

HLWSF Session: Questions & Answers on the LID Design Competition

September 10, 2009

General Questions

Is it fair to say that the design teams that more rigorously compare costs and present that information would have more points than the design teams that neglect to thoroughly address that aspect?

Cost is one of the most critical elements in selling a design concept to a Developer. Given that this is a 'real world' competition, project costs and the presentation of the cost comparison to a traditional design will be an important part of the judging.

Residential Design Challenge Questions

The survey shows three pipeline easements, the criteria only indicate two that are fixed. Do we disregard the one in the northwest corner?

Yes, the one in the northwest corner has been abandoned, so disregard that one.

Will product (home) type be a consideration?

In terms of product type, I know that a lot of lid design looks at doing clustered development and I don't think that we would consider that approach on this project. For competition purposes, it might be better to stick with the product types that we typically see here. The goal is to see how this works for a typical, standard Houston development and if we can make it work with those product types, I think that will be most convincing to developers.

Is an Architect really necessary for this design challenge?

I don't think we're looking for floor plans, elevations that type of thing; we're looking for the ability to make the lot sizes work, but an architect's input on a variety of things would undoubtedly be valuable.

How about the use of 'coving' in lot layout? Do you have any objections to this type of approach that incorporates irregular lot sizes, mixed rather than all in separate segments of the community?

We sell to [homebuilders], and they can be particular about lot size. If I were a judge, what would be powerful to me is to maybe add a homebuilder to your team. As a developer would be concerned about whether the homebuilders feel comfortable that their product will fit on those lots. Maybe that's where the architect comes into play here.

The guidelines open the door to green roofs, and if you're trying to minimize the runoff volumes, there's a lot that can be done inside the lot line, and there's a lot that has to be done inside the lot line.

Cost per square foot for build product homes in these kinds of subdivisions is pretty well known information. If you add these other elements that are going to impact that number, and it may move you higher on the scale with respect to overall design. Architects are especially important in considering these kinds of design solutions.

What about rainwater harvesting?

I think it obviously plays to the economics of the project both plus and minus, so it has to be considered, rainwater reuse is an outstanding goal.

What do you say to energy efficiency in the importance; are you interested in it?

Absolutely, but I'm not certain how it fits into this process. Perhaps if you showed something that is solar powered as amenities or something? For instance, we discouraged the use of pumped detention. We don't want people using energy to pump water when you can use design techniques to make it flow.

This is a low impact development design competition, and LID is about site and storm water management. There are obviously built elements on the site that have an impact on those same considerations that are critical to LID. Perhaps the judges might consider energy efficiency in those elements as an extra added factor, but I don't think it's something the judges are going to look for.

Is there any baseline environmental information for this site we can review?

There is an environmental phase 1 and a wetlands study that was done. We'll get them posted to the Suburban Residential Design Challenge segment of the Competition website.

You have minimum lot sizes here but do you have building pad sizes associated with those lot sizes?

We haven't identified building pad sizes. What we typically do, is we'll talk to the builders up front about size of the lots and make sure that it's acceptable, and we've done that in this case. That comes into play in terms of runoff calculations too I'm sure, so again, I guess the architect is the one that might give some feedback on that.

On the site plans that are available to us, is the ISD sketch something that's driven by you or them?

That's their plan, although it's changing. The Elementary School is now going to be placed on the green parcel that's labeled Option Tract. They want to separate that traffic from the higher grade level schools. They're now planning to put their detention pond where the Elementary School is currently shown. Their plans are independent and they're providing their own detention onsite. We're obligated to pick it up just south of that roadway.

Back to the lot sizes; it seems to me that you may be stifling a lot of creativity by limiting the lot sizes. That limits what you can do with the whole piece of land, and by having some real input, rough as it may be, that may open some doors to some creative solutions.

I think you're right, but you have to weigh the balance between creativity and marketability. If you have an architect on board and can demonstrate that the kind of housing product that's marketable will fit on a different lot, the team of Expert Judges will have to make a judgment call on whether or not the project is marketable. [We will be adding an experienced Developer to the Expert Judges.]

It really sounds to me like you're trying to stick to the traditional pattern of doing things and while wanting to embrace new thoughts, but what about going away from the box altogether?

Our intent is not to stifle innovation, but it has to be able to be sold. Once again, a homebuilder on your team would be a great bonus because you can change the lots to vary. I don't think they have to be typical, but they have to be able to be built on, and they have to be built on with a production style house. In my experience, change happens incrementally and the best thing that could happen here is that we get something that can make a difference and actually gets incorporated in the project and starts the process down the road to change. Too drastic a change just probably isn't going to happen. It's a matter of balance.

Going back to the conversation earlier about lot layouts like the approach taken in 'coving'. You could end up with what is the rough equivalent of the 50', 60', or 70 foot lot, but they may be mixed up in the way that they fan around a curve in the road. Many of these subdivisions have been built elsewhere and they've apparently been beneficial in many ways. Will buyers in Houston, Texas buy that? We don't know, but how about if I approach it is as, 'I know what your objectives are, within the context of a traditional development. If I can give you this number of lots, that roughly equate to those square footages, regardless of how I organize them or shape them, and they are marketable'; would you be interested in that?

Absolutely, and you know we talked about doing the 50's and 60's and 70' foot lot widths, and giving an example, I think of each of product type, you could choose the the option of a 4th product type, and have a mixture of those lot sizes in a coving-like approach if you wanted to use that option. Or approach it more from the perspective of 3 distinct characterizations of size and a total number of lots, with the percentages you've got there, with respect to the midsize lot, the larger lot and the smaller lot.

I think the better question is, is it ok to have more lots than what you have here?

Always.

One thing that I have been thinking about since everyone's been talking is the criteria that are outlined here. The developer has been gracious enough to provide this example property, but they aren't going to be judging it. The reality is the criteria are what they are, and if we successfully implement a design that meets those criteria, even if the owner is not happy, we could still win. Right?

[We'll be adding a Developer to the Expert Judges team] specifically to help address marketability, because the truth is, if it can't be sold, you can't win. It doesn't matter how pretty it is, if it so expensive

it can't be built, it's not a real project. The economics will drive that to a large extent and that's one of the criteria.

Do you have a market price for what a home would sell for, not what you would sell the lot to a homebuilder for, but the market? Who's your homebuyer, who's your demographic, what are they willing to spend on the home?

When did the market studies a couple years ago, we were looking at \$130,000, \$170,000 or \$180,000. That's probably come up a little bit, but still not too far away from that range; entry level and first move-up kind of market. When we get into this question I like more and more the thought of having at least some feedback from a homebuilder or somebody that has that marketability piece of the puzzle. We'll be competing in an area where most of the housing is in builder-developed subdivisions in which the minimum has been done. We'd hope to have some advantages as a result of the Low Impact Development approach, but just what those advantages translate into in terms of added value in the sales price of the lots is an open question. The cost-competitiveness of the project is an important issue.

About your commercial tracts, are those movable at all? If the acreage or tract dimensions were still in marketable arrangements, could they be located elsewhere? They aren't on the list of elements that can be ignored, but they do not get masked in green on the revised site plan.

The adjacent ditch is fixed so the depth of those is pretty well fixed. The more the commercial property we have to sell, the better of we'll be. We don't want to make them much smaller. We did quite a bit of work on the commercial tract on the southeast corner to try to accommodate a grocery-anchored center, so I don't think we'd want to shrink the size of that one.

No, I didn't want to shrink them, it was more about location

I think it's probably best to keep those fixed.

Urban Redevelopment Design Challenge Questions

The study about the future of the TIRZ 15 area that you referred to, is it done?

Gensler is doing a study; they're almost done with the first phase. There's a lot of interest that's occurring. Public works has an interest; the George R. Brown [Convention Center] people have an interest. TIRZ 15 is going to fund it. They've submitted the initial draft, its mostly graphics, it's really more of a treatment. If you think of the northern end of downtown, there's a theme or treatment. Initially that's part of their exercise but the other is to make proposals on how you get a lot of people back and forth across the freeway. The results of a Visioning Session that involved many of the key players related to TIRZ 15 are posted on the website in the Design Challenge details for this project, so you can see those. Among other things it references the [professional soccer team], and that this would be adjacent to the facility. They have their own set of needs and wants, and the private sector has their needs and wants. There are a lot of other jurisdictions besides the TIRZ and the City involved.

Is it fair to say that this is going to be a very high profile urban redevelopment project over the next couple years?

I think what's most exciting about it is that it's very likely to be built. The graphics and ideas that come out of this competition will play a role in stimulating the discussion and defining the vision for this area.

Green Roadway Design Challenge Questions

If we're going to participate in this category, the schemes that you developed here, can they be utilized in the [Suburban Residential] category? Can these roadway ideas be applied to multiple projects?

To some extent, a road is a road is a road. Come up with a road design that is green and works for a boulevard in the subdivision, and in one form or another it would probably work on this too. I talked to Dave Nussbaum [of Mischer Investments, LP] before this session and he agrees with that, by the way. The one difference is that his project probably only has one or two boulevard sections and host of minor streets, and we have one boulevard section. But I think the techniques could be almost identical.

What are your needs for lighting and pedestrian access?

In general, Harris County doesn't light roads. We traditionally don't build sidewalks on roads either, not because we don't like doing that, but there are some statutory prohibitions against using road bond funds for anything but roads, but what we would like to see is some trails integrated into the system here. We'd try to stay away from lighted section because of the cost of electricity. There will be lights close to the monument, so that the area isn't completely dark. The monument is the highlight of the area.

Independence Parkway is the approach to the San Jacinto Monument; you may know it as Battleground Speedway, located in Harris County Precinct 2. It is being rebuilt as a linear museum to the history of the area. There will be monuments to battle sites and other historical places and events. This road system will carry many, many children who'll be learning about Texas history as they travel this road. We'll be posting information on the monuments planned for this roadway in the website shortly.