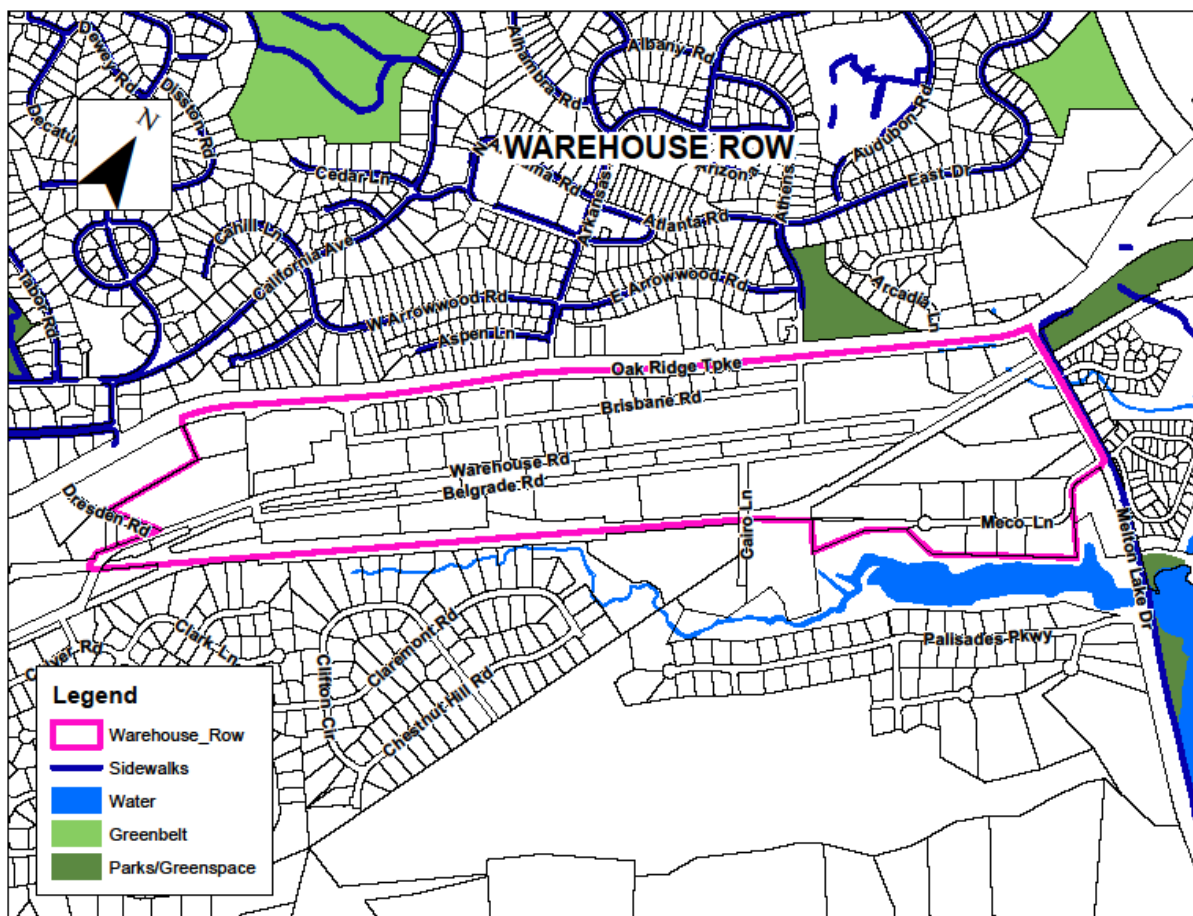


WAREHOUSE ROW

SUB-AREA

Warehouse Row is an older development of mixed retail, office, warehouse and light industrial uses in a linear development defined by frontage on the eastern end of the Oak Ridge Turnpike and three closely spaced parallel streets between the turnpike and an abandoned railroad track.



Function, Character and Zoning

This sub-area serves a broad range of business needs. The frontage on the Oak Ridge Turnpike provides the visibility and traffic volumes to be attractive for several businesses that depend on drop-in customers, exposure to large numbers of potential customers or good regional accessibility at a lower cost than premium locations. There are some high quality office facilities for public agencies, the U.S. Department of Energy and the Tennessee Department of Homeland Security. There are several retail outlets, plus sales or service dealers for equipment or products that require substantial space and lower land rents.



A large office on the turnpike

As one moves away from the Turnpike to the parallel streets on the interior of the area there are older buildings mingled with newer buildings and vacant lots. Here the character is more industrial. One finds warehouses, industrial services (welding for example), and a variety of light industrial activity. Some of the buildings are relatively new and are attractive, several are old and poorly maintained. The level of economic activity is also mixed. There are well manicured light industrial firms with a fleet of service vehicles parked on-site, and antique sales out of almost derelict older industrial buildings. Mecco Lane, a short cul-de-sac off Melton Lake Drive, is a relatively new development with several modern well maintained businesses. There are still several vacant parcels in the development. Two activities normally associated with heavy industry are located next to each other on Belgrade Road, a scrap metals recycling business and the Oak Ridge Animal Shelter. The former is screened from the street by trees and the latter is set back a significant distance from the street.



Well-maintained industrial and retail buildings

The zoning of the sub-area is generally consistent with the current land uses. The properties fronting the Oak Ridge Turnpike are mostly in a business zoning district, while the interior areas are zoned for industrial uses. These business and industrial districts allow a wide range of commercial and industrial uses. The Meco Lane development is zoned IND-2, for heavy industry.

Condition

This sub-area serves important economic purposes in the city. There are modern attractive business buildings with well-maintained grounds mingled with buildings that are older or less well maintained. The areas on the roads that parallel the Turnpike have a disjointed and cluttered appearance. The area lacks the kind of visual cohesion one finds in modern industrial parks. The Meco Lane area is an exception to this observation, but its appearance would be improved by regular mowing of vacant lots.



Industrial buildings along interior streets

Signage in the sub-area is like the buildings, mixed in appearance. Individual signs appear to meet city codes, but each relates to its building and site, with little coordination among the signage as a collection. They convey information, but they tend to reinforce the disjointed visual effect of the area. There are a few exceptions along the turnpike where signs for a collection of businesses in a center are consolidated on a unified display at the entrance.



Transportation

Access to this sub-area from other parts of the city or region is good because of its frontage on the Oak Ridge Turnpike.

Circulation within the area is generally good, although there are localized issues. The Turnpike is a four lane highway with a median strip that allows turn lanes at entrances to frontage businesses. Some of the points of entry are at places where there is no traffic signal. This can make ingress and egress during times of peak volume a challenge.

Circulation to parcels on the interior streets appears to be satisfactory, but some of the businesses will generate movement of large trucks. In some locations the trucks will have to use the street as maneuvering space to line up with loading docks. This may not be a problem given the low volume of traffic on these streets, but it could be a source of conflict between neighboring businesses.

Safety

Several different kinds of safety issues are possible. There are challenges with some of the turning movements to access frontage properties along the Turnpike. The vacant older buildings in the interior of the area sometimes attract vagrants. The vacant older buildings with openly accessible parking areas are sometimes used as a place where people abandon junk cars. None of these issues are critical to the economic health of the sub-area at this time, but issues of this nature impede improvement of the area.

Findings, Recommendations and Place-making

Warehouse Row contributes to the life of Oak Ridge in a workman like way. It provides places of employment and services. Its appearance is OK, not especially good and not especially bad. In places it is modern and neat, in places it is neither of those things. There is potential for improvement.

There is a public interest in the economic health and appearance of this district. It is one of the visual gateways to the city. It is also a substantial space devoted to business activity that could tip toward reinvestment and improvement, or it could slip into decline that would make reinvestment less and less likely. It is unclear if there is momentum in either direction at this time. Signals are mixed. Here are some things to consider.

It is time to connect the dots among several proposals that have already been made. There is an Oak Ridge Waterfront Development Plan, completed on December 14, 2009. Some elements of that plan have been implemented. It includes proposals for improvements in the Elza Gate area, a land area that lies just across Melton Lake Drive from the sub-area and extends east, bounded by the Oak Ridge

Turnpike and the Clinch River. There is also a planning process beginning on a “Rails to Trails” project that would have its eastern terminus in the same area and extend south and west through this sub-area using the abandoned rail right-of-way that runs alongside Belgrade Road. It is recommended that the design team for the “Rails to Trails” project be encouraged to explore how the two projects could be most effectively integrated, pulling the effects of an improved lakefront and a new trail into the Warehouse Row sub-area. A nature oriented trailhead near the lake will be attractive to many people. But a small public gathering place/park near the intersection of Belgrade Road and Cairo Road could serve as an alternative trailhead for people who would patronize shops, food and entertainment activities in the district.



Abandoned rail line east and west of Melton Lake Drive

Continued improvement of the lakefront area and an “on the ground” trail along the old rail line would be a stimulus for new uses to repurpose some of the older warehouse buildings in the area. A restaurant, bike shop, and microbrewery are some of the possibilities. The older warehouse buildings have the kind of spaces often sought by artists. The existing zoning would allow most of these new uses. This is not a proposal to replace warehousing and light industrial activity with new “trendy” things. On the contrary, the long term interests of the property owners and the city will be served by a revitalized commercial-industrial district. But new activities can provide a market for underused spaces, especially in a time of transition. The kind of uses suggested are not necessarily in conflict with traditional light industry.



Vacant land near the abandoned rail line

The most important element leading to improvement of the district could come from the businesses and property owners in the area. They might want to consider forming a property owners association to encourage coordinated improvements in the district. Business owners may now feel little incentive to put time or money into efforts to improve the appearance of their property. But acting together in a coordinated way they might be surprised at what they could achieve with relatively little investment, not only in the appearance of the area but also in marketing older buildings to new uses. Action on the part of the private sector in the area would be an incentive for the city to also invest to improve the area.

The most challenging element of a district improvement program would be to make an overt effort to create a more pleasing gateway effect on the Turnpike. The Turnpike between the corporate limits, just beyond the rail viaduct, and Melton Hill Drive is a pleasant drive with the Elza Gate Park on one side of the road and natural vegetation on the other. But at Melton Hill Drive there is an abrupt transition to strip commercial development with all the visual clutter that goes with it. Coordinated efforts of public and private sectors might make it possible to improve the transition.