts of undeveloped land, simply building taller buildings is not the answer. We must also create an environment that attracts people who enjoy this type of living. A summary of financial benefits to the public- and private-sectors is shown on page 45.

Reverse Flight to Suburbs

America's flight to the suburbs was largely fueled by a search for higher quality of life as central cities decayed. In contrast, this development framework would create a high quality environment within the City where people would choose to live, work and play.

More Stable Neighborhoods

This proposal would encourage private investment and reinvestment in the area. It would create a quality environment with lasting value in which people take pride. Unique amenities like the canal and open space networks will encourage neighborhood stability and construction of more for-sale homes.

Stronger Business Climate

These unique amenities will also attract and retain businesses. The employees they bring to the District will purchase homes, rent apartments, eat at local restaurants, shop at local stores and more. Jobs create jobs. They fuel demand for other services and create a stronger economy all around.

Higher Density/Less Commuting

This proposal will support and encourage higher densities, walkability and transit usage. More people will be able to live closer to where they work and shop. Taking people off highways will reduce highway repair and expansion costs. It will also improve air quality. The time people save commuting every day will increase their quality of life and also contribute to neighborhood and family stability.

Reduced Crime

Studies show that the constant presence of people and legitimate activity in public spaces deter crime. This proposal puts more people on streets and in parks. It would encourage the development of ground-level shops and encourage people to walk between them. More residences would be facing streets as well.

This proposal also provides recreational opportunities and green space that would encourage people to spend more time outdoors. It also provides wider sidewalks that would encourage outdoor cafes. In short, more eyes would be patrolling our streets, acting as deterrents to crime.

Better Quality of Life

Westchase will combine the best of urban and suburban lifestyles. Because of the lifestyle, safety and amenities available in Westchase, residents and employers won't feel compelled to flee to the suburbs. Less commuting will give people one to two more hours per day to spend with their families.

Control Flooding and Runoff

Creating the canal network will increase the amount of storm water detention in Westchase. This will give developers more flexibility. They no longer would need to use on-site ponds for detention. Canals replace the ponds. The current network of unattractive ditches could be widened, deepened and landscaped to create green space. Developers could turn a liability into an asset that attracts retail customers and residents.

Increasing the amount of storm water detention in Westchase will also help other parts of the City farther downstream that have extensive flooding issues but few opportunities for relief.

More Efficient Use of Tax Dollars

Higher density means the City can support more citizens with proportionately fewer employees and proportionately less infrastructure. For instance, it costs the same to sweep a street regardless of whether a hundred people live on it or a thousand. The higher the density, the more profitable METRO routes become. Police and fire departments are not physically stretched as far. And so forth.

We are creating a place that combines higher returns with lower costs.

Private-Sector Benefits

The decision to develop or redevelop a piece of land is complex. It involves many factors including land and construction costs; return on investment; estimated occupancy rates, marketing costs and demand; market trends; and the degree of difficulty. This framework affects all of the above in a positive way.

More Flexibility

Provisions in this framework that create more green space, parks, parking and floodwater detention community-wide will ultimately give individual developers freedom to do more with their property. For instance, they will be able to meet city and flood control district guidelines for higher density development without using huge portions of their property to build detention ponds. Instead, they can tie into a beautiful canal network that brings more foot traffic to their front doors and increases rents. Another example: shared parking; public parking facilities; more on-street parking; and improved pedestrian and bicycle access can bring customers closer to their stores and businesses while reducing construction costs.

Higher Return on Land Costs

Land cost is one of the highest components of construction. Mixed-use developments and higher buildings can improve the return on each square foot of land. That return can make the difference between a decision to "milk" a property for several more years or redevelop it now. Postponing redevelopment leads to urban decay; accelerating it helps areas flourish.

Higher Return on Construction Costs

Developers will be able to put proportionately more of their money into building rentable square footage and less into things that the public sector will now provide – like detention ponds, open space and extra parking.

Higher Rents

Proximity to work, home and amenities like parks, canals and jogging paths will enable landlords to command a premium in rent with faster absorption. This should also help them maintain their properties to a higher standard without compromising profit margins.

Less Turnover

The unique character of the neighborhood, conveniences like more parking, and exceptional aesthetics will encourage commercial and retail tenants to stay in the District. These factors should also attract more stable, profitable businesses from the outset. Community amenities will stimulate demand for apartment space and housing without the need to discount prices.

Lower Vacancy Rates

In good times and bad, people seek places to live and work that are safe, beautiful, fun and affordable with good transportation. This framework will help create such a place. It will help attract businesses for our commercial buildings and individuals for our apartments.

Lower Marketing Costs

With more demand, landlords should have to offer potential tenants fewer incentives to sign leases.

Reduced Risk

This type of high-quality urban environment will help landlords achieve a quicker lease-up in new projects and have better resistance to general market downturns.

Phase 2 of the Jacobs Engineering expansion on Rodgerdale includes 300,000 SF of additional office space.

VI. realistic opportunities for higher-value development

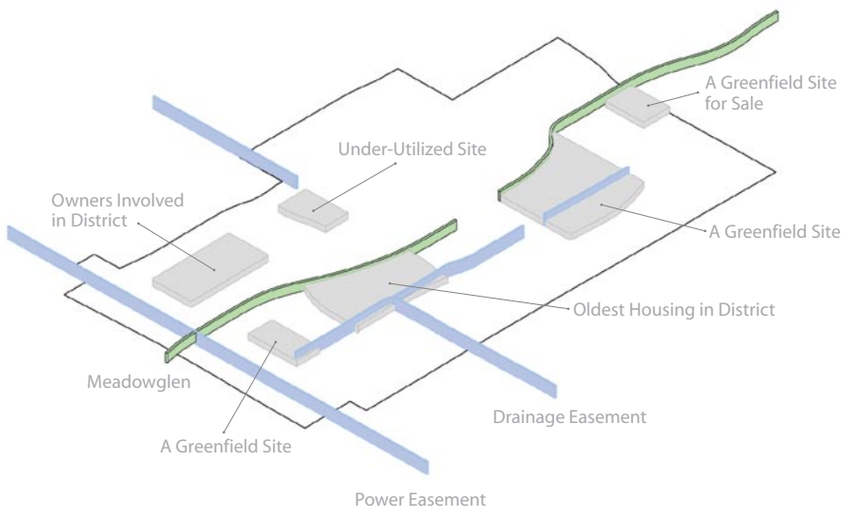
Applying the Concepts

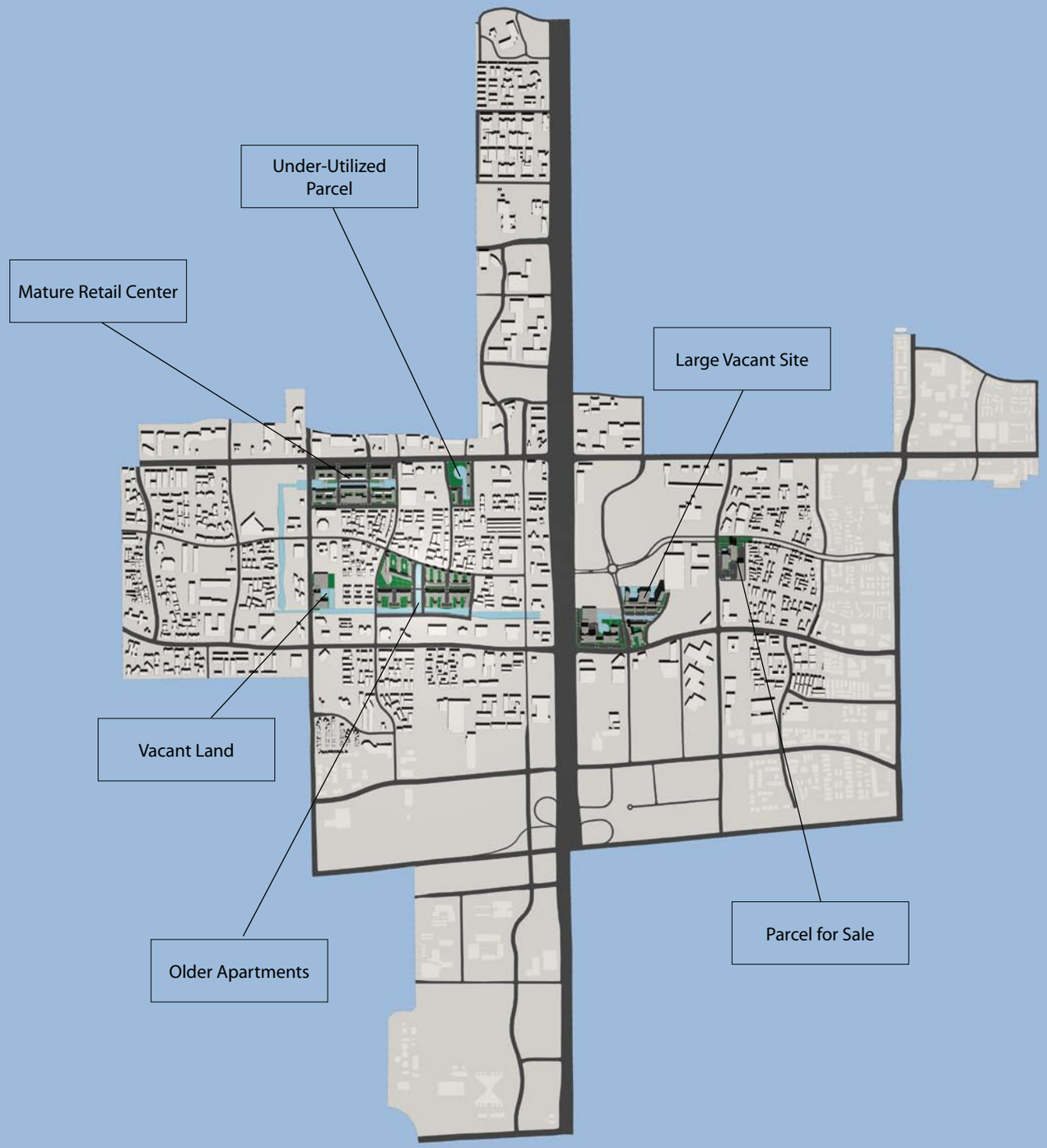
Before private property owners will tie into the six public-sector elements described previously, they must find doing so both possible and practical.

We therefore had consultants examine hypothetical projects on actual properties to assess feasibility from these points of view. They analyzed six different representative sites to assess the degree to which public improvements would stimulate the predicted private-sector improvements.

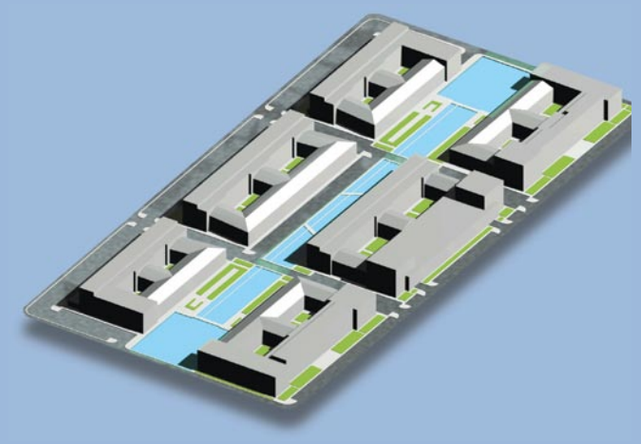
This modeling exercise underscores the incremental, flexible nature of this framework. Elements of it (see Section III) can produce high-value development as opportunities arise. Over time, this process will create an exciting new character for the entire District.

These test cases touch major drainage and power easements, a developing boulevard and areas of strategic opportunity.

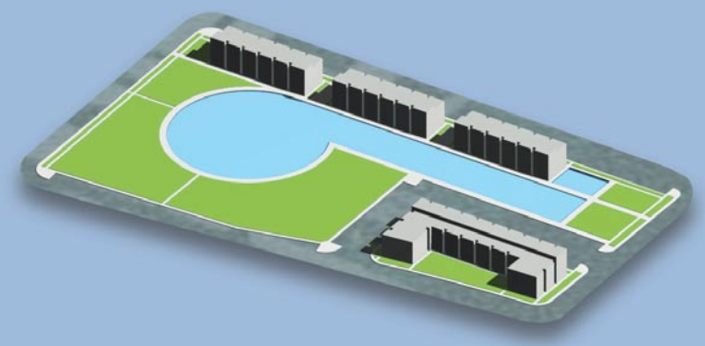




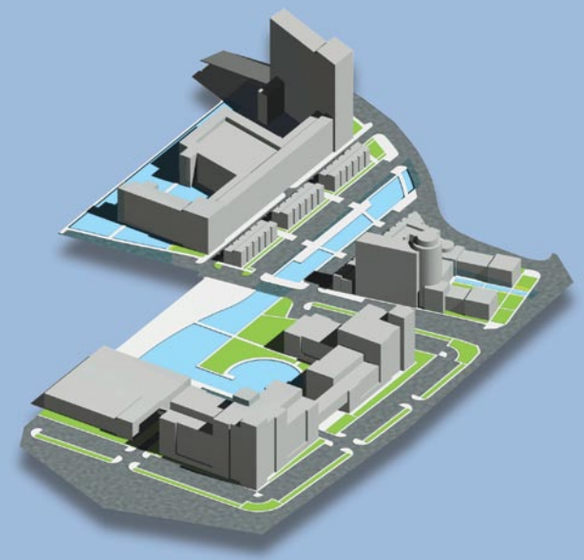
Mature Retail Center



Under-Utilized Parcel

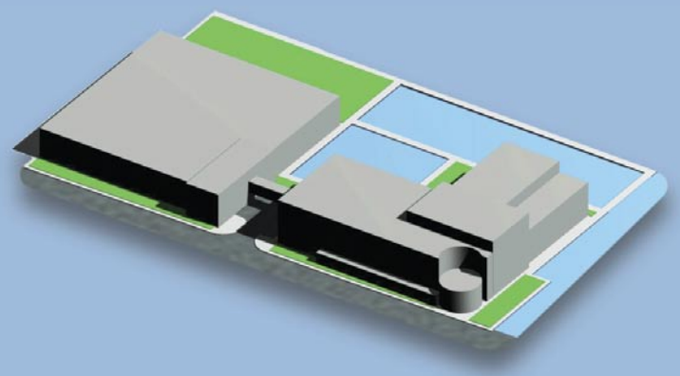


Large Vacant Site

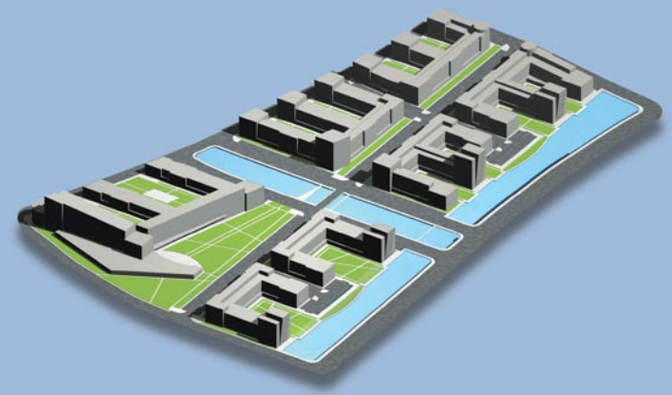


Public-Sector Improvements Could Help Produce Higher Density and Value For Many Types of Properties

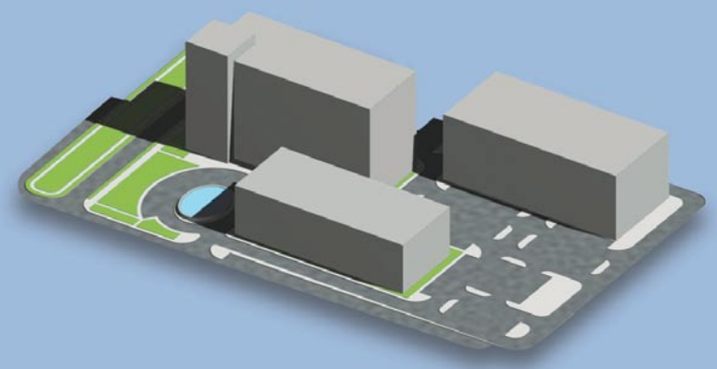
Vacant Land



Older Apartments



Parcel for Sale



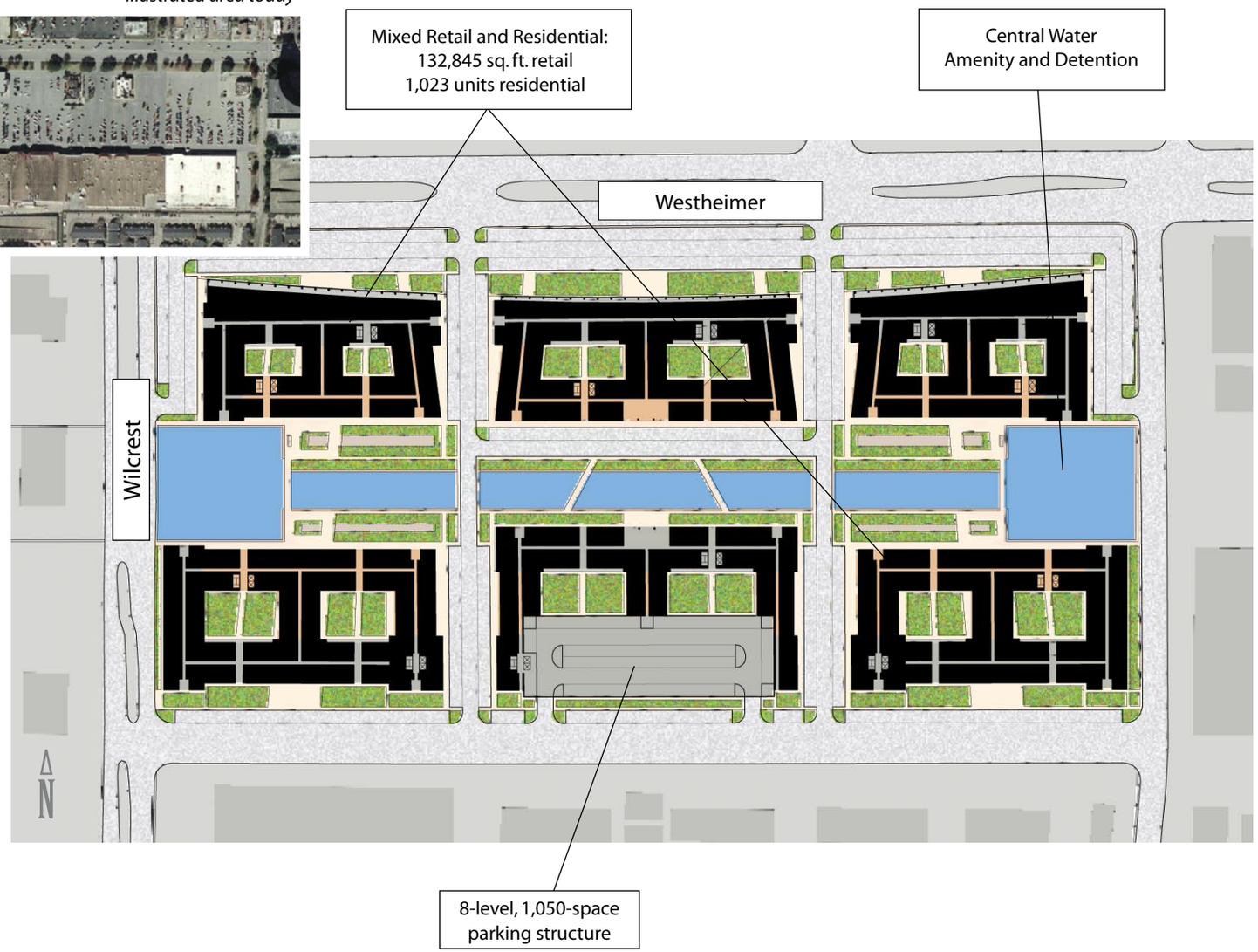
Current strip center could produce higher value through retail/residential mix. (See illustration, right and on page 30.)

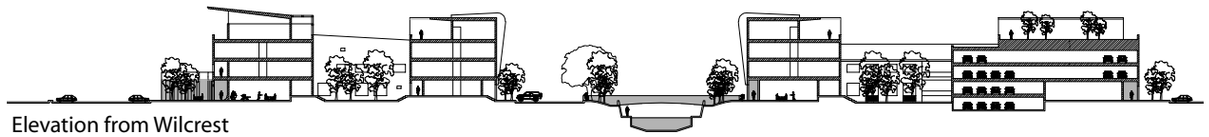
Retail Example

Westheimer and Wilcrest

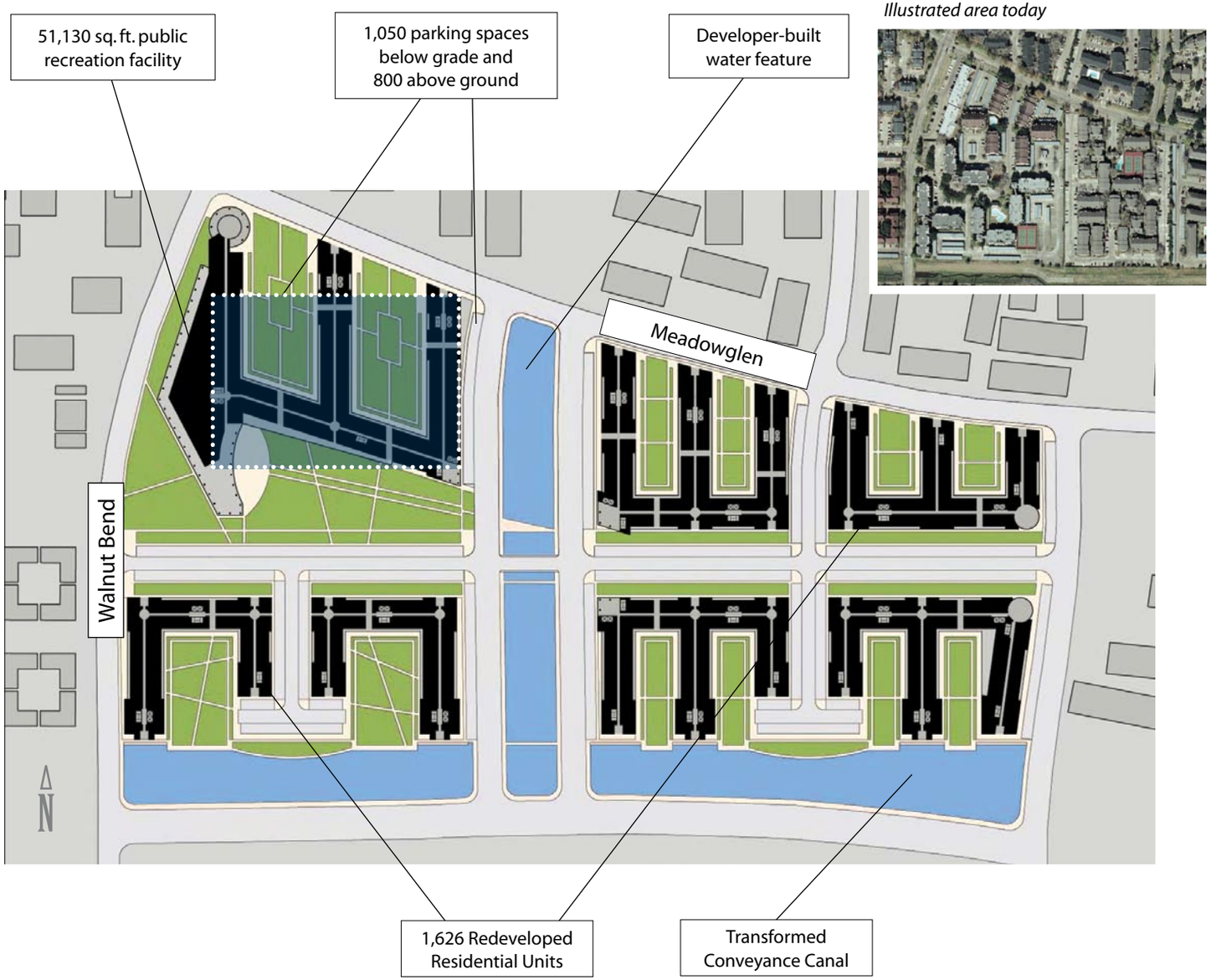
As this large, mature strip center ages, tenants may seek more impressive facilities elsewhere, putting downward pressure on rents. However, within this framework, owners could redevelop the center into a mix of retail and residential around a large water feature that doubles as a detention facility. The increased detention capacity could form a "bank" that serves several surrounding developments while providing an amenity for residents and shoppers. This would generate higher rents for owners, higher sales for retailers, and higher tax revenues for the public sector. Buildings could be phased to suit the developer's capital availability and market demand.

Illustrated area today

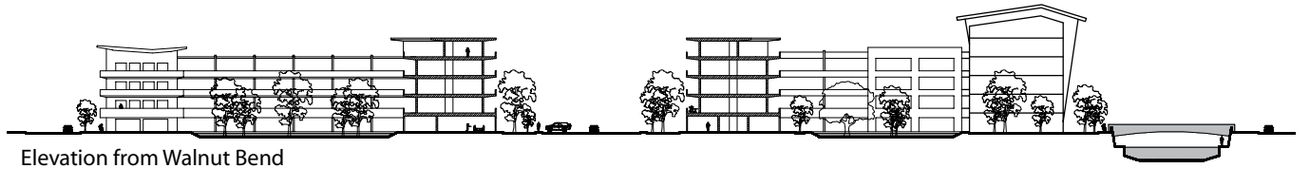




Elevation from Wilcrest



Illustrated area today



Elevation from Walnut Bend

Drainage canal could be transformed into an amenity. (See illustrations on left and on page 24.)

Apartment Example

Meadowglen and Walnut Bend

Two older, low-rise apartment complexes may soon find it difficult to sustain rents while competing with newer complexes. This new framework gives the owners an alternative to reducing rents and maintenance. To encourage owners to redevelop, Meadowglen on the north will be transformed into a "park street." A conveyance canal on the south will provide walking paths. Owners could take advantage of these with higher vertical structures that provide the same number of units but provide more interior open space. A new water feature could easily connect to the canal. Units in such a complex would offer outstanding views and better connectivity – resulting in higher average rents.

Economic Benefits

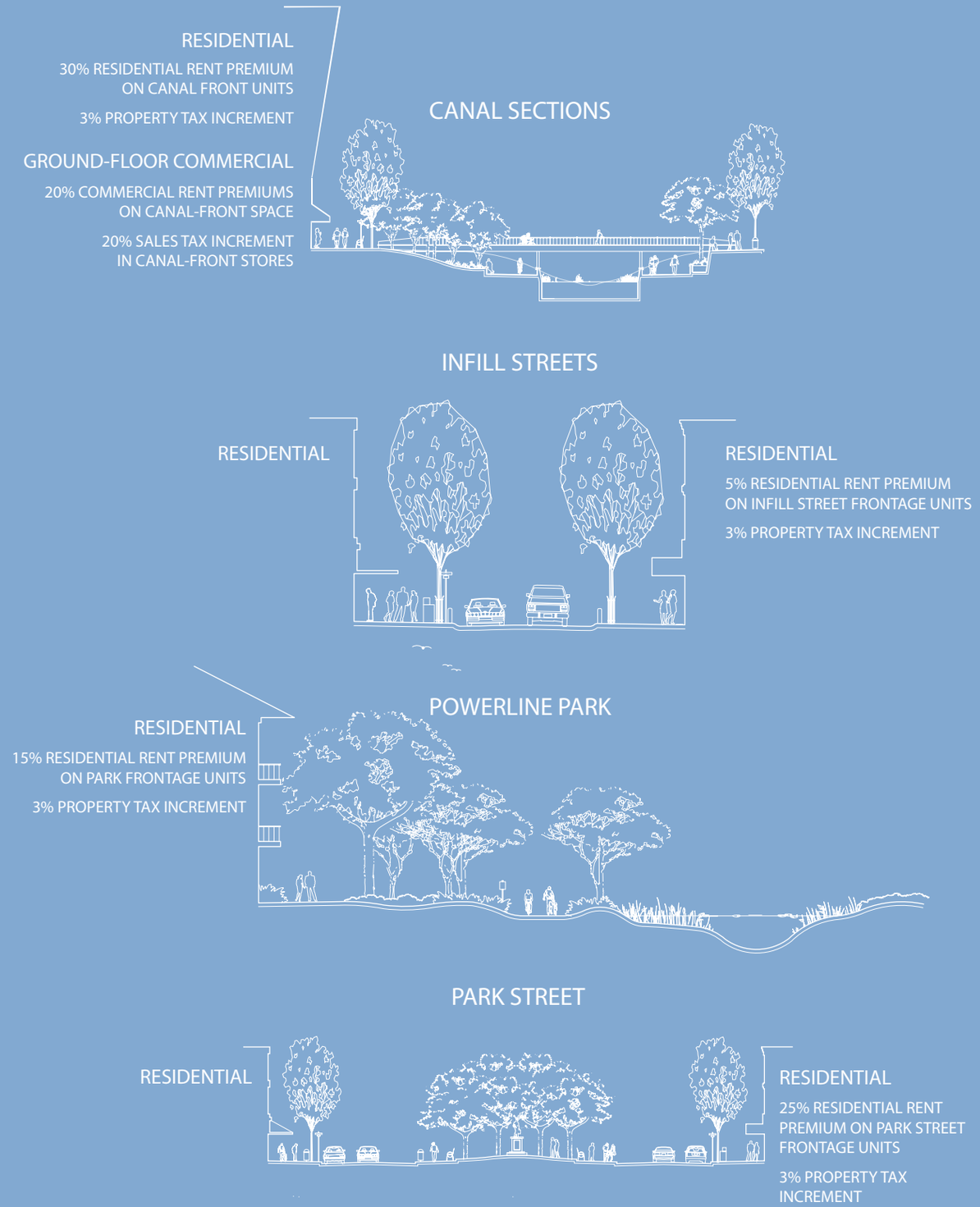
Measurable Returns

The ultimate success of this framework will be measured in economic terms. Beautification, mobility, public safety, and quality of life improvements in Westchase will translate into significant and measurable economic benefits for both the private and public sectors.

Project Costs Justified

These examples show how individual private properties have powerful financial incentives to embrace the public-sector improvements embodied in this framework. While every property will be different, the basic principles are the same. Residents and tenants will pay more for views, proximity to parks, and a mixed-use walkable environment.

These benefits – summarized on the facing page – will merit increased investment. (See also Appendix A, page 47.)



		Private-Sector Benefits		Public-Sector Benefits		
Project Description	Project Cost	Type	Amount	Type	Amount	Other Benefits
Canal Section: 80-foot wide public canal greenway, 1,000-foot long segment with pedestrian paths, lighting and hardscaped canal edges of inner channel	$3.5 million ($3,500 per linear foot)	30% residential rent premium on 150 fronting units	$311,040 / year	20% sales tax increment	$79,200 / year	Expanded flood control through increased channel capacity; enhanced mobility and recreation via pathways
		20% commercial rent premium on 24,000 sq.ft.	$96,000 / year	3% property tax increment	$150,000 / year	
		Aggregate property value increase	$5.1 million			
Infill Street: 25-foot wide pavement in 35-foot right-of-way, 1,000-foot long segment	No right-of-way costs; site preparation, paving, and other, $350,000	5% residential rent premium on 300 fronting units	$104,000 / year	3% property tax increment	$39,000 / year	Improved mobility and traffic reduction on adjacent thoroughfares, enhanced security, market visibility
		Aggregate property value increase	$1.3 million			
Powerline Park: 8-foot wide trail in utility easement with landscaping and lighting, 1,000-foot long segment	$108,900 (paving, landscaping, lighting)	15% open space premium on 150 fronting units	$155,520 / year	3% property tax increment	$57,000 / year	Recreation and open space; mobility and connectivity for pedestrians and cyclists
		Aggregate property value increase	$1.9 million			
Park Street: 80- to 100-foot right-of-way including two traffic lanes plus on-street parking, street trees, pavers, lighting, wide sidewalks, large park esplanade with pathway; water, sewer and drainage lines upgraded	$3.5 million ($3,500 per linear foot)	25% residential rent premium for 300 fronting units	$518,400 / year	3% property tax increment	$194,400 / year	Recreation opportunities, aesthetic improvement, additional parking capacity, pedestrian mobility enhancements
		Aggregate property value increase	$6.48 million			

All costs are in 2006 dollars. The premiums claimed in this chart came from a Robert Charles Lesser survey. (See Appendix A.) They represent premiums typically commanded by owners in areas like the one Westchase District wants to create.

appendix a:

how similar initiatives succeeded in other areas

Summarized from 2005 Robert Charles Lesser study

To better understand the potential benefits of a mixed-use development in the Westchase area, Robert Charles Lesser & Co. studied several mixed-use town centers and urban areas similar to the kind planned here. They included:

- Market Street (The Woodlands, Texas)
- Sugar Land Town Square (Sugar Land, Texas)
- Town & Country (Houston, Texas)
- Frisco Square (Frisco, Texas)
- Legacy Town Center (Plano, Texas)
- Mockingbird Station (Dallas, Texas)
- Addison Circle (Addison, Texas)
- South Coast Metro Alliance (Orange County, California)
- Riverfront area in Chattanooga, Tennessee

Lessons Learned

Each of these shared many common characteristics and provided many valuable "lessons learned." Among them:

- Strong architecture and urban design are critical to establishing a "place." The environment must look and feel authentic.

- Mixed-use developments can foster a 24-hour environment, which is critical to establishing a sense of place and making Westchase a destination. Developments should have natural amenities or strong open-space components. Open space creates synergy between individual land uses and could be a catalyst to development on adjacent properties. The establishment of a "place" increases the value of surrounding properties, thus making private developers more willing to invest in future properties in the area – including for-sale residential product.

- Mixed-use centers are considered a strong amenity for nearby office workers.

Above-Market Premiums

This synergy can lead to substantial premiums above the market – both in terms of rents/prices and occupancies/absorption. An analysis of town center projects showed rent premiums can be up to 20% to 30% over the market in well-executed projects. Occupancy premiums are typically close to 10%. Although rent premiums can be much higher with the addition of natural features such as water, they generally fall into the following ranges:

- Retail.....20-40%

- Office 20%

- Rental Apartments.....20-30%

- For-Sale Residential.....30%

It is also important to note that retail sales can be up to double that of typical shopping centers on a sales-per-square foot basis.

Mixed-Use Development: Critical Success Factors

To create critical mass and foster a 24-hour environment, it is important to bring intense higher-density land uses into the immediate core of a mixed-use development – including residential, office and hotel uses. The residential uses are the most critical, as they provide "livability" to the development. While this residential component could consist of rental and for-sale housing units, a majority of these units should include a mix of attached for-sale products (including condominiums and townhouses) due to significant potential demand.

Parking in a 24-Hour Environment

The configuration, allotment and financing of parking can also have a significant impact on the success of a mixed-use development. Due to the nature of the 24-hour environment created, this parking can be shared among office, retail, residential, and even civic and cultural uses. It is critically important, however, to provide parking that is sufficient for and accessible to each individual land use (primarily retail).

Mixed-use developments that foster a 24-hour environment can lead to substantial premiums above the market.

As part of becoming a mixed-use center, the Westchase District would like to integrate civic and cultural uses into its developments.

Importance of Teaser- and Multi-Level Parking

In order to add energy, character and street appeal to the development, "teaser" parking should be provided in front of retail shops and restaurants, with separate shared parking structures for retail, restaurant, office and other uses, and additional spaces specifically designated for residential parking.

Surface parking lots generally limit the amount of usable open space and decrease densities. They should be minimized here because such lots in a mixed-use environment can harm the sense of place necessary to create an attractive urban core. Additional negotiations with specific tenants will likely be required once the development comes to fruition.

Integration and Impact of Civic and Cultural Uses within a Mixed-Use Development

As part of becoming a mixed-use center, the Westchase District would like to integrate civic and cultural uses into its developments. Attracting civic uses can also bring respectability and prestige to an area, thus creating a cachet that contributes to the overall urban environment.

Need to Create Cultural Magnets

Cultural venues, such as theaters, museums, galleries and performing arts venues can bring after-hours crowds and tourists to the area, thus creating a more dynamic environment and complementary land uses, supporting local retailers and restaurants and filling shared parking structures.

Civic Anchors Provide Stability

Civic uses, including parks, public art, libraries and municipal uses can also create synergy and generally appeal to more daytime and weekend patrons. Civic anchors are typically more permanent residents. They create stable and lasting neighbors. This stability and the higher-quality architecture evident in most civic works can contribute greatly to the overall environment of a mixed-use development. However, in order to best-utilize civic spaces and bring constant critical mass, efforts need to be made to "activate" the spaces with soft programming – organizing and providing events and activities such as concerts, festivals and public art displays.

Planning Crucial to Success and Achieving Critical Mass

Critical to the success of this development, however, will be the creation of a well-planned and integrated public environment. The district should be heavily involved in the overall planning of this environment, and work to encourage and integrate higher-density uses (both horizontally and vertically) within development to provide critical mass. Such uses can include hotels, condominiums and office space. Of key importance: Providing pedestrian-friendly connections between these uses and other surrounding properties.

Right: Bistro Le Cep, one of the Westchase District's many restaurants, offers gourmets an impressive wine selection and attracts diners from throughout the city.

Arts Boost Food and Beverage Sales 25% in Orange County

Robert Charles Lesser also studied The South Coast Metro Alliance in Orange County, California. SCMA worked diligently to attract civic and cultural uses over the past ten years to their retail and office core. They report that this hard work has paid off substantially, as retail, food and beverage establishments now attribute more than 25% of their sales to local performing arts events. In addition, the South Coast Metro Alliance and other areas with a strong civic/cultural orientation report sizable rent premiums. These increase land values and provide a competitive advantage in attracting new tenants from other markets.

appendix b:

summary of key conclusions from robert charles lesser study

Current Westchase Advantages Could Erode Over Time

Currently, the two biggest strengths of the Westchase District are access and price, but these advantages are threatened by anticipated future trends. The new Westpark Tollway provides superior access to Westchase from rapidly-growing suburban executive housing cores to the west, but this is only a short-term boost to access as longer-term traffic congestion is anticipated to catch up. In addition, while land values are strong in the area today, they are likely to increase by a decreasing rate over time, and may decrease without additional investment.

Key threats to the district come from fragile-to-declining retail and rental apartment properties. If the market is left to its own devices, investment in and redevelopment of these underutilized properties will be limited as long as there are vacant tracts of land in Westchase and the surrounding area. Therefore, it will become increasingly important for the district to implement means to level the playing field between existing, underutilized sites and vacant properties in the area (and other nearby areas).

Such means can include funding major development costs (including land, parking and infrastructure), partnering with private entities or creating a Development Authority, and establishing special financing zones for redevelopment.

To Remain a Leader, Westchase Must Develop a Sense of Place

While the Westchase office market is currently leading the Houston area, it is experiencing increasing competition from newer suburban activity centers including the Energy Corridor, Sugar Land and The Woodlands. The struggles of the retail market and the lack of a sense of place could eventually impact the quality of the district's office market as companies seek areas not only with good access, but also with stronger amenities and character.

Creation of Central Core Will Make Westchase a Destination

In order to sustain the strong office market in Westchase, protect land values and encourage future investment, the district should work to create a central core for the area. Through the development of a regional destination, this core could create a sense of amenity orientation by establishing a better sense of identity and location for Westchase – thus creating a much-needed "there" there.

appendix c:

methodology – how this framework was developed

2004: District Board Sets Long-Range Planning in Motion

In the Spring of 2004, the Board of Directors of the Westchase District approved a 20-year service plan. They also set in motion a process to create this Long Range Plan (LRP) for Westchase. Its purpose: Guide the District's activities and initiatives authorized by the service plan. It would also tell other public agencies and private development interests of the District's vision and guide future investment in Westchase.

The Board formed a LRP Committee to guide the process. To involve the Westchase community from the start, the District held a series of community input sessions to identify key concerns and elements of a vision for the area. The District also researched the plans created for other business districts in Houston and around the country. In September 2004, while on a retreat, the Board created vision statements for Westchase that provided the initial background for the LRP.

Consultants Hired/Public Partners Involved

In December, the District hired a consultant team and the main LRP effort was soon underway. After a series of workshops with the Board, the District brought in other audiences to participate in the process. Most notably, they included its Public-Sector Partners, a group of public agencies whose buy-in and assistance is required to fully implement LRP recommendations.

Market Studies Conducted

To make sure the LRP would move the District in a direction that benefited its property owners, tenants and residents economically, Robert Charles Lesser & Co. performed a study of the economic and real estate market issues the LRP needed to address.

The study included a survey of Houston region real estate and development professionals to identify key issues – positive and negative – that define perceptions of Westchase.

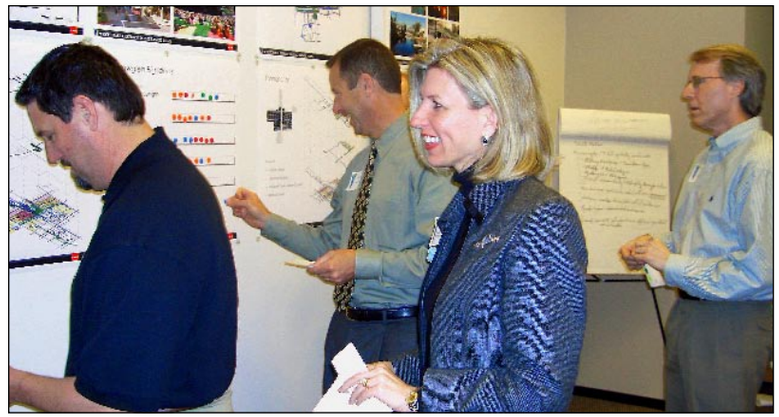
The study also examined other business districts around the nation and the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs, organizations similar to the Westchase District) that are associated with them.

Owners, Tenants, Other Organizations Included

Other groups consulted included major non-Board property owners and tenants and Houston quality-of-life organizations. By June 2005, a draft plan had been created and presented to the Westchase community. (See full list in Appendix D.)

Based on Community Input

The Westchase LRP is the product of much analysis and feedback over two years. A variety of initial plan concepts were examined, critiqued, winnowed, and integrated. All through the process, a set of guiding principles informed the shaping of the plan concepts. The resulting final plan is inherently flexible in phasing and sensitive to the realities of political and regulatory power. It is able to adjust to the dynamics and trends in the market, and takes advantage of opportunities that already exist in Westchase.



At a series of preliminary meetings like this one, Westchase constituents voted their preferences on elements of several alternative plans. The final plan reflects the wishes of the community.

The District held a series of community input sessions to identify key concerns and elements of a vision for the area.

appendix d:

participants in process

The following people and organizations were instrumental in the development of this project. The Westchase District would like to thank them for their time, effort and expert advice.

Public-Sector Partners

Alief ISD Administration, Paula Smith
CenterPoint Energy, Richard Grasshoff
City of Houston District F - M.J. Khan
City of Houston District G - Pam Holm
City of Houston Mayor's Office, Guy Hagstette
City of Houston Planning, Marlene Gafrick
City of Houston Public Works, Jun Chang
Harris County Flood Control District, Mike Talbot
Harris County Toll Road Authority, Lisa Castãneda
Houston-Galveston Area Council, Alan Clark
Houston ISD-West District, Virginia Appl
Houston Police Department, Rick Bownds
METRO, Scott Barker
U.S. Representative District 7 - Culberson, Bill Crow
U.S. Representative District 22 - DeLay, Ben James
Texas Department of Transportation, Dana Coté
Texas Department of Transportation, Carol Nixon

Quality-of-Life Groups

Blueprint Houston, Heidi Sweetnam
Gulf Coast Institute, David Crossley
Quality of Life Coalition, Nancy Brown
Trees for Houston, Kathy Lord
West Houston Association, Roger Hord

Neighborhood Groups

Asian Chamber of Commerce, Elsie Huang
Royal Palms HOA, James Wheat
West Houston Chamber of Commerce, Jeannie Bollinger
Westchase Community Association, Andy Lear

Stakeholders

Numerous companies, properties and individual residents and tenants gave their time and effort to work as part of the planning team. Focus groups, surveys and workshops held over the two-year period provided ample opportunities for meaningful participation by the Westchase District internal stakeholders.

Plan Authors

Knudson & Associates – public and private development controls
Powers Brown Architecture – architectural review and modeling
Rehak Creative Services – final report writing and design
Robert Charles Lesser & Co. – economic assessment, market analysis, and best practices
Spillette Consulting – plan coordination, public input and document drafting
SWA Group – urban planning and community design
Walter P. Moore and Associates – civil engineering review and analysis
Westchase District Staff

Additional Reports and Materials Available

Architectural analysis and feasibilities (Powers Brown Architecture)
North Texas Case Studies trip report (Spillette Consulting)
Projections of project benefits and costs (Westchase District)
Public and private development controls (Knudson & Associates)
Summaries of meetings and workshops (Westchase District)
Westchase Market Study by Robert Charles Lesser & Co. (Westchase District)

Westchase District Board Members

Suzanne Anderson
Weingarten Realty Investors

Gary Baker
Granite Properties

Robert G. Colvill
Colvill Office Properties

Douglas L. Elliott
CB Richard Ellis

Donna J. Flowers
Unity National Bank

Brad Fricks
Stream Realty Partners

John A. Holland
Trammell Crow Company

Keith Josey
BMC Software

Lloyd Lauland
Westchase Hilton

Andrew R. Lear
Westchase Management

David J. Lee
Transwestern Commercial Realty

Philip Schneidau
BMS Management

Bill Sengelmann
Camden Property Trust, Inc.

Mark Smith
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Trammell Crow Company

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