

OPINION

# Hensley Field is Dallas’ most exciting development opportunity

Let’s do this right.



Renderings show what future development at Dallas’ 738-acre Hensley Field could look like. (City of Dallas / City of Dallas)

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Ask most Dallasites and they would probably say they’ve never heard of Hensley Field. Perhaps the only mention of it in recent years was as the city’s “storage closet,” housing official vehicles, unused bronze sculptures or Confederate monuments. But it’s the single largest development opportunity in the city of Dallas for the next decade, and among the many reasons Mayor Eric Johnson, the City Council and other leaders are prioritizing its exciting new master plan. Dallas has reached an agreement with the Navy to move forward with on-site remediation. Additionally, the Navy asked the city to produce a master plan for redevelopment and Johnson has repeatedly pushed for its prioritization.

First built in 1941 as a naval air station, Hensley Field served as a flight training center for Pacific theater pilots during World War II, then later as a general training facility until finally being decommissioned in 1998. Since then, it has served occasionally as a Grand Prairie Armed Forces Reserve Complex, but the complex sits vacant the vast majority of the time.

Recently, the city of Dallas’ Planning and Urban Design Department started reimagining the 738 acres as a mixed-use office and affordable housing complex, connected by multiple parks and loop trails along Mountain Creek Lake, and set against historic, massive airplane hangars that could serve as a backdrop for cinematic purposes.

As Dallas Park and Recreation Board members, we’ve had the privilege of being part of the community input sessions and site tours. We commend the city for assembling an impressive collection of design professionals led by McCann Adams Studio, which redeveloped the decommissioned Robert Mueller Municipal Airport in central Austin, and SWA Landscape Architecture, whose work on the Katy Trail and Pacific Plaza has been widely recognized.

The city undertook an extensive two-year community planning process and has posted its findings and plans at [HensleyField.com](https://www.dallas.gov/hensleyfield). The Navy has completed many rounds of studies, testing and remediation since 1995 and also completed a recent environmental investigation related to a firefighting chemical previously used on certain parts of the property. The Navy is obligated to clean up the site to residential standards and its intent is to complete the cleanup consistent with the community redevelopment plan.

Looking forward, the community-guided master plan details how the site can be transformed, over the next 20 years, into a vibrant new live-work-play epicenter in southern Dallas with more than 6,000 new homes, 3 million square feet of commercial development and 180 acres of open public space — all designed and configured in a way that will promote economic development, environmental stewardship and social equity.

The plan includes a series of initiatives aimed at implementing Dallas’s Comprehensive Environmental and Climate Action Plan, including the design of a network of open spaces that will filter stormwater before it enters Mountain Creek Lake, the planting of hundreds of new trees to mitigate heat island effect, and the creation of a 40-acre Innovation Village on the Runway Peninsula, all demonstrating state-of-the-art technologies and sustainability practices. In addition, all new development must achieve net zero construction (producing as much energy as it consumes) through renewable energy sources like solar and geothermal and state-of-the-art building design.

The plan also calls for complete streets and alternatives to the single-occupant vehicle lanes to access the site, including the extension of Dallas Area Rapid Transit’s high-capacity transit service in the short term and a bus service and light rail in the long term.

Mountain Creek Lake will serve as a critical natural resource to the Hensley Field plan. It will become a major recreational destination for southern Dallas much the way White Rock Lake serves as a destination in East Dallas. But this plan includes an interconnected network of parkland spaces interlaced throughout the community and along the lake edge, placing all residents within 600 feet of a publicly accessible open space. It also includes a marina, four community parks and 15 acres for a working urban farm, and advances the idea of an active and equitable lifestyle within a short distance of quality educational institutions and appealing urban workplaces.

Perhaps most importantly and pragmatically, the master plan sets out a comprehensive financing plan involving both public investment and private capital and a forward-looking program that charts out the steps that the city can take to realize the vision that starts by selecting a master developer partner to facilitate implementation over the next 20 years. Rather than a fixed vision, the master plan has established a variable framework that will allow new ideas and opportunities to be incorporated over time while still adhering to the original guiding principles and pillars of sustainability.

The plan is ambitious but feasible as long as the city maintains the momentum that the Hensley Field planning process has started. The next steps would be to pursue a private development partner with the financial capacity, social integrity and relevant experience to undertake a public-private project of this scale, and then establish a level of transparency during the negotiation process with the selected developer. The city must also continue to involve the public as the master plan evolves, and hold the Navy accountable to deliver on its commitment to clean up the site in a way that allows this exciting vision to be fully realized.

It’s been 30 years since the last Navy plane landed at Hensley Field. Now is the time to capitalize on plans that revitalize this historic space. We encourage all citizens to explore this visionary plan at [HensleyField.com](https://www.dallas.gov/hensleyfield), and we implore city leaders to embrace and support it.

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