

15. QUALITY OF LIFE

Quality of life has come to be a term with little consensus on its definition. In the Comprehensive Plan, quality of life is defined as those features which give residents and visitors an additional sense of pleasure and contentment within the City beyond those basic services and facilities normally provided by cities. These additional features include urban design considerations (such as design guidelines for streetscapes, architectural guidelines and entrances into the City), and the provision of urban amenities (such as public art, street furniture, etc.) A high quality of life is often a major factor in the decision to move or stay within a particular area.

15.1 URBAN DESIGN

Urban design can be defined as the physical pattern of the man-made environment that affects our visual pleasure and governs our movement within a cultural setting (i.e. the City). The character of a city is usually a reflection of the design of its individual elements, including streetscapes, public and private buildings, and open space.

In older cities in both the United States and Europe, the architecture of buildings often reflects a prevailing architectural style and contributes to a sense of continuity within the urban area. On the other hand, Benbrook developed rapidly in the last four decades, with individual buildings designed and constructed with little character or sense of place. While individual buildings may be aesthetically pleasing, the combination of buildings and other features may not present a pleasing appearance.

A. U.S. 377 Corridor

One area of the City in greatest need of urban design improvements is the commercial area along U.S. 377 between I-20/Loop 820 and Lakeside Drive. This area represents almost the entire history of commercial development in Benbrook, ranging from old historic structures like the Sproles House, to small bait shops, to modern fast food restaurants and gasoline stations. The highway itself has been developed as a typical rural 5-lane asphalt roadway with no median or parkway improvements. Signage along the roadway has been developed under various regulations (or variances to regulations) leaving an inconsistent variety of signs sizes, shapes, and heights. Until recently, numerous portable signs also crowded the roadway. Little or no landscaping is provided by local businesses. Overhead utilities line both sides of the roadway, further contributing to the cluttered appearance.

Since there are no predominate or prevailing styles along U.S. 377 to direct future improvements, the options for improvements are numerous. It is recommended that any urban design improvements should be developed, funded and adopted, in part, by the landowners along U.S. 377, rather than dictated by local government. In the Fall of 1992, the City retained the City and Regional Planning Program of the University of Texas at Arlington to conduct an urban design study of the U.S. 377 corridor and make recommendations. The UTA Study resulted in a 136-page report, which is summarized here. Among their recommendations were:

Traffic Management Issues:

- Limit future curb cuts
- Small businesses should have shared parking
- Common driveways should be required

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- Limit driveways to one per 300 feet
- Require traffic impact analysis for new development
- Synchronize traffic signals
- Provide acceleration/deceleration lanes for major centers
- Provide sidewalks and crosswalks
- Replace traffic signals with cantilever poles
- Provide traffic islands and medians
- Redesign intersection to 90 degrees
- Provide better street lighting
- Provide mass transit and/or park-and-ride facility

Zoning Issues:

- Restrict maximum building heights to 17 to 37 feet, depending on location
- Increase minimum setback from 40 to 70 feet, depending on location
- Increase minimum setback to property lines
- Limit convenience uses to within 250 feet of major intersections
- Encourage larger coordinated retail centers
- Encourage higher intensity development near U.S. 377/I-20 intersection
- Require architectural controls

Landscaping and Buffering Issues:

- Require masonry screening walls between commercial and residential zones
- All parking areas should be paved, landscaped and screened
- Require screening of loading areas and dumpsters
- Screen roof-mounted mechanical units

Signage Issues:

- Require monument signs instead of pole signs
- Prohibit portable signs
- Require consistency in signage

Economic Development Issues:

- Promote recreation on Benbrook Lake
- Provide resources for small business owners
- Prepare market study and market commercial sites
- Retain existing businesses
- Assemble small lots into larger ones

Public Investments:

- Purchase Spoles House for museum or other public facility
- Obtain public open space on west side of U.S. 377
- Provide drainage improvements
- Install welcome signs, directional markers
- Put overhead utilities underground

Implementation Strategy:

- Create a Development Coordination Team
- Create a Capital Improvements Design Team
- Use an overlay zoning district
- Identify and prioritize "impact" projects
- Form a 377 landowners group
- Initiate a dialogue between private sector, real estate industry and TxDOT
- Investigate Public Improvement District, Tax Increment Finance District, or increase development fees

The City has implemented several of these recommendations since the completion of the study. The Zoning Ordinance has been amended to create a new HC-Highway Corridor zoning district (rather than an overlay district) which limits curb cuts to one every 300 feet, encourages common drives, and requires a minimum setback of 50 feet. The Zoning Ordinance also requires buffers between commercial and residential districts, as well as landscaping. The City has attempted to require monument signs and to ban portable signs, but this is not politically acceptable at the present time. A preliminary market study was performed as part of the Strategic Plan for Economic Development, but additional efforts are required. The City has initiated a right-of-way study to facilitate dialogue between business owners and the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). The City has also requested that TU Electric relocate their overhead lines away from the highway frontage, but no agreement has been reached on the \$390,000 cost. A loose organization of business owners and landowners along U.S. 377 was established in early 1993 to discuss the urban design study, but this group has been inactive for the past year.

To facilitate implementation of the 377 Study recommendations, the City may want to select a few recommendations to work on each year as part of the annual Action Plan.

B. Gateways

A second area of potential improvement is the entries, or "gateways" into the City, which give a traveler a first impression of the City. Major entries occur along Interstate 20 and U.S. 377; however, there is little perception of entry into Benbrook along any of these routes. The US 377 Study by UTA also recommended that the City's gateways be identified and improved. The City may want to investigate potential improvements to these entries to promote a positive image of the City. Potential improvements may include additional landscaping, community identification and demarcation. One problem is that many of the City's boundaries do not clearly cross a roadway at a given point, i.e. the roadway serves as a boundary, making it difficult to locate entry points. Two possible areas for immediate improvement are the southern boundary of the City along U.S. 377, and the central intersection of U.S. 377 with I-20.

C. Streetscapes

The design of residential streetscapes can be improved through landscaping, sidewalks, street furniture, and street illumination. Residential front yards and the adjacent street parkway are typically landscaped and maintained by the homeowner. The City encourages landscaping of parkways within certain limitations to protect public safety (see regulations in Chapter 12.08 of Benbrook Municipal Code). The residents of Benbrook seem split over the provision of sidewalks, with many existing neighborhoods opposing the construction of sidewalks. All new residential areas must provide sidewalks.

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One aspect of the urban streetscape is the provision of urban trees. Many older cities planted trees along the parkways of streets, giving residential streets a consistent tree-lined appearance. Benbrook does not have such a program, nor is it considered feasible to plant trees within the right-of-way since the parkway is already crowded by required utility locations. It may be desirable for neighborhood associations to promote the planting of similar trees in front yards immediately behind the street right-of-way. The City may be able to assist by purchasing trees in bulk at wholesale, then selling to the homeowners at cost. Some grants may be available for the purchase of trees.

One streetscape problem in Benbrook is with residential subdivision screening fences. Many subdivisions construct a solid screening fence along a public street at the rear of residential lots, such as the Westpark Subdivision along U.S. 377. In these cases, the rear parkway becomes inaccessible to the property owner and is poorly maintained, if at all. The maintenance of these areas must be addressed if our streets are to appear attractive.

Another streetscape problem is associated with overhead utility lines. While underground utilities are often preferred in newer subdivisions, overhead lines are less expensive and were commonplace in most older subdivisions. While not a problem at the rear of the lot, overhead lines which parallel the street contribute to visual clutter. The City's subdivision regulations now prohibit overhead utility lines along residential streets and along protected commercial corridors (see Figure 15.1). While new overhead lines are prohibited in these areas, the cost of relocating existing overhead lines will be expensive. For example, the estimated cost of relocating the overhead electrical lines along U.S. 377 from I-20/Loop 820 to Lakeside Drive has been estimated to be approximately \$390,000.

15.2 URBAN AMENITIES

Urban amenities are defined to include public artwork and cultural facilities. At present, Benbrook has no public artwork (statues, fountains, etc.) or cultural facilities (museums, theaters, etc.). The only art or cultural events are the Fall Festival, which includes a parade, and the Christmas Tree Lighting ceremony, both sponsored by the Fire Department. Previous attempts at an annual arts and crafts fair and other annual events by the Benbrook Area Chamber of Commerce were unsuccessful. The provision of additional amenities and events could enhance the image and sense of community in Benbrook.

One opportunity for public art is on the southeast corner of I-20/Loop 820 and U.S. 377. The City and State Highway Department have unused street right-of-way in this area created by the acquisition of property for the construction of I-20/Loop 820. The area forms a triangle bounded by U.S. 377, Del Rio Avenue and the Waffle House parking lot. Currently the area is unvegetated, unsightly and is often used as truck parking for the Waffle House. It may be desirable to landscape and maintain the area, with the provision of a fountain or statue. Funding could come from local fund-raising by the private sector.

Another opportunity would be the construction of an amphitheater or stage at one of the City's parks, most likely Dutch Branch Park. This could serve as a location for many events for performance groups.

Figure 15.1 Protected Commercial Corridors

