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Import

Developers balk at light rail talks

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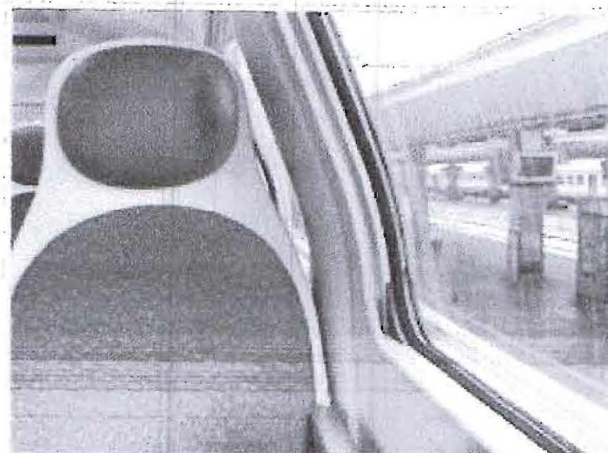
Property owners cite city's level of involvement

By J.C. O'Connell

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AURORA | Local lawmakers halted plans June 21 to study the development of land that will one day surround an important light rail station, after developers complained about the city's hands-on approach.

City staff proposed creating a Station Area Plan for the future light rail station, which would include an economic study and a vision statement of what the city has in mind for the now empty site and surrounding area.



But the site's owners said they'd already conformed to Aurora's Comprehensive Plan and Master Plan and more city involvement would only slow their progress.

"We're very interested in building a project that's successful and that's all we're interested in build. We're not interested in building a memorial to a vision," said Kevin Hawkins, a member of Woodbury Amsource Group, which owns the land.

The vacant plot of land in question is just east of Sable Boulevard and south of Alameda Avenue, which puts the proposed light rail station near the Aurora Mall and city hall.

Deputy City Manager Nancy Freed said the city needs to consider more than market forces as the area is developed, such as connections between the light rail station and surrounding community.

"This is probably one of the most important sites we have in the city," Freed added.

The developers said they are going to conduct their own market study in the next two months to find a viable mix of retail, housing and office space that should be built in the area.

They also promised to share the results of the study with the city.

City council members voted to wait for the results of that study rather than spend \$80,000 and nine months to conduct an economic study of their own.

But city staff argued that while Woodbury Amsource's project is the largest component planned around the future light rail station, there are other pieces to the puzzle and the city should demonstrate that the development of the area is a priority.

The discussion briefly shifted to whether or not the city and the developers can rely on RTD, which has almost a \$1 billion shortfall in the FasTracks light rail system budget, to build a light rail station in the planned location.

"We as a city have to be committed to this project," said Bob Watkins, director of planning.

If the city stops planning for a light rail station, Aurora will be sending a message that it's not committed

to the current FasTracks plan, making it easier for RTD to break its promise to build a station in that location, city staff said.

But Wendy Mitchell, president of the Aurora Economic Development Council, said city officials could regret causing any delay in the developers' plans.

"We can't look like we're giving up (on a light rail station) ... I do worry that we, at some point, are going to have to look at Plan B," Mitchell said.

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