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To reel in a big corporate campus, Fort Worth might repurpose public housing site

Several agencies are working closely to identify potential future uses for the land, which could someday be served by a bullet train connecting Fort Worth to Arlington, Dallas and Houston.



Downtown Fort Worth on Tuesday, December 11, 2018. (Vernon Bryant/The Dallas Morning News) (Vernon Bryant / Staff Photographer)



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Where is the best spot to build Fort Worth's next big corporate campus?

Some regional planners say their favorite candidate is roughly 40 acres of developed but underused land — today filled mostly with public housing — just east of the city's downtown.

The area in the middle of Fort Worth is shaped like a triangle, wedged between Interstate 35W, I-30 and U.S. 287.

Today, it's home to several hundred residents of the Butler Place public housing area, and next door is the historical I.M. Terrell Academy — once a segregation-era school for African American youths from all over North Texas, and now a science and arts academy.

But Butler Place is in disrepair, and the city housing authority is in the process of relocating residents to other accommodations in the city.

Once those relocations are complete, much of the land in the 40-acre triangle could be ripe for repurposing. And, the area is adjacent to Fort Worth Central Station, which is already a transportation hub that in the coming years could be a stop on a high-speed rail line.

"Can you imagine a high-speed rail station and corporate relocation on this land?" said Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments.

Morris spoke this week to the Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition, a nonprofit group that advocates for mobility improvements in the western part of Dallas-Fort Worth. Morris told the group that several agencies were working closely together to identify potential future uses for the land, which could someday be served by a bullet train connecting Fort Worth to Arlington, Dallas and Houston.

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This conceptual rendering shows a North Texas passenger station (center, with blue roof) in Dallas for a proposed bullet train connecting Dallas and Houston. Other proposals would extend the route to Fort Worth. (Photo illustration by Texas Central)

Morris said unnamed parties have "been working discreetly to buy land between I-35W and downtown" — just west of the triangle-shaped land — "to create an opportunity for Uber or Amazon or whomever to relocate." He didn't elaborate on those prospective purchases.

Redevelopment of Butler Place has been in the works for years.

A panel from the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit Urban Land Institute assessed the property and surrounding neighborhoods in 2015, offering suggestions for redevelopment.

At the time, Fort Worth Housing Solutions (formerly the Fort Worth Housing Authority) decided not to move forward with redevelopment, but since then more affordable housing properties have been built in the city.

Fernando Costa, an assistant city manager, said a corporate headquarters is just one option for the land. Other ideas include a high-density development that mixes commercial and residential space, likely with affordable housing options, or a research institute campus.

The city would need to decide if it should apply development restrictions to the area or allow the market to dictate how the land evolves, Costa said. A series of meetings will be scheduled with several groups, including downtown business interests, surrounding neighborhoods and residents, for feedback on Butler Place's future.

There may be historical elements worth preserving, he said.

"We want to balance these interests and do what's best for Fort Worth," Costa said.

The property just east of downtown lacks easy access to the rest of the city — a major hurdle for development — although streets that already serve the area include Luella Street, Morgan Street, East 19th Street and I.M. Terrell Way.



A 34-unit apartment project south of downtown Fort Worth is being constructed out of 76 steel shipping containers. (Keywinn Development)

Interstates 30 and 35W and U.S. 287 wall off the triangular area, which can be noisy because of highway traffic. Costa said the city could consider a special tax district to pay for improved access.

Built in the early 1940s, Butler Place is one of the city's oldest public housing complexes and one of the last. (Cavile Place in east Fort Worth is also being redeveloped.)

Though remodeled a few times, the nearly 80-year-old complex has fallen into disrepair.

Butler Place was approved for the Rental Assistance Demonstration program, a program that transfers ownership of public housing units from the federal government to the local housing authority, allowing Fort Worth Housing Solutions to do what it pleases with the property.

Households are relocating to several apartment communities around Fort Worth. Many, like Campus Apartments and Palladium, Fort Worth, are owned or partly owned by Fort Worth Housing Solutions and are fairly new. A little more than half of the 412 units at Butler Place are filled now, but the housing authority expects everyone will be relocated by the end of 2020.

Director Mary-Margaret Lemons said the relocation is a "major upgrade." Unlike Butler or Cavile, these apartment communities are mixed-income and feature modern apartment amenities like pools and fitness centers. They're also closer to schools and job opportunities, she said.

Regardless of Butler Place's condition, Fort Worth Housing Solutions has moved away from the traditional housing project model, opting for integrating income levels.

"We believe we create better citizens when you're exposed to different incomes and backgrounds," she said.

Gordon Dickson and Luke Ranker, Fort Worth Star-Telegram (TNS)



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