

**"Traffic, parking snarl tackled—Several solutions proposed by diverse work group"**

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by B. Lou Guckian

ALAMO HEIGHTS—It may have looked like just another meeting when first entering a neighborhood planning session held recently in the Alamo Heights High School library. It wasn't. Even before the April 5 workshop began, the room beckoned participants to roll up their sleeves, think and collaborate on solutions to traffic and parking problems plaguing streets around the high school.

The event is called a charrette, which is an intense design session. Near the sign-in table was an array of full-color photos depicting lines of cars parked along both sides of residential streets, some blocking homeowners' driveways. Also shown were buses stacked alongside each other in the high school parking lot.

Flip charts were strategically positioned in the front and alongside three small round tables, each equipped with a large aerial photo of the city, tracing paper and markers. After coffee and muffins, urban planner Bob Ashcroft called 22 participants to order.

Referring to handouts, Ashcroft presented a clear outline of the pending process and expectations for the next six hours. Key stakeholder groups were identified: the city of Alamo Heights, the Alamo Heights School District and residents who reside on streets closest to the school and most effected by parking problems.

Opening comments were given by high school Principal Linda Foster, city Councilman Mike Holland and design professional Richard Garison, who along with Ashcroft are with the San Antonio chapter of the American Institute of Architects. AIA co-sponsored the event, recruiting professionals to participate.

The first step was to identify concerns and basic needs of all stakeholders. Residents quickly responded as Ashcroft recorded each idea onto a flip chart. As each page was filled, he tore it from its place and taped it to shelves behind him. And so it continued in rapid pace.

Residents fired their concerns: Trespassing, trash, loitering, safety and speeding, parking, property values, property damage and destruction, an aggregate feeling of "lack of neighborhood."

"I want full use and enjoyment of my property," said Susan Harwell, a homeowner and mother of two who lives on East Fair Oaks. "My cat was killed here right after a sports event (at the high school). We don't want it to be a child next time."

Echoing that concern was Foster, who said the school wants to be a good neighbor, but wondered how. "We're so land-locked," she said. City Engineer Paul Sontag agreed: "The city is landlocked now. If we expand here, we'll have to decrease somewhere else."

High School senior Erin Lee looked for an answer to the students' parking problems, which often result in tardiness to class. "Parking close to the school is so limited and sometimes we have to park three or four blocks away," Lee said.

The high school currently employs about 160 and has 1,255 students, including 289 seniors. Not all students have reserved parking. There are 253 parking spaces on campus, including 12 visitors spots.

There are 289 parking spaces on streets around the high school. These streets include East Fair Oaks, Vanderhoeven Drive and East Castano Avenue. Parking problems also are reportedly increasing on Elmview.

Articulating his interest to resolve the school's parking problems, Holland maintained that it is equally important to preserve the "beauty and charm of the city, and exercise accountability for what the group proposes to the rest of the community."

With concerns and needs identified by stakeholder groups, it was time to board the school bus and tour the problem areas. Adults snuggled into child-sized seats, and soon, conversation reflected an increasing awareness of cramped situations outside the bus.

There are no crosswalks or sidewalks on East Castano at Broadway. Pedestrian safety became more of an issue as the group watched early-morning joggers and dog-walkers steering clear of skinny sidewalks near the school district's maintenance facility at the high school and instead walking behind parked trucks and cars.

Buses and maintenance vehicles consumed a large amount of parking spaces. Better marking of existing spaces was needed, participants said. It also was noted that major retail and commercial areas on nearby North New Braunfels and the Quarry Market are increasing traffic in Alamo Heights.

After the bus tour, Ashcroft directed the group to give an accurate, joint description of what they saw. They did: Not enough parking on campus to accommodate demand, an overflow problem in adjacent neighborhoods, a landlocked campus surrounded by residential areas, other areas that are problematic to traffic flow.

Elements were pinpointed through a process of intense, fast-paced brainstorming that yielded volumes of ideas while judgment and discussion were withheld until later. Seven

basic issues were identified: parking; traffic; the campus; regulations and restrictions; lifestyle of residents and pedestrians as well as student safety; and overall development of the area.

The group then broke into three teams. Each included one high school student, two design professionals, residents, and city and school officials. Each team generated at least 20 solutions. They strategized, mapped ideas, listened and revised strategies.

Within two hours, teams had transformed from people sitting in chairs around a table to players in a huddle. Homeowner Deborah Dunn perched on a table, her feet resting in her chair, while she leaned in to get a closer look at her team's map.

Architects and engineers were mapping solutions to traffic flow problems, drawing them on tracing paper laid over aerial maps. Students were telling architects and engineers what their particular parking needs are. Homeowners were telling city officials and school board members how to best relieve parking congestion.

Teams presented their strategies to the entire group, which opened the door for more discussion and clarification. By the end of the session, a preliminary, phased plan of action had been created—one that everyone agreed on.

"We kept checking with Erin to make sure that our recommendations were in line with the student's perspective," said architect Richard Mogas, a member of AIA. Sontag said, "The students have (provided) very good input and without them we would have had much less knowledge."

The preliminary plan identifies and addressed about a dozen common elements of the parking and traffic problem. Steps to gain support were outlined, including finalizing the proposal into written form and providing a graphic representation, making presentations in the community, and identifying costs and budgets.

"It's important to show the process that led to the product so people don't think you're just shooting from the hip," Ashcroft concluded.

Engineer Don Durden said: "This is really about building relationships and trust within the community. In the past, we bulldozed communities to build drainage ditches. Now, we're doing projects with communities."

Meanwhile, Ashcroft said he hopes such sessions will enable residents of neighborhoods to play more of a role in San Antonio's urban development planning and problem-solving processes. "My interest is to find simple processes that work that we can use throughout the city," he explained. "You see conflicts between large organizations and people all the

time. The city just doesn't have the resources needed to deal with all these problems. I hope what we do here today can be used as an example for other neighborhoods."

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**Sidebar: "Charrette process used on small scale"**

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ALAMO HEIGHTS—A six-hour neighborhood planning session to study traffic and parking problems around Alamo Heights High School was deemed a success by participants.

Organized and facilitated by urban planner Bob Ashcroft and co-sponsored by the San Antonio chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the April 5 workshop brought together a diverse mix of people representing residents, the city of Alamo Heights and the Alamo Heights School District. Of 35 who attended, 22 were participants.

"When we got the common elements together and agreed on what we liked, we drew a consensus agreement," Ashcroft said. "This led to key elements of workable solutions."

Some possible answers in the preliminary plan:

- Start head-in parking on East Fair Oaks to increase spaces.
- Get cars to use Castano by simplifying parking and making it safe.
- Move traffic light on Tuxedo to Fair Oaks.
- Put sidewalks on every street.
- Make car pooling attractive.
- Move the school district's maintenance facility and buses off high school grounds.
- Encourage riding bicycles to school.

Ashcroft said such solutions won't just happen.

"The city of Alamo Heights appointed a committee with representatives from the school, the neighborhood and the City Council," he said. "We'll take our findings to the committee and then it will rest with the city and the school district."

Gaining support for the proposal, Ashcroft said, includes finalizing it into written form and providing a graphic representation, making presentations in the community, and identifying costs and budgets. Sun Staff Writer John Tackett contributed to this report.

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