

THE STATE OF MORRISVILLE: AS GROWTH BECKONS, TOWN FOCUSES ON CORE

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What will Morrisville look like in 25 years? If the past quarter-century is any indication, there will likely be more residents, a bustling mix of shopping and retail and an entirely new downtown.

In fact, the town has a long-term plan that calls for the creation of a Town Center.

“Morrisville was so small – only 250 residents in 1980 – that it never really spawned a traditional North Carolina Main Street,” says Ben Hitchings, the town’s planning director. “The desire for a central gathering place started in January 2006.”

Using the town’s original train station as a centerpiece, the plan calls for the creation of a “mini-Main Street” while preserving historic structures and two park sites that commemorate two of the last skirmishes of the Civil War, Hitchings says.

The existing town hall will remain, but a new fire station will be built, he says.

In addition, the town is working with the Wake County library system to open a library within the Town Center area, Hitchings adds.

To anchor the Town Center, Morrisville plans to build a cultural arts center. Hitchings says this project will be built in phases and will include an outdoor amphitheater, classrooms, meeting spaces and a community theater. The

entire Town Center project is being planned as a public/private endeavor, says Mayor Jan Faulkner. “The Town Center will be built by developers. The land will be leased to developers.”

ROAD UPGRADES

Hitchings says the town already is looking to acquire select properties as they go up for sale. In some cases, the town might make an offer based on fair market value, he says.

However, given the current economic slowdown, Morrisville’s revenue stream has slowed, says Faulkner.

Although the town has a 25-to 30-year financial plan, some capital projects, like building new greenways and parks, are being pushed further out on the timeline, she says.

Also affected will be some transportation projects, including the construction of the International Drive/Aviation Parkway connector, she says.

To be sure, Morrisville is only now catching up with its growth spurt.

Morrisville’s population grew from 6,000 eight years ago to 18,000 today. And the town is still growing. To adapt to continuing growth, the town is improving roadways and intersections and revising its Land Use and Transportation Plan.

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Work has already begun on one of the town's busiest intersections: N.C. 54 and Aviation Parkway. "We're adding right turn lanes in all four directions," says Blake Mills, the town's public works director.

While this project is expected to expedite traffic flow in all directions, Mills explains, "Eastbound traffic, going toward the airport, is where it really backs up."

Work on this project began July 1 and should be completed in a year, he says.

The final cost to the town will be about \$2.5 million, money that comes from a \$4 million bond approved by voters a few years ago and was earmarked solely for road improvements, Mills says. Morrisville's Land Use and Transportation Plan, which combines two previous plans, will come up for review by the Planning and Zoning Board in October, Hitchings says. If approved by the town council, it could be adopted by December.

WIDENING MAJOR ARTERIES

Aside from a number of key road improvements throughout the town, the plan also calls for more bicycle lanes and a pedestrian-friendly Town Center area.

Hitchings says public input was vital to establishing priorities. After contracting with the Raleigh office of consulting firm Louis Berger Group, the town launched an online survey, held public workshops, formed three focus groups and established a telephone hotline. Some

residents want the town to speed up improvements to N.C. 54, the main artery connecting the town to Research Triangle Park and Durham.

Jackie Holcombe, a co-founder of Morrisville Action, a citizens action group, says widening N.C. 54 should be the town's No. 1 priority. Hitchings says Morrisville's transportation plan calls for its widening "first to four lanes, and eventually to six lanes, with a somewhat different configuration as it passes through the Town Center." "The town, however, doesn't own the road," Hitchings says. Faulkner says widening all of N.C. 54 will not be easy because most of the road is within the railroad's right of way.