

# Waco might expedite ballpark phase of master downtown development

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9 hrs ago



An overview of the strategic roadmap for Waco's downtown redevelopment includes four phases in downtown Waco and a potential fifth phase in East Waco. The Ballpark District is at the far left in green, with Barron's Branch district adjoining it in a pinkish color.

Hunt Development Group, provided

Interest from builders of sports stadiums has caused the city of Waco and its contracted master developer to consider creating a minor league ballpark sooner than later.

The downtown redevelopment plan that rolled out in June called for a “Ballpark District” at the former Indian Spring Middle School campus in the fourth phase, which could take as long as 12 years to start.

However, the plan by Hunt Development Group adds the project could be done sooner depending on developer interest.

Waco officials have been surprised at the quantity and persistence of developers in following up on the Ballpark District, Tom Balk, the city’s director of strategic initiative, told the Waco City Council on Tuesday.

“There’s a bunch of sports entertainment development groups that have stayed in contact with us and tried to ask the same question in a variety of ways: ‘Why can’t we do this (ballpark district) first?’” Balk told the council during an extended work session on capital improvements.

The [plan envisions that the Ballpark District](#) would include a baseball stadium with at least 6,000 seats, surrounded by retail, restaurants, mid-rise multifamily units and a boutique hotel in right field. The 24-acre district lies between Jefferson Avenue and Bosque Boulevard, and between Third Street and the Brazos River.

Sports and entertainment districts like the one proposed are hot and should remain hot over the next couple of years, City Manager Bradley Ford said at the meeting.

The Hunt plan begins with Phase 1A, called the Barron’s Branch District, encompassed by Washington and Jefferson Avenues, Fourth Street and the Brazos River. Other phases would involve creating a new municipal building at Heritage Square and relocating the convention center, leaving the ballpark to the last phase.

A video produced for the city shows a potential look for the area where Barron's Branch approaches the Brazos River. For more from the city about the plans and opportunities for public input, go to [wacodowntownredevelopment.com](http://wacodowntownredevelopment.com).

But city leaders Tuesday said that in 10 to 15 years developers may not be as interested in a ballpark district.

City costs for Phase 4 are estimated at \$181 million, in today's dollars, including financing, but it would secure around \$225 million in initial private investment. The Ballpark District is projected to create more than \$1 billion in taxable added value over 10 years, with \$47 million in land appreciation, according to council documents.

The use of the baseball park would be exclusive to a sports franchise on days needed for baseball games, but the city could use it for concerts and public events, or lease it out to others around the need for games, officials said.

Meanwhile, Phase 1A is projected to cost between \$167 million to \$171 million and unlock \$231 million in taxable added value over 50 years and \$36 million land appreciation.

That initial phase creates a festival-oriented public space in the form of an amphitheater and surrounding green space.

Redevelopment would include La Pila Plaza along Jefferson Avenue near the Brazos River. It would build a second underground tunnel for Barron's Branch creek to prevent flooding, plus larger water and wastewater mains that would benefit a large area of downtown.

It would create a landscaped walkway along the creek flanked by mixed-use buildings.

The creekwalk would resemble a small-scale version of the River Walk in San Antonio, officials have said.

At Tuesday's meeting, Balk proposed a hybrid concept that would delay the creekwalk, buildings and amphitheater of Barron's Branch while building La Pila Plaza and infrastructure, and adding the Ballpark District to the first phase.

Balk also said the potential stadium builders didn't object when told that they would have to build the surrounding mixed-use developments before the stadium itself.

That mixed-use development could include a smaller venue like Texas Live, in Arlington near the stadiums where the Dallas Cowboys and Texas Rangers play, Balk said. It would also include surrounding buildings, similar to the Domain in Austin.

“This is increasingly common for successful ballpark districts,” Balk said by email Wednesday. “We expect elements to include, residential, office, retail, dining, hotel, and entertainment.”

The Ballpark District cannot be built without the infrastructure components of Phase 1A, Balk said.

Added to the Ballpark District for the Phase 4/1A hybrid would be essential downtown utility capacity building:

- \$24.6 million for a new large-diameter water main to downtown from the Riverside Water Treatment Plant for drinking water.
- \$24.1 million for a new West Bank Interceptor for wastewater.
- \$19.5 million for the second drainage tunnel on Barron’s Branch.

Adding these features into a Phase 4/1A hybrid would reduce the cost of the Barron’s Branch District, Balk said.

Some council members were excited Tuesday by the possibility of building the ballpark first, while others wanted to stay the course. No votes were taken during Tuesday’s retreat on the capital improvements plan.

Council Member Alice Rodriguez recalled the old Katy Park ballfield as a place for families to go on weekends, and said she hoped the new ballpark would bring similar opportunities.

“I support the stadium,” Rodriguez said.

“I’ve always thought of Waco as a baseball city: not just Baylor football and Baylor basketball.”

Rodriguez also said that many Hispanic community members and former Waco residents have told her they are excited about La Pila Plaza.

Council Member Andrea Barefield of District 1 also supported the ballpark. Council Member Josh Borderud, District 3, said he preferred the original phasing plan.

He said the council should build a beautiful public space like the creekwalk planned for Phase 1A, to keep faith with constituents.

Council Member Darius Ewing, District 4, said he didn't love moving the ballpark up.

He reminded the council that they put the ballpark late in the phases to make sure the market is there. He said it should be left for later, a direction Council Member George Chase agreed with.

After the council discussion, Ford summarized the next steps for Balk and the Hunt team.

"Keep on track with Phase 1A design and expedite conversations with potential builders and developers within Phase 1A," he said. "And while you're doing that, also keep up the communication with the sports-entertainment district developers."

Ford said in a Wednesday email that he wanted to stay on track with Phase 1A because of community feedback supporting La Pila Plaza and the creekwalk.

Balk said the city and Waco ISD are negotiating a plan to exchange properties, including the Indian Spring school property now temporarily occupied by Kendrick Elementary.

"The formalization of land transactions will take shape through the first part of 2025," Balk said in an email Wednesday.

Meanwhile, the city and Hunt will initiate a proposal process with the ballpark developers and also ramp up marketing efforts for the mixed-use buildings in Barron's Branch District, Balk said.

Ford said he expects to bring an update on the hybrid proposal to the council in March.