



Chapter 6

Tall City Tomorrow Character



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“Can’t we do a better job preventing litter! Many times dumpsters and barrels are over filled. (Even the recycling bins)”
– Community Comment

Tall City Tomorrow Character

INTRODUCTION

The traditional elements of a comprehensive plan help guide land use directions, transportation and infrastructure services, and other city services like parks. Throughout the Tall City Tomorrow process, residents also expressed a desire to address community character and quality. The image of the city both internally and externally was very important to residents. They saw that great cities go beyond basic systems and elevate the pride and quality of life that residents and visitors alike experience. Chapter 9 will review many of the quality of life features, such as parks, recreation, culture, and natural environments. Tall City Tomorrow Character identifies initiatives and action items that will promote Midland’s character through the built environment. Defining a vision and the action items necessary to achieve that vision requires a discussion of the issues and opportunities related to community appearance, landscaping, and community design.

ISSUES & OPPORTUNITIES

Community Appearance

Community appearance has a direct impact on residents’ attitudes toward investment in their community and neighborhoods. Many spoke of a need to get a better handle on litter and the appearance of entrances into the city. One concern was of their own first-impressions of Midland as newcomers, as well as seeing the city through the eyes of guests, and the fact that this was not always a positive experience. They noted concern that this first impression did not speak to the quality of many Midland neighborhoods and developments. Midland is not unique, in that property maintenance is a struggle for many communities and can often result in a cycle of decline starting with just one low-quality property on a block. Defining a ‘good appearance’ can be difficult, as it can mean different things to different people. Cities need to have a well-defined baseline for building and property maintenance, as well as the political will to enforce those standards. This effort also needs to include community education regarding expectations and how to properly address problem properties in a neighborhood. The first key element is community support, which has been expressed by residents through the Tall City Tomorrow process.

Urban Landscape

Good and well maintained landscaping can be a crucial contributor to an attractive community image. Landscaping can have many benefits and fill an important role in land use. These include:

- » Minimizing compatibility issues between adjacent but different land uses
- » Offering shade on hot days and blocking harsh winds
- » Breaking up concrete environments such as large parking lots
- » Shading homes and reducing utility bills
- » Strengthening commercial districts (studies have found that shoppers will spend more in environments that have greenery and good landscaping)
- » Overall enrichment of the urban environment

Landscaping can also play a very important role in providing a positive first impression to visitors. Residents spoke often of the negative first impression of some of the land uses along the city’s gateway corridors. These uses are vital to the city’s economy and a common issue for many cities. Good landscaping and screening along the city’s gateway can change travelers’ focal points, exemplifying the quality community that many residents find in the city’s neighborhoods.

In Midland’s hot, dry climate, sustaining an attractive landscape requires selection of appropriate materials and an understanding of proper maintenance. Landscaping often defaults to turf and other non-native materials that require watering and ongoing maintenance. Since the last drought, residents have been encouraged to try more xeriscaping, a landscaping approach that uses more native materials that require less water. However, residents jokingly noted that some property owners seem to think that xeriscaping also means zero-maintenance. This is definitely not the case and while the use of native materials should be encouraged, an understanding of how to maintain those materials is also needed. To begin this process, the city should be a leader in demonstrating use of good materials and maintenance of public properties.

Community Design

People are attracted to places that offer a quality experience and are active with people, because they provide residents with a sense of community and belonging. The desire for these types of places in Midland is evident on a nice evening in Wadley Barron Park. Resident fill this park to walk, enjoying the pond, and meet their neighbors. These spaces are limited in Midland, and residents recognized that commercial centers are designed for single-stop experiences, with limited opportunity to interact with neighbors or visit other businesses without getting back into a car.

Creating great places is not easy and involves more than just buildings. It has to include the smaller details, such as good sidewalks, landscaping, public spaces to meet others, defined edges, and possibly features that draw people in like public art, street furniture, or water. It is difficult to legislate good places but attention to the details of the site design or adding features to existing neighborhood centers is essential to creating the types of destinations that Midland residents desire.



“More trees, flowers, hardgrasses, flowering cacti, pretty things to help make it look nicer.”

– Samantha H

“More green spaces with shading and seating and practical water features”

– Community Comment

TALL CITY TOMORROW CHARACTER PLAN

GOALS

1. Ensure that Midland's built and natural environments are regionally appropriate and well maintained.

The severe droughts of the past 10 years have made many residents aware of the natural environment around them. The intense heat in the summer months and hard winds also drive the character of the built environment. Using materials that are appropriate to the climate and conditions of Midland not only celebrate the character of the city and region, but last longer and are easier to maintain. Low maintenance materials are just that, low-maintenance. Residents, businesses, and the city should place a high priority on education and enforcement of quality maintenance.

2. Identify partnerships to produce neighborhood and commercial centers that are attractive, functional, and of high quality.

City officials, developers, and residents alike want new developments to reflect the character and quality of Midland. In previous sections of Tall City Tomorrow, the need for proper circulation, pedestrian access, and the mixing of uses to create quality neighborhoods has been discussed. High quality building materials and good landscaping create attractive destinations where consumers want to spend their time and money. The city will need to work closely with the development community to ensure quality products that meet the needs of today's residents, reflect the pride residents have in their community, and that will last well into the future.

3. Create vibrant multi-use destinations that support activities and residential settings for multiple generations.

In Chapter 3 the need to create "balanced neighborhoods" was identified as one of the guiding land use principles. Balanced neighborhoods provide residents with easy access to a variety of places to live, shop, work, play, and engage in community life. Neighborhoods should also be places where residents can find a home at all stages of their lives. National trends show that retirees and young professionals are often looking to live in environments with easy access to jobs, services, and entertainment. These vibrant neighborhoods should be places where generations can interact with common and diverse options.

4. Encourage the development of places where Midland residents can gather and socialize to build connections.

On any beautiful evening in Midland one can find residents enjoying the trails around Midland College or feeding the ducks at Wadley Barron Park, but few of these environments exist. Most dining and shopping opportunities are one-stop destinations, and few of the city's parks are attractors like Wadley Barron. Future park space should include more amenities like water features or open spaces to run a dog; and commercial spaces should mix uses and offer outdoor dining and common spaces where musicians can play and shoppers can rest and talk with friends.

INITIATIVES & POLICIES

1. Improve landscaping regulations

Action item: Support and encourage the use of native landscaping materials

The most recent drought was especially hard on the city's trees, shrubs, and grasses. Any non-hardy materials quickly withered and died. This experience led to a greater interest in using more native materials and doing more xeriscaping. Some areas have been replanted but many of the trees lost to the heat or ice storms have not been replaced. In partnership with Keep Midland Beautiful, the community should work to raise money and apply for grants that support tree and plant material giveaways. Along with these materials should be educational information on the proper maintenance and care of native plants.

Action item: Develop and implement an education program on the use and maintenance of native materials

One of the biggest challenges to using more native materials is the learning curve that often must accompany any change. Often residents struggle with the different look that these materials have and how to provide proper maintenance. To some, these materials may look unkempt compared to the highly manicured look of less drought-tolerant materials. Invasive weeds can still be an issue and depending on the plant material some trimming and pruning may be required. In partnership with local schools, the Texas A&M Agrilife Extension, Keep Midland Beautiful, and the City, educational material and workshops should be developed that can be shared in schools, at community events, and through continuing education venues.

Action item: Require additional landscaping for large projects

Tree planting and landscaping in larger projects and especially in large parking lots has multiple benefits. Trees shade parking and walkways, decrease the heat island effect, help orient customers in large parking lots, manage circulation, and can be integrated into design elements that provide public spaces and safe paths for pedestrians. Landscaping and circulation in larger developments should create an environment that is friendly and reflects the pride residents have in Midland's western climate.

Action item: Work with property owners and local civic organizations to plant trees and native landscaping along major corridors

The streets of any community may be the only public environment that most individuals experience on a daily basis. As residents and visitors travel along a city's streets, they are forming opinions about a community or neighborhood. Trees and landscaping can have a strong impact on the opinion that is formed. This is not an easy or inexpensive endeavor and must be taken on with the assistance of the local community organizations, business owners, redevelopment efforts, and active neighborhoods. Reconstruction of any arterial or collector street should include landscaping along with appropriate pedestrian and bicycle features.



“The city needs to help get dead trees out of people’s yards. We must do all we can to encourage people to make our city more attractive. . . . We’re a very hospitable community.

– Written Comment from November, 2014 workshops.

2. Upgrade site design standards

Action item: Require pedestrian accommodations in all site designs

New developments and redevelopment of existing sites must include better pedestrian connections. At a minimum this may include:

- » Safe walkways between parking areas and business entrances
- » Defined walkways between businesses within a development
- » Median breaks and refuge areas when crossing major streets
- » Well defined crosswalks that offer the pedestrian the shortest possible crossing
- » Connections to any adjacent trails or sidewalks
- » Safe and convenient connections to public transit stops

Action item: Expand design guidelines for all arterial streets

Midland has implemented standards for the I-20 corridor through the BP overlay district but these standards should be expanded to include arterial or other streets of civic importance. This should include Loop 250 access roads and major entrances into the community, like Andrews Highway. Standards may include basic landscaping, lighting, sidewalk and crosswalk design, utility placement and visibility, and screening of stored materials.

Action item: Develop design guidelines specifically for new neighborhood centers

The land use plan outlined in Chapter 3 calls for neighborhood centers that are vibrant mixed-use destinations where land uses are integrated. Appealing neighborhood centers combine a set of ingredients that include safe and comfortable streets and sidewalks, properly scaled buildings, visual interest, and a mix of uses that allow people to live, work, and play within a cohesive and comfortable environment. Design guidelines for the neighborhood centers identified in the Tall City Tomorrow Land Use Plan (page 82) should focus on good landscaping, connectivity, shared parking, stormwater management that creates amenities, public spaces, properly scaled signage, and connections to public transportation.

Action item: Offer incentives for on-site retention of stormwater and the use of that retention area as a site amenity

Encouraging the use of low-impact development techniques should decrease the volume and velocity of stormwater entering the streets and draws with the added benefit of creating onsite amenities. Techniques may include:

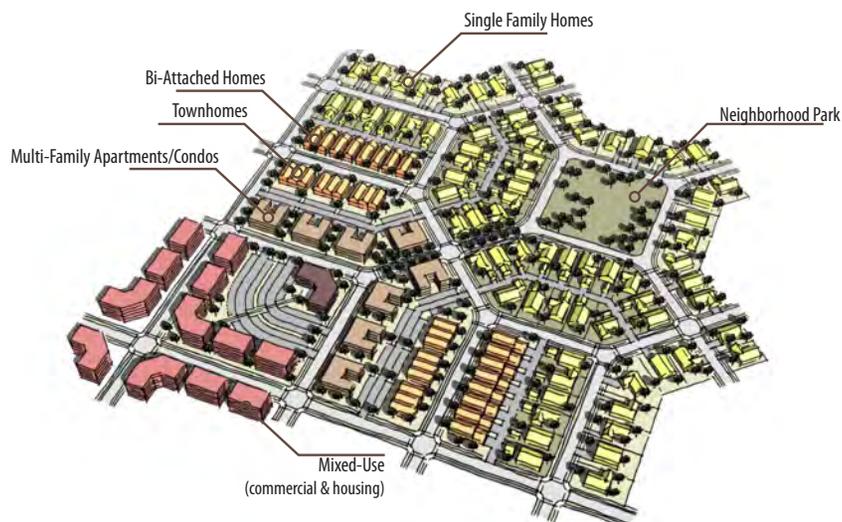
- » Onsite retention of stormwater to create a water feature/amenity for the development
- » Using rooftop collection systems and green roofs to capture rainwater that can be used later for irrigation
- » Using pervious pavement, pavers, or asphalt in appropriate locations
- » Using planters, landscaped strips next to roads and parking areas to encourage stormwater infiltration and temporary detention



3. Enhance new residential development areas.

Action item: Establish basic neighborhood design principles for new developments

For many years Midland, like most American cities, has tended to build “subdivisions” or “additions” that are separated from community services, shopping, and jobs. The combination of these features is what often makes a strong neighborhood, where we can interact with others and decrease the stress of moving around the city. Chapters 3 and 4 have expressed the importance of mixing and combining uses that have similar intensity. Locating differing uses next to each other does not mean that you have automatically created a sense of place and character. Certain design aspects should be considered that help integrate uses and create a sense of community. As illustrated in the adjacent diagram, future developments should include key design components necessary to create integrated neighborhoods.



- » Mix of land uses and housing types. In the diagram to the right a variety of housing types are mixed together, with appropriate transitions at rear and side lot lines. To achieve the desired mix of housing in the graphic on page 100, a majority of the land area is devoted to single-family detached, with attached or medium density development taking up the next largest portion, and finally high density apartments taking up the smallest portion. While the apartments require the least amount of land they can provide a significant portion of the area’s overall unit count.

Other cities without much greenery do great jobs hardscaping or building structures that are all cohesive, fit in with the area, and look great for years to come. Force builders to invest in that now to save quick deterioration in the future.

— Samantha H



- » Connectivity. Differing housing styles are connected by sidewalks, which connect to parks and business centers. Clearly defined crosswalks create a safer environment for pedestrians and well-connected streets provide drivers multiple routes in and through the neighborhoods, reducing traffic loads on any one street.
- » Stormwater protection. Although not illustrated in this particular diagram, draws and playas should be preserved as features that enhance the neighborhood. These enhancements should also protect residents in the neighborhood and downstream from flash flooding.
- » Focal points. Neighborhood focal points create gathering places and sense of community. This diagram connects housing directly with nearby amenities like the park, shops, and jobs.

Action item: Require features in low density developments that create a sense of community

Different people have different preferences and density alone does not make or break a great neighborhood. Many people desire new houses but still seek the diversity and neighborliness of the best established neighborhoods in the city. Others want “elbow room” and seek a bigger lot in a lower density development. Almost universally, everyone wants an attractive development that gives them a sense of belonging to a community. Certain features can help make even better communities:

- » Street connections for both community contact and public safety access
- » Trail and pathway connections
- » Lot clustering to maintain open space
- » Community access to draws and open space

4. Improve community appearance

Action item: Review and update property maintenance codes and enforcement procedures

Poorly maintained buildings and sites have an enormous effect on the visual quality of Midland, which can be depressing to residents as well as to property values. A review of property maintenance codes should be completed along with an assessment of enforcement procedures. A review of the property maintenance code should address those items that have the greatest impact on life safety, visual quality, preservation of community maintenance standards, and enforcement of the ordinance. The city should consider a proactive approach for key corridors and neighborhoods that are experiencing declining values. With increased enforcement should also come access to assistance, as often people do not have the resources to improve the appearance of their property. Along with property maintenance notifications, the City should provide information on local organizations that offer assistance to residents. This may even be done in partnership with local civic and church organizations.

Action item: Develop property maintenance material and education programs on how to be a good neighborhood

Good property maintenance programs combine awareness of the need for reinvestment and upkeep with the tools necessary to being a good neighbor. Preparation and distribution of a property standards manual should encourage good neighbor behaviors before enforcement is needed. The manual should be a friendly and clear document that sets out the expectations for residents of Midland as a community for individual building and property maintenance. It can also help provide useful information, such as locations of sites to dispose of or recycle unwanted household items. Educational programs should also be developed, especially for first time homeowners and renters. This may be done in conjunction with local realtors or landlord associations.

