

\$167M downtown phase centered around manmade stream, amphitheater

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A vacant section of downtown will be made over with a stream and walking paths that meander past waterfalls, a plaza, a shaded amphitheater and limestone bluffs, according to an artist rendering that ignited the Waco City Council’s enthusiasm this week.

The rendering showed the \$167 million first phase of a 12- to 20-year redevelopment of downtown Waco. The phase begins next year with the creation of the “Barron’s Branch District” between Washington and Jefferson avenues near the Brazos River. The tract, which once was a Hispanic neighborhood called Calle Dos, is largely vacant now except for a Waco Independent School District track facility.



After seeing the rendering and related video, Mayor Jim Holmes called the vision “amazing.”

“I think ultimately people are going to forget about the San Antonio River Walk, and this is going to be the premier riverwalk in the world,” Holmes quipped.

Beyond the amenities shown in the rendering, Phase 1A will also provide street extensions and water and sewer utilities city officials say are crucial to downtown growth over the next 50 years. Phase 1A will be followed in 2026 by Phase 1B, which will create a new City Hall and Waco ISD administration building at **Washington Avenue and Fourth Street**.

Tom Balk, the city’s director of strategic initiatives, told the council that the project is on schedule and on budget.

“But what we’re really excited about is the new drawings and a walk-through video that shows what the reconstructed Calle Dos could look like,” he said.

Calle Dos was a Mexican immigrant neighborhood along the banks of the Brazos River that formed after World War I.

It remained a center of Hispanic culture in Waco until the start of federal Urban Renewal that began around 1958, according to **wacohistory.org**. Its boundaries were approximately between Fourth Street, Washington Avenue, present-day Waco Drive and the river.

The new rendering gives a bird’s-eye view of a reconstructed Barron’s Branch Creek as it flows through the new Calle Dos toward the Brazos River.

Balk also showed an **85-second video** walk-through that starts at a manmade waterfall and follows along through businesses to a footbridge and eventually to a restored historic fountain, called La Pila, a view line to St. Francis on the Brazos Catholic Church.



A rendering from summer 2024 shows a new plaza along Jefferson Avenue between the Brazos River and St. Francis on the Brazos Catholic Church. In the foreground is a reconstruction of La Pila, a historic fountain that once served a mostly Hispanic neighborhood.

Hunt Development Group, provided

During the council meeting, Alice Rodriguez, who has held the District 2 council seat for 26 years, told a story about the significance of that water feature in her youth and the youth of her parents' generation. She recalled people in the neighborhood who didn't have showers took turns bathing in the waterfall that formed downstream of the fountain, with separate times reserved for men and women.

"I'm excited about this, guys: Floyd Casey Park and this area here, these are the first places in all the time I have been on the council that the city has ever honored its Hispanic heritage," Rodriguez said.



Barron's Branch extends underground through the length of this property, which includes the former Indian Spring Middle School's track.
ROD AYDELOTTE, TRIBUNE-HERALD FILE PHOTO



 HUNT

DOWNTOWN WACO MASTER PLAN

BARRON'S BRANCH CREEK SECTION

A rendering from this summer shows a concept for restoring Barron's Branch, which now is confined to an underground drainage tunnel. Hunt Development Group, provided

Barron's Branch currently runs to the Brazos River through a large drainage tunnel that was installed about a decade ago. The project would create a second tunnel to relieve flooding on Barron's Branch, as well as a meandering canal that would be supplied with recirculated Brazos River water, similar in appearance to the San Antonio River Walk.

The new drainage features would remove 16 acres from federal floodplain designations, opening the tract to development.

"In Barron's Branch we will build not just the creek and the shaded amphitheater seen in the renderings and the video but also the park and plaza and street features, and all of this will attract private developers," Balk told the council Tuesday.

In an interview Wednesday, Balk said he is hearing interest from local, regional and out-of-state developers, though he wouldn't say which states.

"This is real, it's becoming real," Balk said. "When a council goes beyond comprehensive plans and master plans, to OK \$167 million for redevelopment and then conducts a national search for a master developer and puts \$12 million into design, then private developers begin to respond. And we're seeing that. We're hearing that interest."

Balk also expanded on the utility plans, saying that the water and sewer lines the city will run and the streets and plazas it will build are being designed and planned to accommodate the growth forecast for the next 50 years and beyond.

"Planned capacity accommodates the growth in all the redevelopment phases plus the growth of downtown proposed in the city's comprehensive plan, plus an engineered margin on top of that," Balk said.

Balk said the street work would substantially be covered by existing funding streams.

“Then after we build the streets and water and park features, the developers will come and build vertically and that will bring in tax revenues to the Downtown TIF (Tax Increment Financing district) to pay for the rest of the redevelopment,” Balk said.

He said the city can also tap into revenues from water, sewer and the newly created stormwater utility fee.



A rendering Hunt Development Group provided to the Waco City Council this week shows a new Barron's Branch with a footbridge and riverwalk-style amenities.

Hunt Development Group, provided

Balk emphasized the need for public feedback.

He said a Phase 1A design open house will be held Dec. 6 in the Cooper Room at the Greater Waco Chamber of Commerce, 101 S. Third St., 5:30–7 p.m., just before the Christmas tree lighting at Heritage Square.

Balk and Hunt officials will also staff a booth at **Waco Wonderland** from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Dec. 7 to field question from the public.



WATCH NOW: After a presentation by Hunt Development, Waco City Council members unanimously adopted a strategic road map at the Tuesday, June 18, 2024 meeting for Waco's downtown redevelopment, a master plan designed to transform Waco's city center over the next 12 to 20 years.