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LONG-RANGE PLAN WOULD TURN INNSBROOK AREA INTO A SMALL VILLAGE

BY LUZ LAZO - PUBLISHED: MAY 3, 2010

Henrico County's largest work district could be up for a transformation into a walkable community with a mixture of office, retail, entertainment and residential development.

A land-use study conducted by the county's Planning Department recommends turning a portion of western Henrico -- which includes the Innsbrook Corporate Center -- into a mixed-use community.

The study also recommends creating an internal transportation system at Innsbrook such as a shuttle that would bring people from one place to another inside the work park and would provide access to major corridors such as West Broad Street.

The majority of the Innsbrook area, between West Broad Street and Nuckols Road near Interstate 295, is designated for office use under the 2026 Comprehensive Plan adopted in August.

The study recommends changing the land-use designation to urban mixed-use.

If the county were to change the land-use designation, Innsbrook -- the second-largest employment center in the region after downtown Richmond -- could be looking at slowly becoming a small village over the next two decades.

County planning staff members will hold a public meeting tomorrow, where they will present the study of the 1,185-acre area with 8,600,000 square feet of office and commercial space. The Board of Supervisors requested the study last summer.

A work session and public hearings also will be held with the Planning Commission and the supervisors. The board could vote on the land-use designation change this year, and some construction could begin as early as next year.

"We think it is exciting," said Planning Director R. Joseph Emerson Jr. "It is really moving the county forward."

Changing Innsbrook into a mixed-use development is a natural evolution, considering the way development in the county is moving, Emerson said. Other developments, he noted, are going into mixed-use -- a couple of miles from Innsbrook, for example, West Broad Village offers an urban living space with single-family homes, condominiums and shops in a 115-acre area.

Concerns about increased vacancy rates of office developments at Innsbrook and its vicinity prompted



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the county last year to study opportunities to ensure that Innsbrook remains a viable economic generator in the county.

The Innsbrook Corporate Center and surrounding area, including land south of West Broad Street, are about 25 percent vacant, according to the study. This is mostly due to office complexes vacated by large corporations within the past two years.

County and business leaders say new development will help retain existing businesses and attract new employers. And the study suggests that it would also "incorporate pedestrian-scaled design and serve the needs of new population growth."

Paul W. Kreckman, president of the Innsbrook Owners Association and vice president of Highwoods Properties, a major property owner in Innsbrook, said the county is headed in the right direction in looking at changing the existing land use to take advantage of an existing infrastructure. The Innsbrook Owners Association has developed its own mixed-use development plan that visualizes Innsbrook as a place where people can work, live and shop.

"What we have tried to do with Innsbrook is make it a unique business community. . . . We have created a nice business environment," said Kreckman, who was involved in the development of Innsbrook 30 years ago. "Now that we have achieved this, what do we do next?"

The next logical step is to turn the office park into a high-density, urban center with town houses, condominiums, apartments and small retail stores, he said.

He envisions the construction of a performing-arts center, a specialty or post-secondary school in the area, and an increased number of medical offices. But it would be done in a multigenerational process, he said.

While other developments such as West Broad Village are being built essentially all at once, Innsbrook is an established center that will add retail and residential, and develop it over time.

The county land-use study area goes beyond the office park boundaries, which is 630 acres, and includes some retail development mostly along West Broad Street and Nuckols Road. But there is a limited amount of housing in the area, presenting opportunities to develop a variety of housing types such as town houses, condominiums and apartments that would provide more choices to people employed in the area, the study says.

Jean M. Moore, Henrico's assistant director of planning, who is overseeing the study, said the demographics support high-end development.

Innsbrook remains one of the wealthiest areas in the county. In the general vicinity to the Innsbrook study area, the median household income is \$62,457, compared with \$48,185 for the county as a whole. Additionally, 38 percent of the residents in the area hold bachelor's degrees or higher, compared with 23 percent countywide.

About 8,650 people lived in the general vicinity to Innsbrook, which accounts for a 3,189-acre area, bounded by interstates 64 and 295 to the north and south. Of 3,727 housing units there, 2,166, or 58 percent, are single-family detached homes.

A 30-acre section of Innsbrook along Sadler Place between Cox Road and Highwoods Parkway has already been rezoned for urban mixed-use to include 344 residential units, integrated parking and commercial spaces.

Emerson sees the potential for redeveloping now-vacant parking areas with "greater efficiency" to include parking decks or parking beneath mixed-use buildings.

Henrico's elected officials are also showing interest in the plan.

"When I was appointed to the Planning Commission in 1984, there were only two buildings at Innsbrook and, since that time, Innsbrook has developed -- and very nicely," said Supervisor Richard W. Glover. "Mixed-used development is becoming more popular all across the county. People like to live where they work."

Board Chairman Patricia S. O'Bannon said mixed-use is almost certainly the logical next step for the Innsbrook area, but the question would be to determine what kind of mixed use the county would want, she said.

"You are talking about Innsbrook, you are at an intersection of main highways. You are right at the interstate. So are you going to have tall buildings? That is where the discussion will go," she said. "How tall is too tall? How do you accommodate parking? How do you create a walkable community?"