

Downtown Austin is flourishing, but it must be nourished

EDITORIAL BOARD

Sunday, December 04, 2005

The welcome news that Silicon Laboratories Inc. is moving downtown is a sign that Austin's march toward a rejuvenated, reinvigorated urban core is building momentum.

The trick from here is not to lose it.

@import url(<http://alt.coxnewsweb.com/statesman/css/enhance.css>);

MOST POPULAR STORIES

- With chance to upstage college basketball's leading men, Longhorns fade to black
 - Southern Cal's Bush wins Heisman Trophy
 - The eyes of Texas are on Longhorn merchandise
 - Travel tips from Rose Bowl veterans
 - Blue Devils' dominance leaves Horns singing the No. 2 blues
-

Encouraging a denser downtown is one way to discourage sprawl. But density doesn't and shouldn't just happen. If we are serious about redeveloping downtown as a place to live, eat, shop, work and play, then a commitment of planning and money is required. The debate on locating infrastructure and its costs will be contentious. Austin values process, sometimes at the expense of results, so the City Council and its successors should focus on goals. No one wins if downtown redevelopment bogs down or is left to chance.

Silicon Labs, an Austin-grown firm, will be the first major employer to move downtown in four years. Silicon Labs said it intends to buy the six-story building at 400 W. Cesar Chavez St., a structure now owned by Computer Science Corp. Some of Silicon Labs' 500 employees will make the move when the purchase is complete.

There's no doubt that the influx of workers will generate demand for more retail and housing downtown, and perhaps even draw other employers. That would comport well with the Envision Central Texas goal of creating more density downtown. The goal is among several chosen by citizen groups put together by Envision Central Texas to direct regional growth. Although the group has little more than the power of suggestion, policymakers take its recommendations seriously

across the region.

Although there is still plenty of developable property downtown, bold and comprehensive redevelopment will require tradeoffs. Balancing development interests with the need to protect the quality of Shoal and Waller creeks is one of those. Another is following state law protecting views of the state Capitol.

The law rightly restricts how tall buildings can be in certain downtown zones, but developers can be expected to argue that increasing land values will put pressure on them to maximize heights in order to minimize rents.

Yet another will be balancing the needs of the homeless who gravitate downtown with the interests of residents and business owners who complain about the panhandling and litter that comes with them. The council is expected to take action on a tougher panhandling ordinance later this month. Social service agencies are traditionally located downtown, but we can expect a debate on whether they should be.

A longer-range question — one already being discussed — is redoing Interstate 35, which has acted as a barrier between East and

West Austin. Downtown revitalization has made land just east of the interstate a magnet for redevelopment. As the area redevelops, planners can anticipate demands to make the highway less of an impediment.

No doubt that solutions will generate discussion and traffic hassles, but as the Silicon Labs decision indicates, downtown Austin is healthy and growing. And that's a good problem to have.