City considering two new sites for homeless RV park

By Sarah Coppola

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Tucked behind a storage business, a gas station and a printing shop in North Austin sit 24 acres of vacant land.

Residents envision tall buildings and a walkable streetscape one day occupying this spot and areas around it. But City of Austin officials are eyeing the site, and one in Southeast Austin, for something else: an RV park for homeless people.

"Neither site has been fully vetted, and the project hasn’t been fully defined," said Francoise Luca, president of the Gracywoods Neighborhood Association. "We have a lot of questions."

Mobile Loaves and Fishes, a nonprofit that delivers 750,000 meals a year to homeless people in Austin and six other cities, has for three years worked with city leaders to find a location for the park, which it would run.

The city proposed then mixed two other sites, partly because neighbors objected to them, and is now considering city-owned land on McKalla Place, near the corner of Burnet Road and Braker Lane, and at FM 973 and Platt Lane, near a city sewage treatment plant. City officials said they haven’t set a deadline to pick a site and may end up choosing neither.

The park would have 100 RVs and 50 small cottages to house as many as 200 people who are chronically homeless — those who have a disability or addiction and have been homeless for more than a year.

Before leasing land to the nonprofit, likely for a low cost, the city would negotiate details of the park’s security and operations, city officials say. The lease could also contain a measure allowing the city to take back the land if it decides to use it for another purpose.

The park would help the City Council meet its goal of creating 350 housing units for homeless and low-income people by 2014.

"I believe in the merits of the project and in Mobile Loaves and Fishes," said Council Member Mike Martinez, who has led the effort to identify land for the park. "Neighbors have valid and legitimate concerns," he said, "but the issue of homelessness needs to be addressed."

Nonprofit would screen applicants

Since 2005, Mobile Loaves and Fishes has bought 45 RVs and has been housing homeless people at trailer parks across Austin. President Alan Graham wants to expand the program, and leasing city-owned land would exempt the nonprofit from paying property taxes on it, he said. Graham said he isn’t aware of another city that has tried the RV park concept to house the homeless.

Housing offers people the stability to address problems that contribute to their homelessness, such as substance abuse, he said. Those left homeless for long periods also drain tax dollars for jail stays and emergency room visits, among other things, he said.

In 2008, the city proposed an East Austin site for the RV park, then nixed it when neighbors balked. City officials then suggested using 16 acres near Austin-Bergstrom International Airport, but the Federal Aviation Administration objected because the city had used federal grants to buy the land years before, precisely to prevent people from living close to airport noise.

Graham said Mobile Loaves and Fishes would raise the $5 million needed to create the park, which he said would be gated and have central shower and laundry facilities, a main lodge and a chapel.

The nonprofit would rent the housing to single people or couples for $100 to $375 a month, though residents could stay there permanently. The nonprofit would install security cameras, impose rules about property upkeep, have property managers and case managers during the day, and employ security officers at night, he said.

The nonprofit would only consider applicants who have steady incomes, which could include disability benefits, Graham said. It would not house sex offenders or people with violent criminal pasts, he said. "This would be like any other neighborhood, where (residents) are expected to live obediently and according to the rules of the community," he said.

Neighbors question park's suitability

Warehouses and businesses abut the McKalla Place land, and neighborhoods nearby include apartment complexes and single-family homes. A 2007 land-use plan that the city spent three years and $490,000 writing — with input from residents — calls for making this area a second downtown by 2035, with tall buildings that have shops and eateries on the ground floor and housing and offices above.

Neighbors say the nearby Domain, a dense development of stores and housing that opened in 2007, shows the area is already transforming.

"If the city allows an RV park here, it will stymie the denser development that is occurring," said Roger Duck, who owns a self-storage business next to the proposed RV site. "I know Alan and support what he's trying to do. This just isn’t the place for it."

Because of its proximity to the Domain and a Capital Metro commuter rail stop, the McKalla Place land is valuable and could be a catalyst for redevelopment, said Brian Gaston, who owns six acres next to it. The city bought the land with federal grants to buy the land years before, precisely to prevent people from living close to airport noise.

City planning director Greg Guernsey said denser development "won’t happen overnight," and the city can allow other uses in the meantime.

The site poses other problems, neighbors say. It is near a bus line, but not close to grocery stores or health services that homeless people might need. It sits next to a day care facility. And it would add homeless residents to an area already plagued by panhandling, neighbors say.

Earlier this year, a couple who live in a Mobile Loaves and Fishes trailer were videotaped panhandling in North Austin, raising questions about whether the RV park idea will lead to self-sufficiency.

"I’m all for helping people. We donate to charities. But having these types of people living so close together, with no supervision, could spell disaster," said Jeremy Wallace, general manager of Pro-Air Engineering, a business near the site. "We are worried it will increase theft on our property and threaten the safety of our employees."

Another worry is that the land was once home to a chemical business. The city bought it in 1995 from Reichhold Chemicals to build a facility where city vehicles and
equipment could be stored and repaired, said city real estate officer Lauraine Rizer.

When a contractor was clearing the site in 2003, a blast seriously injured a worker because benzoyl peroxide had been left on the site. The city remediated the land, then sued Reichhold for not properly disposing of chemicals there. Reichhold settled for $3.6 million. Rizer said a small piece of the land still has high concentrations of a naturally occurring mineral, but that most of it is safe for people to occupy. Neighbors aren’t so sure.

“I think the (RV park) idea is a good one, and I don’t have concerns about the location,” said Eleanor Langsdorf, who lives in Quail Creek, about two miles from the site. “I am concerned about the safety of the property for the people who would live there.”

Few services near southeast site

The Southeast Austin site is more remote: a few miles from the airport and near land where developers recently announced plans to build Rio de Vida — a development of homes, retail and parks — over the next few decades.

The neighborhood lacks a bus line, grocery store and health and social services that will be needed for the RV park to succeed, said Manijeh Huereca of the Del Valle Community Coalition. It has its fair share of undesirable projects — including a gravel mine and a facility for people transitioning into life after jail — and doesn’t want another, she said.

“For a long time, whatever wasn’t wanted in the City of Austin came this way,” she said. “To have a whole displaced population come in would compound the needs that already exist here.”

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