

OPINION

Dallas must remove barriers for affordable housing in Hensley Field

We welcome the master plan to redevelop a forgotten city asset, but the city should be flexible about the details.



Renderings show what future development at Dallas' Hensley Field could look like. (City of Dallas / City of Dallas)

By [Dallas Morning News Editorial](#)
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Hensley Field — a former naval air station on land that Dallas owns next to Mountain Creek Lake — is done being the city's closet for all sorts of things that need to be stashed somewhere. A new master plan fills the outline of the 738-acre site with a blueprint that could transform it from a faded star to a flashy headliner in City Hall's ongoing project to make Dallas more attractive, more affordable and more economically and environmentally resilient.

We share city officials' enthusiasm about the master plan, which the Dallas City Council will consider for approval Wednesday. The plan contemplates a mixed-use, mixed-income lakefront development that would add more than 6,800 homes to the city's housing stock over a period of 20 years. Behind the plan is a consultant team led by McCann Adams Studio, the urban design firm that helped turn a decommissioned municipal airport into a celebrated master-planned community in Austin.

But as the council prepares to vote, we urge city leaders to remain open-minded about future steps even as they embrace the grand vision. They may have to deviate from the plan to realize the big picture.

The master plan specifies that at least 20% of the homes in Hensley Field should be affordable to buyers making 80% or less of the area median income — about \$89,000 for a family of four in Dallas — or renters making 60% or less of the median income. And a tenth of all homes would be priced for buyers or renters making between 80% and 120% of the median income.

Some of this affordability can be achieved through housing stock diversity, according to the consultants. Think cottage homes with a shared courtyard and houses with zero lot lines.

But public subsidies will still be necessary to meet affordable housing goals, such as low-income housing tax credits for apartments. In the case of the redeveloped Mueller airport in Austin, the master developer sells lots for affordable homes at a discount.

Still, it has been difficult to pass on affordability to homebuyers. According to a memo from the Hensley Field consulting team, the housing costs in the Mueller development have gone up so much that selling houses at a discount to people making less than 80% of the median income is not always feasible because of "a large financing gap for the builder."

The consultant team recommends that the city be flexible about its affordability targets and that it also consider mechanisms such as a community land trust — a setup in which a nonprofit owns the lot and a person owns the house on it.

We urge the city to be adaptable in other ways. The master plan envisions that every new building will meet net-zero energy standards, meaning a structure generates enough energy to offset what it consumes. But this kind of green building is more expensive than conventional construction. If this standard discourages homebuilders from taking on affordable housing, then Dallas shouldn't be rigid about it.

We're excited about what Hensley Field will become. It's a dream that must be kept within reach of the city's workforce.

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