City of Melissa
2015 Comprehensive Plan Update

Chapter 8: City Center Concept Plan

Table of Contents

Introduction 8.1

The Concept Areas 8.3

Old Town 8.3

Town Center Area 8.5

Transit-Oriented Development Area 8.7

The Linkage Concepts 8.10

Gateways 8.10

Streetscape Elements 8.11

Trail System 8.12

Ornamental Parks 8.13

Walkability 8.14

Recommended City Center Policies 8.15

Policy 1: Consider Seed Projects to Create Private Interest 8.15

C1.1 | The City should prioritize capital investments in concentrated areas. 8.15

Policy 2: Encourage Development in Old Town 8.16

C2.1 | The City should investigate ways in which it can streamline the development and/or redevelopment process in Old Town. 8.16

Policy 3: Involve the Public in City Center Decisions 8.17

C3.1 | The City should encourage the creation of a City Center Association. 8.17

Policy 4: Consider Zoning Requirements and Standards 8.17

C4.1 | The City should review, and amend if necessary, current zoning regulations. 8.17

C4.2 | The City should work with the development community to achieve higher density for the TOD area. 8.18

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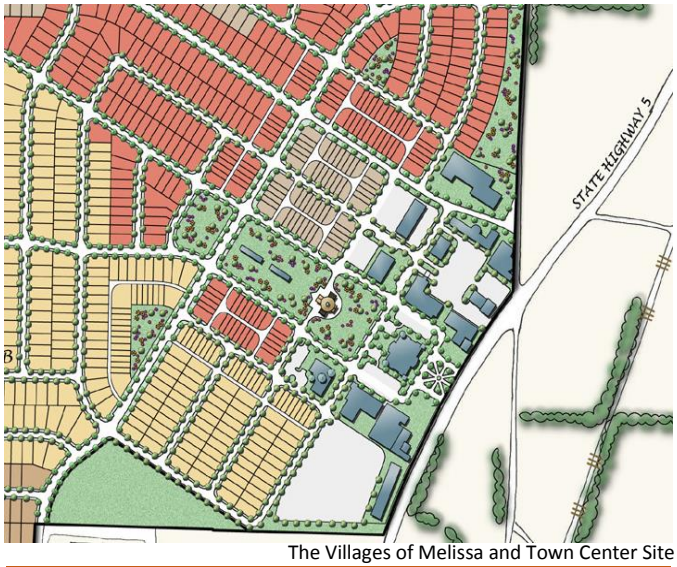
Introduction

Numerous cities across Texas, both large and small, are trying to find ways in which to reinvigorate their downtown areas. At the same time, new areas for uses that once located in downtown areas – uses such as public, retail, and residential – are being encouraged to develop in other areas. There is therefore a need to balance both of these objectives.

The purpose of this chapter of the Comprehensive Plan is to put forth concepts that will help Melissa create this balance in relation to similar local objectives. There is a strong desire, on the part of citizens and City leaders alike, to preserve Melissa's local history, which is represented by the Old Town area. This preservation, however, is a challenge given that the Old Town area has limited structure, footprint, and future direction..

Because of this, there was an aspiration to create a new Town Center area where citizens can visit their Town Hall, gather for events, shop, eat, work, etc. The Town Center area is still under development, but the City Hall is currently complete with approximately 40,000 square feet of facilities. Additionally, public and private efforts have already begun to shape this area, with homes constructed around the central retail/public area. Another facet to consider in this balancing act is the desire for a rail transit stop along the City's existing rail line, which may have the ability to bolster both the Old Town and Town Center areas.

The "City Center" consists of three distinct areas – the Town Center, Old Town, and the Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) area.



The Villages of Melissa and Town Center Site

The urban fabric is made up of lots of tiny things, including loft apartments in converted old warehouses, mixed-use retail and residential, artist studios, galleries, niche marketing, restored buildings, small boutiques, wide sidewalks, outdoor dining, eateries, pubs, live/work spaces, mom-and-pop businesses, churches, libraries, court houses, landmarks, lighting, public gathering places where people can connect, street furniture, flowers, interesting window displays, street-front street-level store entrances, microbreweries, storefront facade improvements, farmers' markets, theaters, public transportation. Don't small things like these bring diversity, density, vitality, exuberance, vibrancy, connectedness, liveliness, and disorganized complexity to a downtown and thus reinforce the urban fabric?

Urban Land Institute Website

Vacant Land Surrounding City Hall in the Town Center Area

The City Center Concept Plan is based on these three areas of Melissa – the Old Town, the Town Center, and the Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) area – and how to effectively link them so that they can be mutually beneficial. The entirety of the three areas encompasses approximately 450 acres. Making this large amount of land unique will set the stage for Melissa as a whole – the City Center will become an area for which the City is known. One of the most challenging aspects in creating an integrated feel to the three individual areas will be the presence of State Highway 5, which tends to divide them physically and psychologically. However, with aesthetic elements to enhance them, pedestrian features to link them, and uses to create activity, these areas can become a cohesive City Center for Melissa.

The Concept Areas

Old Town

Melissa's Old Town area represents the oldest area of the City, its "downtown" core. Like many Texas towns, the City was originally settled in proximity to the railroad in the early 1900s when rail lines were a catalyst for economic and population growth. In recent decades, however, the area has generally declined.

Citizens have consistently expressed their desire to preserve Old Town, both at the Public Workshop (held in December 2005), and in responses to the Community Questionnaire and Online Survey (see Chapter 2). People want Old Town to be a place reminiscent of what it used to be – a place where people go to shop and work, as well as to live. The following concepts should be used to reinvigorate Old Town.

- Land Use – Generally, land uses within Old Town should be residential, public/semi-public, retail, and office. Recommended land uses discussed in detail in Chapter 3, the Future Land Use Plan include:
    - Single-family homes that have historic character or are designed to fit in with such character (Image #1).
    - Residential apartment-type units should be permitted either in renovated homes, in new buildings constructed to resemble large homes, or on the upper floors of retail and office buildings (Image #2).
    - Office uses should also be permitted by right in renovated homes or homes that would fit the historic character of the area (Image #3).
    - Small boutique-type hotels and bed-and-breakfasts would help create people-activity (Image #4).

Image #1

Image #2

Image #3

Image #4

Image #5

Image #6

- Restaurants and entertainment-based uses would also create activity (Image #5).

- Public Space – One of the reasons citizens used to identify so strongly with their downtown areas was the presence of public space that they could feel ownership in – it was theirs because it was public. A small, intimate public space or series of spaces would help foster Melissa's citizens' sense of pride and ownership in the Old Town area (Image #6). An ornamental park is shown in **Figure 8-1** in representation of a public space, which is currently underway.

- Cohesive Elements – Creation of special elements such as murals and public art will help Old Town to be recognizable as a significant destination in the City (Image #7).

- Special Niche – Many cities have created a niche for their old downtown areas. Examples include art galleries (like Denison) and antiques (like Fredericksburg). Creation of a niche for Old Town Melissa would help it thrive as a unique place, both regionally and locally.

Image #7 (all 3 pictures)

Town Center Area

Image #8 (Both pictures)

The Town Center represents an area of the City that is partially developed since the completion of the Town Hall. The Town Center is shown in **Figure 8-1**, and is supported by the Future Land Use Plan, Chapter 3. The Town Hall is the new hub of the City's governmental and administrative services, as well as the new home of the library. Completing the Town Hall was an important component in developing the Town Center area.

Image #9

- Character and Landmark – The area is designed in an old style, resembling a downtown square. The Town Hall is central to the area, which will be surrounded by a public plaza area and two-story office, retail and residential uses. The Town Hall creates a landmark for Melissa, and serving as the embodiment of local government, much as the historic courthouses once were for county seats in Texas. It has been designed with this landmark ideal in mind (Image #7).
- Public Space – As with Old Town, public space in the Town Center area will be important to its success. Such a space will make the citizens of Melissa feel that the Town Center belongs to their community, and will be more inclined to support it by living there, shopping there, and gathering there for events.
    - Central public space is an important aspect of the Town Center in relation to the Town Hall (Image #9). The City is considering moving forward with the development of an ornamental park behind City Hall. While this is not finalized, the goal is under consideration.

Image #10 (Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C.)

- This public space creates a distinguishable focal point for the Town Center, to which other elements surrounding it should relate (Image #10).

- Surrounding Density – As one expert in urban design notes "a satisfactory sense of enclosure occurs when the relationship of the ground plane or 'floor' of an exterior space and enclosing vertical 'walls' (formed by building facades, rows of trees, or other vertical elements) form a comfortable feeling of containment akin to an 'outdoor room'"[8-1] (Image #11).
  - Therefore, buildings that are at least two stories in height should surround the public space within the Town Center.
  - Medium density housing and retail with office or living units above would be appropriate.
  - This will create a verticality surrounding the public space that will make it feel like an "outdoor room."

Source: glenwoodpark.com (top picture)

Image #11 (all 3 pictures)

[8-1] *Dennis Wilson, Townscape, Inc.*

Transit-Oriented Development Area

The term transit-oriented development (TOD) describes a mixture of land use types in a density sufficient to support the cost and ridership needs of transit, typically some type of rail transit (e.g., light rail, commuter rail, traditional trains). This area is included in this City Center Concept Plan for three primary reasons. The first reason is because the mix of land uses envisioned for the TOD area is consistent with that envisioned for Old Town and the Town Center, although a higher density needs to occur to support transit. Secondly, it is included because of its proximity to both areas. This proximity will create a mutually beneficial relationship between each of these areas, making them stronger together and more of a destination than they would be on their own. Third, people may be more inclined to visit or live within the Town Center and Old Town if they can use transit to travel to other regional destinations.

Planning for TODs is an important way for citizens, government officials and transit providers to protect their investment in the transit system. TODs help build and sustain demand for the transit system through users who live and work in the area.

Marya Morris, AICP. **Smart Communities: Zoning for Transit-Oriented Development. ideas@work, November 2002, Vol. 2, No.4.**

TOD districts are most successful when there is a critical mass of housing types and commercial uses that reinforce one another and generate demand for transit.

Marya Morris, AICP. **Smart Communities: Zoning for Transit-Oriented Development. ideas@work, November 2002, Vol. 2, No.4.**

- Location – The location of the TOD area is ultimately dependent on the location of Melissa's transit rail station, which is flexible based on conditions such as property ownership, topography/environmental concerns, and transit entity's preferred location, among others. The chosen location shown in **Figure 8-1** has been determined based on a regional rail planning effort by the North Central Texas Council of Governments (NCTCOG). If the location changes in the future, the TOD area should be located accordingly, adjacent to the transit stop.
- Density – The TOD area needs to be high density, both residential and non-residential, in order to help support the transit. The denser the TOD is, the more of a destination Melissa will become. Therefore, for residential uses, this area should have a minimum density of 25 units per acre, and it should be higher if possible.
- Character – The TOD area needs to have a definable character. For example, Mockingbird Station in Dallas has a very modern feel, while Plano's Downtown Station has more of a Main Street feel (Image #12). The choice of character needs to be made, then followed through with the design of the station and related amenities (e.g., public art, paving, etc.).

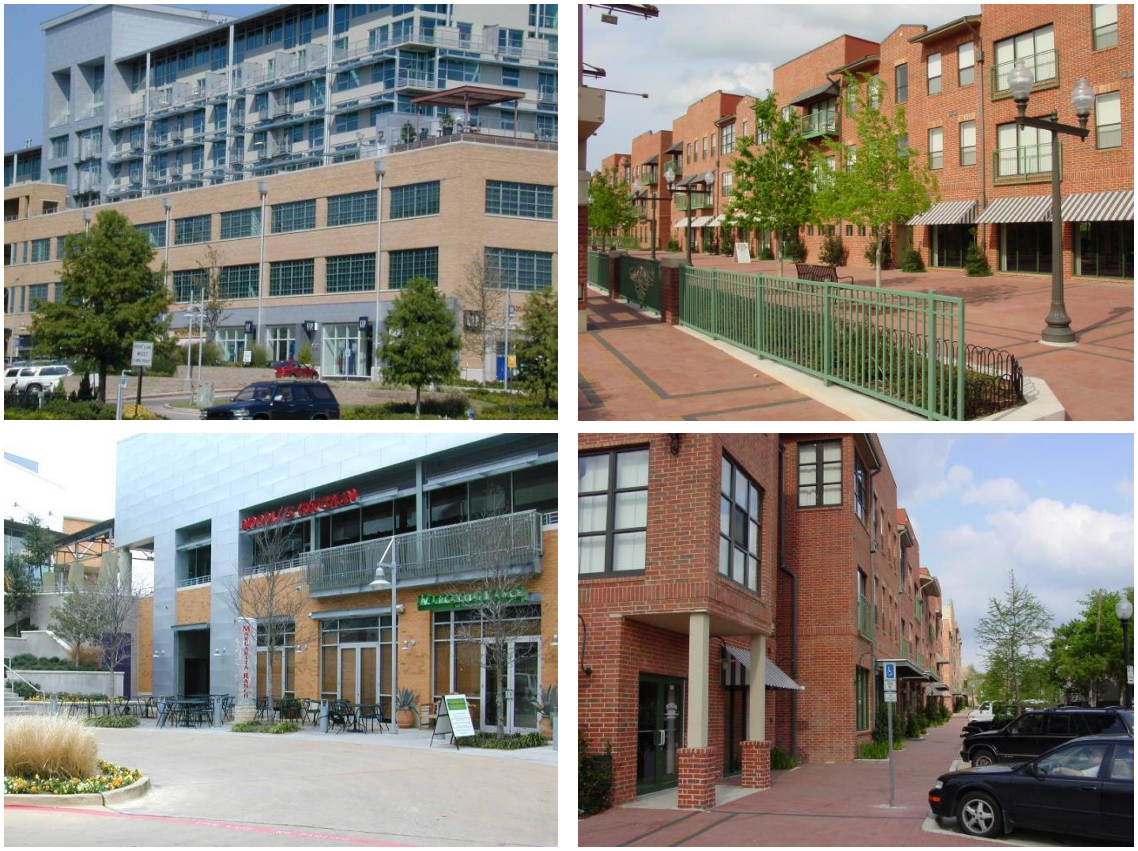
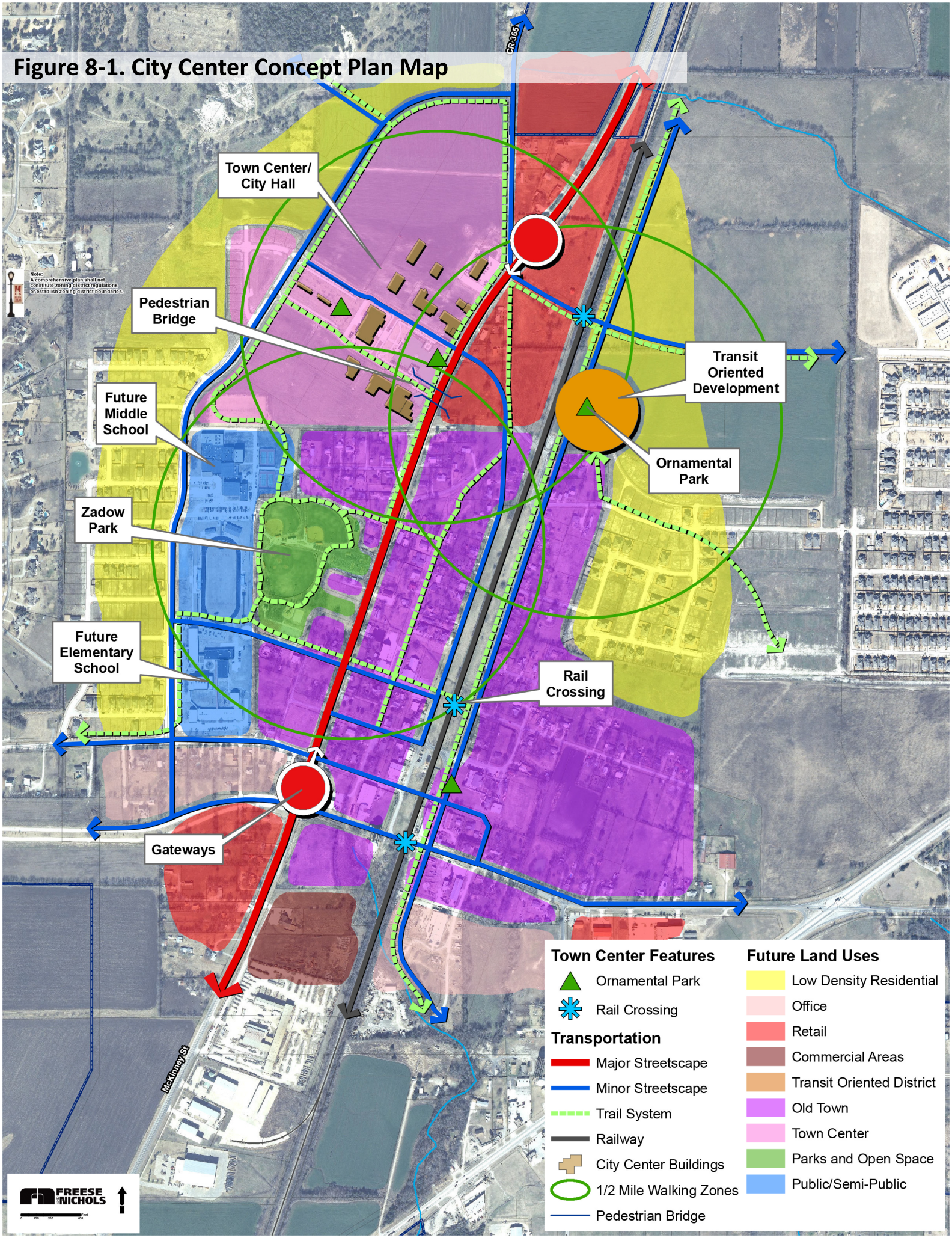


Image #12 (Mockingbird, left; Plano, right)

Figure 8-1. City Center Concept Plan Map



The Linkage Concepts

The goal of the City Center Concept is to link each of these areas – the Old Town, the Town Center, and the TOD – to one another, thereby creating a mutually beneficial impact between them. The various elements that are recommended to help provide this link are discussed in the following paragraphs. Equally important to the text descriptions are the images provided, which give the reader a visual idea of what is envisioned for each of these linkage concepts.

Gateways

Gateway features (Image #13) serve the purpose of announcing to residents and visitors that they have arrived in a special place. Therefore, two gateway features have been shown on in **Figure 8-1**, both along State Highway 5.

Image #13 (All 4 pictures)

- These gateways would allow for a demarcation of the City Center along one of the most heavily traveled roadways in Melissa.
- They could also contain some directional information as to how to get to each of the three areas. TOD area needs to have a definable character.
- Gateways should generally be simple in design and constructed of low-maintenance materials. Both gateway features should be similar-looking, so that they begin to create a visual theme for the City Center.
- Gateways should be readable by both pedestrian and automobile traffic.
- Additional locations for gateway features should be established as the City Center areas become increasingly successful. For example, when the TOD area is created (when the rail stop is established), an additional gateway feature may need to be established at the intersection of State Highway 5 and North Central Street.

Streetscape Elements

Streetscape elements include various types of visual amenities that can enhance the "view from the road." For the purpose of this City Center Concept Plan, the streetscape elements deemed most important include street trees, landscaping, public art, special lighting, distinctive signage (e.g., banner signs), and unique paving patterns (Image #14).

As part of this linkage concept, "major" streetscape elements have been shown in relation to State Highway 5 (SH 5), with all other roadways shown with "minor" streetscape. This is intended to project the extreme importance of Melissa's visual image along SH 5, and the fact that this highway should be the first priority when streetscape elements are funded. Also, because of the higher speed of the traffic, the streetscape elements established in relation to SH 5 may need to be sized differently than the elements are in relation to the other, lighter-trafficked roadways. Minor streetscape roadways include Melissa Road, Preston Avenue, Harrison Street (East and West), Cooper Street (east of SH 5), and Central Street, including North Central as it crosses SH 5 and enters the Town Center.

Image #14 (All 8 pictures)

Trail System

The recommendation for an integrated trail system has been discussed in several locations within this Comprehensive Plan, including an in depth discussion within the Parks & Trails Plan, Chapter 6. However, in terms of the concept of linking the Old Town, Town Center and TOD area, the need for an easy and safe means for pedestrians to travel between them cannot be overstated.

Locations for pedestrian and bicycle trails specific to the City Center are shown in **Figure 8-1**. In addition to the three areas that comprise the City Center, Zadow Park and Melissa Junior High and High School are also shown with pedestrian trail connections.

One of the most challenging aspects in creating a linkage with a trail system within the City Center will be the presence of SH 5 and the rail line, neither of which people will generally want to cross. Special attention must be given to how a trail connection can be made effectively in relation to these physical barriers, so that they do not amount to psychological barriers. Other options for safe pedestrian passage in relation to SH 5 and the rail line include special paving to delineate crosswalks, pedestrian signage, and for SH 5, a stoplight with light-controlled pedestrian crossing. The preferred option is a grade-separated pedestrian crossing, examples of which are in Image #16. This type of pedestrian bridge may be cost-prohibitive at this time, however the City should continue to plan for a grade-separated crossing to ensure pedestrian safety, promote connectivity, and allow for unrestricted traffic flow. Such a crossing has been shown over SH 5 in **Figure 8-1**.

Image #15 (All 4 pictures)

Image #16 (Both pictures)

Ornamental Parks

Ornamental areas are shown on the City Center Concept Plan Map (**Figure 8-1**) within each of the three areas. The importance of public space in relation to the population feeling ownership of an area has been previously discussed herein. The type of ornamental areas envisioned are those that help create an identity for the Town Center, Old Town, and the TOD, and that provide a special place for pedestrians. Ornamental areas can be any number of things, including a central green space, plaza, gazebo, fountain, or splash pad for children, etc. (Image #17). Creation of a series of ornamental parks that link the City Center areas will project the concept that each area is a special place in Melissa.

Image #17 (All 3 pictures)

Ten Principles for Creating Successful Squares

1. Image and Identity
Creating a square that becomes the most significant place in a city--that gives identity to whole communities--is a huge challenge, but meeting this challenge is absolutely necessary if great civic squares are to return.

2. Attractions and Destinations
Any great square has a variety of smaller "places" within it to appeal to various people. Creation of 10 good places, each with 10 things to do, offers a full program for a successful square.

3. Amenities
A square should feature amenities that make it comfortable for people to use. Examples include benches, waste receptacles, lighting, public art. Amenities will help establish a convivial setting for social interaction.

4. Flexible Design
The use of a square changes during the course of the day, week, and year. To respond to these natural fluctuations, flexibility needs to be built in to the design of the space.

5. Seasonal Strategy
Great squares change with the seasons. Skating rinks, outdoor cafés, markets, art and sculpture help adapt the use of the space from one season to the next.

6. Access
To be successful, a square needs to be easy to get to. The best squares are always easily accessible by foot: Surrounding streets are narrow; crosswalks are well marked; lights are timed for pedestrians, not vehicles; traffic moves slowly; and transit stops are located nearby. A square surrounded by lanes of fast-moving traffic will be cut off from pedestrians and deprived of its most essential element: people.

7. The Inner Square & the Outer Square
(Frederick Law Olmsted's idea) The streets and sidewalks around a square greatly affect its accessibility and use, as do the buildings that surround it. Imagine a square fronted on each side by 15-foot blank walls versus that same square situated next to a public library: the library doors open right onto the square; people sit outside and read on the steps; maybe the children's reading hour is held outside on the square. An active, welcoming outer square is essential to the well-being of the inner square.

8. Reaching Out Like an Octopus
Just as important as the edge of a square is the way that streets, sidewalks and ground floors of adjacent buildings lead into it. Like the tentacles of an octopus extending into the surrounding neighborhood, the influence of a good square starts at least a block away.

9. The Central Role of Management
The best places are ones that people return to time and time again. The only way to achieve this is through a management plan that keeps the square safe and lively.

10. Diverse Funding Sources
Sponsorships from private entities and partnerships can help manage these special areas. For example, property associations can supplement public funding.

Adapted from an article of the same name on the Project for Public Spaces website.

Walkability

It is not enough to simply provide a trail linkage between the three areas. If the areas are separated by too great a distance, people will be inclined not to walk but to drive. However, the Old Town, Town Center, and TOD area are not too far from one another for people to walk between. A five- to ten-minute walk is about the amount of time that people are willing to spend getting somewhere on foot. This is equivalent to ¼–mile to ½-mile radius. Therefore, the ¼-mile radius for each of the three major areas has been shown in **Figure 8-1**. These areas are in fact within walkable distances of one another.

Another aspect to walkability is enticing people to walk with an inviting atmosphere. One way to create this atmosphere is by providing pedestrian and bicycle amenities that are practical as well as attractive. For example, a bench that is provided as a rest stop needs to be one that looks inviting – compare Image #18 to Image #19. Other examples include outdoor dining areas (Image #20), special lighting and signage scaled to pedestrians and bicyclists (Image #21), landscaping (Image #22 and Image #23), and interesting elements such as water and public art (Image #24).

Image #20

Image #18

Image #19

Image #23

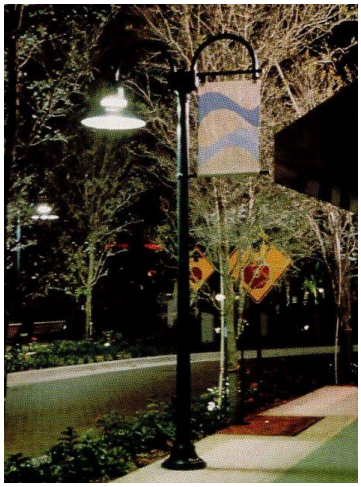


Image #21

Image #22

Image #24

Recommended City Center Policies

Following are recommended policies related to the City Center area. The City Center Concept Plan Map, **Figure 8-1**, is intended to be used in conjunction with these policies. The Implementation Plan, Chapter 9, will outline specific ways in which the City can implement these policies, along with other recommended policies from within this *2015 Comprehensive Plan Update*.

Policy 1: Consider Seed Projects to Create Private Interest

Public investment in an area is often needed to spur private interest and related private investment. City-funded improvements signal to the private sector that an area is worth investing in – the investment becomes a better bet because the public sector is doing its part. The City, therefore, needs to invest in the City Center in order to create a catalyst for private investment.

C1.1 | The City should prioritize capital investments in concentrated areas.

- The recent comprehensive plan survey indicated that there is strong support for development incentives in key area. The City should take advantage of this citizen support and strategically distribute incentives to developers that will benefit the City by building quality infrastructure that is in line with the City's vision.
- Concentrated public projects will have more impact than projects that are spread throughout the City Center. Such "seed" projects will help attract private development.
- Incorporating streetscape elements along SH 5 should be the first priority. Street trees, lighting, landscaping, and special signage are examples of effective streetscape elements. Improving aesthetics and announcing the City Center in this highly trafficked corridor will greatly impact how Melissa is perceived and improve the identity of the City Center. These streetscape elements should be coordinated with the future improvements of SH 5.
- The following are the recommended priority projects for each of the three areas.
    - Town Center – Melissa's leaders and citizens have shown a commitment to investing in the Town Center through the funding and construction of Town Hall. The next prioritized improvement should be the ornamental areas shown in **Figure 8-1**. These areas should be completed with the Ten Principles shown on page 13 in mind.
    - Old Town – Annual streetscape capital projects should be completed in the Old Town area. Such projects should be concentrated in one-block lengths along streets for maximum visual impact. Street trees, lighting, and cohesive signage are examples of projects that would enhance Old Town. An Old Town Master Plan is recommended to coordinate efforts and timeline in this key development area.
        - The first street length prioritized should be East Harrison Street; improvements should be constructed around the SH 5 intersection for maximum visual impact from citizens and travelers using SH 5.

  - When Central Street is realigned to provide entrance into the Town Center, it should become a top priority for improvements from SH 5 east and south into the Old Town area. This will create visual interest into Old Town from the Town Center.
- TOD Area – No priority projects are needed for the TOD at this time, because its establishment is likely many years in the future; funds are better spent in the short-term improving and enhance the Town Center and Old Town. However, the first improvements in the TOD (when the City has specific knowledge of when transit is going to be established) should be trails and an ornamental park area.

- Although no more than one or two substantial projects could be completed each year, a sustained and consistent effort over a five- or ten-year period will achieve a significant transformation, especially in Old Town, that would further the City Center as a whole.

Policy 2: Encourage Development in Old Town

The development of infill-type lots or redevelopment projects that involve one or more lots are often more difficult to complete than the development of a vacant land area. In addition to seed projects, development/redevelopment in Old Town should be encouraged by the City through procedural and cost-cutting measures.

C2.1 | The City should investigate ways in which it can streamline the development and/or redevelopment process in Old Town.

- Lot Consolidation – Given the small size of lots that characterize Old Town, there may be a need to consolidate two or more lots into one lot for development purposes. This would require a replat, amending plat, or a minor plat. In order to encourage lot consolidation for development/redevelopment in Old Town, the City could waive fees and associated application costs, thereby saving the applicant money.
- Shortened Approval Process – The less time it takes to get a development proposal approved and completed, the more profit is realized from the development. The City should investigate its approval procedures and should streamline such procedures, if possible. One way of streamlining is to allow administrative approval of some types of development applications. In many cases, replats, amending plats, and minor plats can be approved administratively. The City should consider revising the existing Subdivision Ordinance to allow administrative approval of certain plats as allowed by the Texas Local Government Code, and in agreement with the City Attorney. Another way is to place approvals on the consent agenda of the applicable government body.

Policy 3: Involve the Public in City Center Decisions

C3.1 | The City should encourage the creation of a City Center Association.

- People that live, work, and own businesses or property in the City Center should have a voice in decisions that the City makes that affect this area of Melissa. The creation of an association that can represent the interests of the people with interest in the City Center would be mutually beneficial – it would give City Center representatives the advantage of having their needs and concerns heard, and it would give City representatives a recognized group to which to listen.
- The creation of a City Center Association would also help people acknowledge the City Center as a whole, instead of the separate parts (e.g., Town Center, Old Town).
- The City Center Association could be surveyed for input on City expenditures (i.e., which seed projects would be most helpful to development efforts), City-sponsored area events, future regulatory efforts, and future planning efforts.

Policy 4: Consider Zoning Requirements and Standards

Zoning is perhaps the strongest regulatory tool a municipality has to implement its vision. The vision for the City Center put forth within this chapter will need support through zoning regulations.

C4.1 | The City should review, and amend if necessary, current zoning regulations.

- Development standards within the Zoning Ordinance should be reviewed in relation to the following:
    - Building materials – These requirements should likely be different for the Town Center and Old Town to reflect the unique character of each area. The Town Center buildings should be primarily masonry, have façade offsets, have a certain height requirement (e.g., minimum two-story adjacent to the Town Hall area), etc.
    - Signage – These requirements should consider attached signs, require only monument signs (no pole signs), require pedestrian-oriented signs, etc.
    - Landscaping – There should be a minimum requirement in the front yard, and then possibly a requirement in relation to pedestrian amenities.
    - Outdoor dining – A requirement for this for restaurants should be considered.
    - Setbacks – Possibly minimal to no setback requirement for buildings, except along SH 5.
    - Parking – Require behind the building, or generally not where pedestrian access is provided.
    - Pedestrian and bicycle considerations – Requirements for amenities such as off-street trails through developments, sidewalks, connectivity to adjacent development, and bicycle racks.
- Current Historic Overlay District requirements should be reviewed, and amended if necessary, to reflect the concepts and policies for the Old Town area discussed herein.

- Zoning requirements and standards should be updated and implemented around Old Town, Town Center, and the TOD area to ensure that land uses are compatible and walkable. If land uses develop that discourage connectivity and walkability, the overall vision for the area will not be achieved.
    - When individual master plans are created for Old Town, Town Center, and the TOD area, the final plans should be reflected in the current Future Land Use Plan and zoning regulations to ensure successful implementation.

C4.2 | The City should work with the development community to achieve higher density for the TOD area.

- Achieving higher density development in the area identified for Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) would benefit both the City and the development community.
    - Allowing higher density would benefit the development community by generally increasing the amount of profit to be made from developing within this area.
    - Allowing higher density would benefit the City by generally increasing the likelihood and viability of transit through Melissa and a related transit stop within this area. Transit is only cost-effective with a certain amount of density to support it.
- Development plans for single-family and two-family residences have been previously approved for the land area partially within the proposed TOD area. The City should work with developers to achieve higher density in this area to support planned transit.