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Environmental impact of FasTracks under review

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AURORA | The planning process for a new light rail line in Aurora is moving forward, despite unresolved questions about the future of the larger FasTracks program.

Beginning July 10, the draft environmental impact statement for the Interstate 225 section of the Regional Transportation District's planned FasTracks project will be open for public review. The public input process, which lasts until August 10, will include open meetings at 4 p.m. on July 22 at the Summit Conference and Event Center in Aurora, as well as the opportunity for the general public to weigh in on RTD's plans via phone and e-mail.

The draft document outlines a wide range of potential impacts and effects of the proposed expansion of the light rail line along the I-225, a stretch that's been slated to include about 10.5 miles of new track and eight new transit stations.

"Basically, we have public comment for the next 30 days, then we have our public meeting in between," said Larry Warner, I-225 project manager. "Depending on the complexity of the comments, there could be another public meeting ... If the comments are minor in nature and we don't get too many public comments. Everything is documented in the final environmental evaluation ... Then that final environmental evaluation gets blessed by the RTD board of directors."

The draft document includes details about different potential impacts of the project, including the amount of projected noise that will come as a result of the new line, right-of-way issues, business relocations and the impact of vibrations on the medical campus at the former Fitzsimons Army hospital site and at the Anschutz campus on East Colfax Avenue.

Even as the planning process for the I-225 line progresses, the future of the larger FasTracks project remains uncertain.

During the past year, RTD officials have presented a wide range of options to deal with the estimated \$2.1 billion budget shortfall for the estimated \$7.9 billion-dollar transit project, including scenarios that could see the full construction of the Aurora segments delayed well past its original estimated completion date of 2017, even as far as 2034. Another suggestion would see the construction of a portion of the track ending at the Aurora Town Center that could be completed by 2017, but which would offer limited service for commuters.

Or, RTD has suggested, taxpayers could foot the bill, paying more to see the project completed on time. The agency has suggested bringing the question to voters in 2010.

All of these options represent a stark departure from the original RTD plans for FasTracks, approved in 2004, which envisioned the full completion of about 119 miles of new rail in the metro area for about \$4.7 billion.

Since then, the price tag has ballooned to \$7.9 billion, an increase that RTD officials have blamed on escalating costs of raw materials. As a result, they've estimated they can only cover \$5.8 billion by 2017.

While the ultimate fate of the project has yet to be decided, the environmental planning process for the 225 line is continuing as planned.

"This does not limit us from implementing this (plan) in phases. It doesn't have a specific shelf life," Warner said. "If it's years before it gets started ... RTD would have to look at the document and see if it needs to be updated."

According to the draft documents, the next steps for the planning process will include additional engineering work, identifying and starting the process to procure an appropriate 404 Permit from U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and conducting additional studies and analyses related to noise and hazardous materials.