Urban Design Visions for Riverside, Paso Robles

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Following the CRP Department’s tradition of community-oriented projects with real clients, the authors discuss their studio work for the City of Paso Robles Community Development Department. The students explored development scenarios and urban design ideas for the area between the Salinas River and the railroad tracks, including more memorable, walkable and livable spaces, and stronger connections to the downtown and the rest of the city.

In the Fall Quarter 2016, the City of Paso Robles Community Development Department charged the third-year design studio (CRP 341 Urban Design III) at Cal Poly’s CRP Department to develop pre-planning urban design visions for public and private lands between the Union Pacific Railroad tracks and the Salinas River, from 1st Street to 24th Street. During this ten-week period, the 35 students enrolled in the studio engaged in rapid information collection and data gathering, analysis, conceptualization, and visioning, leading them to develop specific urban design proposals.

Initial discussions with the city indicated that the student work would be a pre-planning phase, a rich and broad-ranging visioning exercise in which the energy of twenty-nine undergraduate planning students would be turned to imagining creative and dynamic options for selected areas of Riverside Paso Robles. The hope was that these ideas might capture the imagination of various constituents in the city and stimulate follow-up commitments that could result in the formation of a new identity and imageability for this area of the city.

This article can only comment on a small part of the bulk of the work submitted to the client in the form of posters, a powerpoint, and a 386-pages final report. The main goal of the work was to provide an array of possibilities that stakeholders, community and city might assess and judiciously select from for further exploration.

The Project Site and Process

The project site is adjacent to Paso Robles downtown core, but it is disconnected from it by both the railroad tracks and Highway 10 (Figure 1). The railroad and highway run north-south and separate the project site into long, somewhat narrow, land segments that are connected east-west at only a few streets. Each intersection offers varying levels of safety and security of crossing.

Most economic and recreational activities in the project area are not oriented to or are unable to take full advantage of, the proximity of the highway and the thousands of motorists and tourists that use it and pass by this site. The existing hodgepodge of city-serving, industrial, and highway-oriented land uses, vacant properties, together with poor development conditions results in a visually unattractive and underutilized environment despite the fact that the site is in a prime location and contains six access points to the city that are designated as gateway sites in the City’s Gateway Plan.

The area is perceived to be lacking in legibility and failing to add to Paso Robles’s image and identity. Currently, there are many land uses and services in the area that are useful to the city and its economy, but, some present challenges when examined in the context of the area’s long term potential and fit with the city’s development vision.

Figure 1: The project site delineated by the Salinas River, the railroad tracks, 1st and 24th Streets.
Students assessed, in some detail, the strengths and weaknesses of the overall project site and the needs of the community to identify the opportunities and constraints the site offered for the future development of Paso Robles. The assessment considered the project area within both the neighborhood and the region. Interviews with target stakeholders and the community at large were carried out by the students in the project site (74 individuals), besides an on-line survey with the support of the local newspaper (152 responses).

Following the overview analysis, the class identified six specific focus areas forming the site, and sub-teams were formed to deal with each of them. The student teams did a thorough investigation of their focus areas including a survey of existing conditions (through a pre-designed lot survey form), and identified catalytic sites where changes might potentially be most transformative and easily attained in the next ten years. Elements examined included land ownership, the quality of the built environment, and the desires of stakeholders.

The concept plans for the focus areas seek to offer design visions that would contribute to the City of Paso Robles’s effort to revitalize the Riverside area and strengthen its connections to the Salinas River and the rest of the city, overcoming the existing barriers. These visions can be achieved in the short and medium terms, and would help the overall area to realize its full development potential in the long term. Next, very brief descriptions and illustrations representing the ten project visions developed for each of the six focus areas.

**Area 1 - Team 1A: South River Gateway**
**Austin Forde, Mariah Gasch, Daniela Koeller, Yliana Ortega**

This plan envisions an attractive gateway to the Paso Robles Street corridor from the Highway 101 exit by providing a mix of commercial and residential uses that are visible as one drives along Paso Robles Street. It strengthens both automobile access and pedestrian and bicycle connections to the Salinas River. A roundabout intersection will serve to calm traffic and give access to a new Frontage Road, running parallel to Paso Robles Street, which forms the backbone of the residential component of the project. Facing the road will be first-floor townhouses and multi family apartments over ground floor parking which minimizes potential damage in areas of the site which are within the 100-year flood prone zone. There single-family homes zone is located at the South end of the site. A plaza facing the roundabout provides an open and welcoming entrance to commercial enterprises and will serve to attract visitors into the development.

**Area 1 - Team 1B: Salinas Equestrian Commons**
**Lindsey Klein, Sabrina Meleo, Kenzie Wragge, Amy Gunn**

This alternative vision for Area 1 is based on an equestrian facility and equestrian-oriented development to cater for both residents and tourists, meeting a regional need. The proposal includes a barn-shaped building for equestrian-related activities that can be converted into a space for events such as weddings, fairs, and other social gatherings. Adjacent to the barn there are boarding and exercise areas for horses, and an open recreational field spreading out towards the Salinas River. Equestrian events and polo games will be hosted in this field, but also music concerts and other outdoor gatherings. A small boutique hotel and equestrian-oriented shops are located along Paso Robles street. A roundabout helps direct and calm arriving traffic, allowing access to parking lot designed to accommodate horse trailers and overnight rental occupancy. These facilities are complemented by a public park and a pedestrian trail leading along the Salinas River corridor, serving as a gateway to restore vitality to the floodplain.
Area 2 - Team 2A: Paso Robles Riverfront District  
Cro Pilato, Hunter Kelly, and Sam Hughes

This proposal envisions a live-work and multifamily residential area and pedestrian friendly gateway to the Salinas River at the intersection of 13th Street and Paso Robles Street (Municipal Public Works site). This corner gives access to a plaza fronted by two-storey buildings with public use and retail on the ground floor with residential above, and industrial live-work buildings. Food carts, coffee shops, public seating and landscaping provide vitality to the plaza. A riverwalk connects it to adjacent focus areas and to an attractive open central plaza along Paso Robles Street. This second plaza opens up to the Salinas River and the mountains beyond. The facilities surrounding the plaza provide services to local workers and tourist/visitors, including a theatre style community center, an art incubator, leasable spaces, and mobile food stations. Public seating, shade structures and pathways to walking and bike trails along the river further open up this area to the river front.

Area 2 - Team 2B: West River Village  
Sam Camacho, Alyssa Chung, Rob Etter

This proposal includes a first phase with investments to enhance the existing streetscape and pedestrian facilities, introducing a consistent aesthetic along Paso Robles street and developing a trail system along the Salinas River. Public/private partnerships are called for. Phase two consists of three mixed-use developments linked along the riverfront by the multiuse trail. The first features commercial and retail along Paso Robles including uses such as a neighborhood grocery store with multifamily residential above that could accommodate senior housing. The second site provides a linear park that opens up views of the hills, recreational space for residents and ground floor commercial uses with live-work units and offices on the second floor. The third site offers ground floor space for commercial and light industrial uses such as wineries, commercial services and small-scale operations with minimal freight traffic, plus the unusual suggestion of multifamily residential on the second floor to help support the existing industrial uses and to and generate a distinct identity for the area.

Area 3 - Team 3: The Crossings  
Ian Connolly, Heather McCoy, Marco Romagnoli

As the south gateway to this narrow, long, strip of land, The Crossings creates a restaurant/retail district on a city owned lot that enhances the Derby Wine Estates and nearby businesses. Additional developments include mixed-use housing and retail, commercial, and a building for start-ups (the MakerSpace) to complement the adjacent downtown. Site improvements include redesigned streets for better vehicular and pedestrian circulation, improved linkages to Downtown, new parking, and accentuating a “green” image. The Crossings
is a pedestrian friendly district with the urban character of the downtown. Physically disconnected from the downtown this concept prioritizes improving the physical linkages across the railroad. A new pedestrian crossing is created from the railroad station to a newly proposed plaza on Riverside Avenue. The current southernmost rail crossing on Pine Street is moved and reconfigured as a new at-grade crossing on 4th Street. Design includes elements such as pedestrian safety gates and rubber track inserts with flangeless fillers and a continuous design identity between the two sides of the railroad tracks.

**Area 4 - Team 4A: Corridor to the Oaks**  
Hannah Chiu, Maddie Pritchard, Willow Urquidi

This proposal includes key elements such as a gateway linking eastern and western Paso Robles, improving circulation along 13th Street from Pine to Creston, stimulating catalytic transformations on seven lots, and facilitating biking and pedestrian movement. Streetscaping is enhanced with attractive, native, and water conserving landscaping. A protected central bike lane along 13th Street continues south on Railroad Street providing a safer alternative to downtown. The northwest corner of 13th and Railroad streets features a kiosk for bike services and products. Bike racks designed as artistic pieces enhance place identity, and art murals and centerpieces are encouraged. New commercial/office buildings fill empty and underutilized lots and plenty of pocket parks are provided. A pedestrian greenway will connect 13th to 12th Street with plenty of seating. New and redesigned parking lot help alleviate local needs and an indoor shopping center/market place and retail outlets on the corner of 13th and Paso Robles Street accent this important gateway, strengthening the linkage between east and west Paso Robles.
Area 4 - Team 4B: Paso Robles Downtown Corridor
Tornia Wilson, Ana Padilla, Lauren Gaul

The first, five-year phase of this plan, executed in a five-year period, implements basic infrastructure and intersection improvements. The historic downtown in the west and modern residential areas of the city in the east are linked by 13th street which crosses Highway 101 and the Salinas River to be intersected by Riverside Avenue and Paso Robles Streets. This grid serves both tourists and locals, linking them to the businesses and cultural sites such as the fairgrounds and Pioneer Park in northern Paso Robles. The second long term phase, encompassing 10-15 years, consists of a new pedestrian bridge linking 12th street over Highway 101 which is fronted by mixed-use buildings. A river lookout/plaza at the end of the pedestrian boulevard celebrates a transition between the natural environment of the river and the built environment of the city. It features a look out that faces the river and hills beyond.

Area 5 - Team 5A: North Riverside Corridor
Audrey Ogden, Melina Smith, Connor Lavi, Kaileigh Johnson

This proposal enhances destination places such as Pioneer Park and Museum, creates diverse housing, augments green spaces, and increasing walkability. Design includes improved sidewalks and paseos with pedestrian lights, new crosswalks, bike lanes and a formal railroad crossings to connect foot traffic directly to downtown. Pioneer Park is enhanced with a new design and accesses, and pocket parks in selected street blocks and along the railroad tracks contribute to a stronger sense of community. Proposed zoning changes increase opportunities for live-work spaces, mixed use, and affordable housing and will help attract commercial businesses. Reconfiguration of various existing lots are proposed to facilitate vehicular and pedestrian traffic, better access to residences and business and help create an inviting and lively environment.

Area 5 - Team 5B: Pioneer Greenway
Eric Martinez, Megan Miller, Jorge Nozot, Gabriel Ward

The Pioneer Greenway establishes a commercial node at the intersection of Riverside Avenue and the 17th Street exit off Highway 101, marking the arrival into the city. Two-storey buildings with welcoming urban corners for pedestrians offer retail and commercial on the first level and residential apartments on the second. Clear wayfinding features will direct the public to nearby landmarks. In the second phase access to Pioneer Park and Museum is improved with street signage, improved sidewalks, crosswalks, and pathways to enhance the pedestrian experience. Redesign and improvement of Pioneer Park and its facilities, a walking and biking path around the park, redesign of the museum to add a community facility will make this complex a community center. New housing, community gardens, and pocket parks along Riverside Avenue strengthen the residential areas. Landscape medians and traffic calming elements on Riverside Avenue soften the transition between the street and the developed areas, and strengthen the connection between the Fairgrounds and Downtown.
Area 6 - Team 6: 24th Street Gateway Improvement
Michelle Huang, Ashley Wong, Matthew Fluhmann, Samuel Love

Providing a welcoming and memorable introduction to Paso Robles from the North this plan creates a pleasant and engaging entrance gateway to the city and develops three focus area. The focus area is the corner of 24th Street and Highway 101, and its major existing element is the Midstate Fairgrounds. Our concept features signage and public art with a pioneer theme, a playground, a visitors’ center, a redesigned gas station, new commercial space, and the redevelopment of the existing parking lot along Riverside Avenue with a parking structure with commercial on the ground floor facing the street and residential above. The visitor’s center will include a meeting room for welcoming functions and community events. Commercial buildings and a small plaza occupy the corner of Riverside and 21st Street. The intersection of 24th Street and Park Street an underutilized lot will now feature a new community park and two mixed-use buildings or a small boutique hotel serving the Fairgrounds.

Logo developed by student Eric Martinez to represent Paso Robles Riverside Area.