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Orange poised as must-see place to be

By JAMIE REID
The Enterprise

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Is a trolley in the future for downtown Orange?

ORANGE -- Recently released plans for Orange are reminiscent of San Antonio's River Walk, with a ferry ride down Adam's Bayou and a luxury hotel hugging its banks.

Then there's a touch of New Orleans, with a trolley skirting a downtown of quaint shops and historical buildings.

But wait -- there are echoes of Austin's walking trails along a waterway, and even Galveston's Moody Gardens, with many acres of botanical gardens.

It's a little of all these and more, a distinctive package local leaders hope to develop and market to tourists as Orange, Texas.

Please come.

Those same leaders admit these are big, expensive plans that will take years to see through, but they are possible, said Jimmie Lewis, director of planning and community development.

And why not?

Orange already has several historic and cultural attractions, including The Stark Museum of Art, Lutcher Theater and the W.H. Stark House, which draw some visitors.

Plus, as early as 2007 the Shangri La Botanical Gardens and Nature Center will open its 252 acres of gardens, exhibit halls, outdoor classrooms, boardwalks hundreds of feet long, a theater, café and numerous small gardens. When it does open, Lewis expects visitors to increase.

City leaders want those visitors to stay overnight in an Orange hotel, eat at an Orange restaurant, shop at an Orange boutique.

Right now, there's just not enough stuff -- or enough marketing of attractions -- to draw and keep people here, Lewis said.

That's where these new plans come in.

But, it all started pretty simply.

City leaders have known for years they want to develop along the Sabine River, near Simmons Drive, where they already have 190 acres. They built a boat launch this year, and are eager for a space for festivals and something to attract outdoorsy vacationers,

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They're just not sure how to approach it.

So in April, officials interviewed three design firms to pitch ideas about the riverfront.

Dallas-based MESA Design Group came back with citywide plans involving Interstate 10, downtown, Adam's Bayou and Shangri La.

The emphasis on tourism -- shopping districts downtown, new hotels and outdoor activities -- would move the city away from its dependence on industry.

"It was something we wanted to do all along," Lewis said. "They turned out to be the right company."

The city, with financial help from The Stark Foundation, paid about \$240,000 for MESA's detailed plans. Last week, the design firm showed those initial plans to the City Council.

Highlights from the plans:

- *Simmons Drive, to be renamed Sabine River Parkway, would be expanded to six lanes, enhanced with native landscaping and serve as the city's main entrance. The Interstate 10 on and off ramps would be renovated so visitors can easily enter and exit the city. A city monument near Simmons Drive is proposed to let visitors know they have entered Orange, while an information center could show off city offerings.*
- *A riverfront park near Simmons Drive may include an amphitheater, 20,000-square-foot civic center and festival area with vendor booths. Walking trails, ponds, a marina, canoe dock and a small golf course could give residents ample space to enjoy the river and all its offerings.*
- *Additional land near the riverfront, once the home of Navy housing additions, would be used for residential development that includes homes on canals and along the golf course.*
 - *In downtown, visitors could get on a trolley that would run along Green Avenue, Simmons Drive, Park Avenue and 16th Street. Small, retail-minded businesses such as boutiques, coffee shops and souvenir vendors are expected to find homes here.*
- *A veterans' museum and memorial are proposed near the downtown riverfront, while space is left nearby for Lamar State College-Orange to expand.*
- *The boardwalk flanking the Sabine River would allow Lamar students and downtown visitors to walk along Front Street between Second and Fourth streets.*
- *A luxury hotel with a conference facility is planned near Interstate 10, north of Shangri La Botanical Gardens and Nature Center. The hotel might tie into an existing golf course at Sunset Grove Country Club, which was designed by world-renowned architect Donald Ross.*
- *An Adam's Bayou ferry would take people from Shangri La to a downtown trolley stop.*

The plans are preliminary and subject to change, Lewis said. Representatives from the city and the design firm will meet the second week of December to flesh out the ideas, Lewis said.

A final plan is expected to be in place by the end of 2005.

Then, the city will decide what aspects to explore first, Lewis said. Officials will look for developers and entrepreneurs to invest and take the plan bite-by-bite.

"I think it's all doable," Lewis said. "But some of it is going to take longer than we might expect."

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