What's Up, College Station? Transcript
Season 4, Episode 45

Grace Hallowell: What's up, College Station? I'm Grace Hallowell, and today I'm joined by Heather Wade, the principal planner from our Planning and Development Services department. Hi, Heather.

Heather Wade: Hi there. How are you?

Grace Hallowell: I'm doing well. Welcome back to the show.

Heather Wade: Thanks for having me.

Grace Hallowell: We are here to give a little update about the Harvey Road project that we were talking about a few months earlier. We have gotten some feedback, and we are still gathering more feedback. So to kick things off, can you explain what this project is for those who may not know?

Heather Wade: We are in the process of developing a long-range plan for the Harvey District. The Harvey District is the small area between Texas Avenue and the highway, and it's bounded by Dominic and Holloman, surrounding neighborhoods of Harvey Road and then the commercial corridor. The project's goal ultimately is to develop a long-range plan to identify a vision for the district for 10 to 20 years in the future and identify strategies for how to revitalize the area.

Heather Wade: Because it is an established area in the city, it's a major gateway to the city and to the university. It's old and aging, mostly developed in the 70s and 80s. There are aging properties, underutilized properties, and we want to figure out how to revitalize the area and where to prioritize those strategies.

Grace Hallowell: What prompted the city to begin looking at the future of the Harvey district, and why is this such an important area to plan for?

Heather Wade: It is identified in the city's comprehensive plan as an area worth further planning. That was the initial direction. As we go through implementing the comprehensive plan, we get direction from City Council on which things to focus on and prioritize. The Harvey Road corridor in this specific area was identified as a high priority because of its importance both for housing and for economic development.

Heather Wade: The commercial corridor itself is one of the key commercial corridors in the city, and it has a lot of importance to not just the city, but also to local residents.

Grace Hallowell: What are some of the opportunities and challenges that the city has identified as it looks at the district's future?

Heather Wade: As we've been doing this project and going through the planning process, we've engaged with a lot of different people and done a lot of data analysis. That's how we've identified some of the big challenges and themes to focus on. One of the big ones has been on housing. This area is known to have some of the most affordable housing in the city, naturally occurring affordable housing.

Heather Wade: One of the big challenges that has come up is how do you revitalize an area, improve housing for people, improve their quality of life, but also make sure that it remains affordable? That's something that we've been taking very seriously and looking at, and our strategies will hopefully reflect that in the future plan.

Heather Wade: Local businesses are a major piece to this area. We have legacy businesses that have literally operated in the Harvey district for decades and they don't plan on going anywhere. Another challenge and opportunity is to identify how to protect those local businesses, but also support them as they continue to operate in the area, while also potentially offering new opportunities or activities to residents and visitors.

Grace Hallowell: How has community feedback helped guide the planning process so far? What have you heard from residents and business owners and those involved in the Harvey district?

Heather Wade: The engagement that we've done is actually very foundational to the plan. Everything that we've done to date has been based off of the feedback that we receive. The vision ultimately that we develop for this plan comes from all of the engagement, all of the input we've had, and everything is iterative and builds on to what we've heard.

Heather Wade: We've heard all sorts of things. We have more than 1,200 touchpoints for engagement. We've gotten a lot of input. It ranges from things people love, things people want to see improved. It can be as simple as, make sure Chuy's stays, which Chuy's is very popular in this area.

Heather Wade: In Texas, I think it's the number one ranked Chuy's in Texas.

Grace Hallowell: Whenever anybody comes to visit from out of town, we go to Chuy's.

Heather Wade: So, very successful restaurant in the Harvey district. Sometimes it's input like that, and sometimes it is, “Hey, we love that you guys are focusing on sidewalks, but can you also consider adding shade as you're improving the sidewalk connectivity?” We've heard a lot of things about comfort, shade, really emphasizing protection of the local park, which is Oaks Park, and connecting to Wolf Pen Creek Trail and the Wolf Pen Creek Park.

Heather Wade: Those are just some examples. We've heard pretty consistently help the local housing and make sure that it remains affordable. People want to see new opportunities in terms of retail. There are places where people would like to see more retail, and the input really does have a large variety.

Grace Hallowell: The city is hosting a community scenarios workshop on November 18th. What exactly is this type of workshop and how does it fit into the overall Harvey District planning process?

Heather Wade: The scenarios workshop is an opportunity for community members and stakeholders to come and look at how we've synthesized everything we've heard so far. We take that input through our engagement work and the data analysis, combine it, and develop different potential futures for the district. There are technical pieces to that, what we call scenario modeling behind the scenes. Ultimately it results in three different alternative futures for the Harvey district. That meeting will present those and let people give their thoughts on whether this makes sense for the area, whether there are pieces to these alternative futures people like or would change, and ultimately it helps us to refine the vision for the Harvey District plan.

Grace Hallowell: Sounds like a lot of fun.

Heather Wade: I think it's going to be a lot of fun. It will be more interactive. It's not going to be a lot of listening to people talk at you. We're getting people to go around to different stations, give their input on different ideas of what the Harvey District could look like in the future.

Heather Wade: They'll get to vote on different things and give their input that way. It'll be interactive, people won't just be sitting in a chair, and we invite anyone and everyone to come.

Grace Hallowell: Can you give us an example of what some of these scenarios might look like?

Heather Wade: We have three primary scenarios that will look at different ways in which the Harvey district could grow. One is focused on small changes to the district—nothing super dramatic, a smaller amount of growth over a 10 or 20 year planning horizon that would look at where you would add to vacant or underutilized sites.

Heather Wade: The second scenario would be focused on more targeted revitalization, which might result in some larger site changes. Specifically, one of the emphases is on Post Oak Mall and the Macy's property, which, because it's a city-owned property, is an opportunity to explore a larger site in terms of how you revitalize an area.

Heather Wade: The third scenario is going to be more of that dramatic change, if we were to really see the Harvey District just totally transform. That's going to be looking at much broader change to not just homes, but retail and potentially more change in terms of looking at where mixed use might go.

Grace Hallowell: Some residents might wonder whether the scenarios presented at the workshop are actual developmental proposals. Can you explain the difference between exploring possibilities and making final decisions?

Heather Wade: Absolutely. That's a great question. These scenarios that we are showing are very hypothetical. They're not development proposals. There's no plan to have any kind of immediate change. It's just hypothetical scenarios for examples of how things could change so that we can talk through what the vision for the area is.

Heather Wade: Sometimes it's hard to really define that vision without thinking through examples that you can actually see. This is taking everything that we've heard and putting it down visually on a map so people can get an idea of what it really means when we say rehabilitate this area or change this area to be a mixed-use development.

Heather Wade: It'll include maps that show this visually, but we'll also have renderings that show, at the street-level point of view when you're standing somewhere, what it could potentially look like in the future. If you were walking down a street, what it would look like to you. That's really impactful when you're trying to talk about what a place potentially changes into in the future.

Heather Wade: The goal is to give people a better visual idea of what we're talking about when we talk about different types of revitalization and what the possibility is for the future.

Grace Hallowell: How will the feedback collected during the November 18th workshop influence the next phase of the Harvey District plan?

Heather Wade: The feedback we get is really critical. We suspect there might be things that people like from each of the scenarios. Ultimately, the goal is for us to identify what we call a preferred scenario, which is the visualization of the ultimate vision for what the Harvey District could become in 20 years.

Heather Wade: We take everyone's input from the different scenarios to identify what people liked and didn't like, and those can be combined to create a preferred scenario. My guess is that it'll be a combination of the three scenarios, and ultimately we'll be able to refine the modeling and the ultimate vision based off of all of that input.

Heather Wade: It's really important that people come because we need to know what they think of these different ideas so we want the plan and its vision to reflect the community's desires for the area.

Grace Hallowell: Right, a collaborative effort. Let's go over the details for the event. When and where is it, and what can attendees expect when they arrive?

Heather Wade: It is going to be on Wednesday, November 18th from 6 to 8 p.m. It'll be at the Visit College Station Center, 1207 Texas Avenue in College Station, right next to City Hall. We'll have signs up so people aren't sure where to go, and we'll be out there directing people to the right building.

Heather Wade: People can expect a series of interactive stations—no formal lecture or anything. We're inviting people to come out and visit these different tables and check out these different ideas for the Harvey District.

Heather Wade: They'll be able to give their input through sticky notes, dot voting, comment cards, interact with staff, ask questions, in an open-house style.

Grace Hallowell: Do residents need to have any prior knowledge of the Harvey District plan or planning terminology to participate?

Heather Wade: Absolutely not. One of the things that we've built into the workshop is we will have a couple of stations that explain the process to date and the analysis that we've done, including everything that we've heard from the community. There will be two specific tables on everything that's been done so far.

Heather Wade: People can give input on, “Hey, I think you might have missed something,” or share thoughts and questions about anything that we've done up to this point. There's nothing required in terms of coming ahead of time—no homework. Everything will be presented in a way that anyone can come and give input, and we'll have staff set up throughout the meeting space to answer any questions.

Grace Hallowell: If somebody cannot attend the workshop or is just curious about more information about the project, where can they go to learn more?

Heather Wade: They can go to the Harvey District Plan website at www.cstx.gov/harveyroad.

Heather Wade: If they have specific questions or want to provide input and can't attend the meeting, they can send their input to me directly at hwade@cstx.gov. I'm always open to receiving feedback. If people are interested in viewing the scenarios and they can't come to that workshop, we will be providing PDF versions of the workshop materials online.

Grace Hallowell: What is one thing that you hope residents take away from this workshop?

Heather Wade: The biggest takeaway for residents would be that their input matters, and that ultimately what they bring to us in terms of their concerns, values, or desires really does have implications for what we end up putting in the plan. The engagement piece is super critical and foundational to the plan.

Heather Wade: Even now for this part of the process, we're at the point of really refining the ultimate vision. Their input really matters. I don't want people to think that it's a waste of their time because it really is important and will have an impact on what goes in the plan in the end.

Grace Hallowell: Absolutely. Before we go, we have a fun little lightning round. Are you ready?

Heather Wade: I'm ready.

Grace Hallowell: What is one thing every great neighborhood needs?

Heather Wade: I think every great neighborhood needs a gathering place, a place where you can expect to run into people you know. It doesn't have to be something where you spend money; it could be a park or some kind of public space. Gathering spaces are really critical to great neighborhoods.

Grace Hallowell: What is one planning feature you wish more people would notice?

Heather Wade: I would say it's the little things, like shade, for example. A lot of people view shade as a little thing, but it ultimately has a really big impact, and I don't think people realize how significant the little things really are. A sidewalk is great until you're walking in the sun and it's 100 degrees outside.

Heather Wade: Things like shade make a really big difference, as do gardens and green space.

Grace Hallowell: If you weren't working in city planning, what career would you try?

Heather Wade: I am a plant hoarder—I heard the saying, "It's not hoarding if it's plants." I feel like maybe I'd like to try my hand at running a plant nursery, a place where you grow plants and sell them. I feel like that could be really fun. I don't know if I'd be good at it, but it seems like it would be a cool job to have.

Grace Hallowell: What is your favorite season in Texas?

Heather Wade: Fall, 100%. I love fall, as long as it actually feels like fall. Fall is one of the more real seasons we get in Texas, and I like fall and everything that comes with it.

Grace Hallowell: Finally, what is one word you would use to describe the future of the Harvey District?

Heather Wade: Connected.

Grace Hallowell: Connected. That's a good one. Well, thank you so much for joining me today, Heather. Thank you. And that's what's up.