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Development plans detailed for light rail areas

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AURORA | The city's new stretch of light rail may be surrounded by high-rise apartments, pedestrian-friendly plazas and other mixed use developments, according to planning officials.

At an initial public workshop session April 3 held at North Middle School, representatives from Aurora's planning department paired with lead designers from an Oregon-based urban design firm to present preliminary station area plans for a future RTD line.

The 10.5-mile span of light rail track, which is slated for completion in 2015, would run from the current Nine Mile transit station to a new terminus at Smith Road and Peoria Street. The station area workshop, which was spearheaded by city staff, served as a complement to a similar public meeting led by RTD last month.

City officials detailed three major sections of the light rail line, which would run along the I-225 corridor. In addition to the Peoria-Smith area, which would serve as a link to the east corridor line to DIA, staff discussed Fitzsimons/Colfax and the Abilene stations as major areas of focus.

"We're making decisions this year that will influence the land alignment," said John Fernandez, the city's manager of comprehensive planning. "The kind of development that can occur around rail stations is different than the suburban model of development. (It's) taller buildings, mixed use projects, places where people want to walk and gather and take the train. One of the major things we're doing is re-examining our zoning code."

Lead staff from the urban design firm Crandall Arambula, based in Portland, Ore., discussed their ideal vision for the Aurora project and spoke in general terms about the public input process.

"These are not abstract exercises with us. This is all about implementation," said George Crandall, principal of the company. "The idea is to create the kind of environment where we would all like to live."

Crandall stressed finding the right mix of land uses, promoting the use of transit, creating bike and pedestrian connections, managing parking and traffic circulation and creating harmony with existing sites. Crandall suggested a development that could include a grocery store, in-line retail shops, office spaces, support services, residences and a public gathering area.

In terms of financing development around the stations, Crandall pointed to the major role of private investment. Whereas a transit project of such scope could be expected to garner \$28 million in public funding, he said, the figure for private investment was closer to \$2.1 billion.

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