



# AURORA THE VOICE OF Sentinel ONLINE AURORA, COLORADO

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## Heavy demand for light rail parking

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People exit the light rail March 18 at the Nine Mile station at Parker Road and Interstate 225 in Aurora. (Photo by Heather A. Longway-Burke /The Aurora Sentinel)

**AURORA** | On a typical weekday morning, parking spaces are a rare commodity at the Nine Mile Park-n-Ride.

The RTD transit station at Parker Road and Interstate 225 serves as the terminus for two light-rail lines, and its parking garage boasts three levels and approximately 1,225 spaces.

Since the first light-rail cars made their maiden voyages from the Aurora station in 2006, that parking capacity has failed to meet morning commuters' demands.

"If you get there by 7:30 or 8 a.m., it's filled up," said Larry Warner, I-225 project manager for RTD's FasTracks project. "The light rail opening triggered the capacity issues out there."

It's a basic question of supply and demand that's sent many riders looking for parking farther up the line at the Dayton and Hampden stations during the past 16 months. It's also a concern that spurred a constant chorus of public questions, as staff from RTD's FasTracks program unveiled their latest plans last week for a new light-rail line that would stretch from East Iliff Avenue north to Peoria Street.

At two consecutive public meetings held March 12 at the Summit Event and Conference Center, RTD engineers and planners updated the public on preliminary plans for the FasTracks I-225 corridor, a project that would see 10.5 new miles of track and seven new transit stations in Aurora by 2015. With an estimated budget of \$620 million, the I-225 corridor portion is part of the larger, \$6.2 billion FasTracks project passed in 2004 that would add approximately 122 miles of new rail transit throughout the metro region.

During the two meetings, the FasTracks staff revealed the latest plans for the line's alignment, a winding route that would start on the east side of I-225, run along Abilene Street, cut east along East Exposition Avenue, west at the Aurora City Center and veer further east on Montview Boulevard before continuing north to Smith Road along Peoria Street.

Amid the discussions of alignment, station locations and mixed use development along the light-rail route, the majority of the public's



Aurora resident Chris Walsh waits at the Nine Mile light rail station to go to night school at Community College of Denver March 18 at South Parker Road and I-225 in Aurora. (Photo by Heather A. Longway-Burke/The Aurora Sentinel)

questions and concerns came back squarely to the issue of parking.

FasTracks officials were quick to address the question, albeit in general terms. Park-n-Rides were proposed at Iliff Avenue, the Aurora City Center and Peoria Street, and a piece of RTD property on the east side of I-225 at East Colfax Avenue could be used for parking for the elevated Colfax station. FasTracks staff also suggested working with business owners along Abilene Street to lease parking space during their off hours.

"In relation to parking, we don't have real firm quantification of numbers," Schock said. "Every place we've stopped, we've heard about parking and the need to provide adequate parking."

The project is still in its initial planning and screening phase, and engineers are working with numbers specified in the FasTracks ballot issue passed in 2004. The original plan designated 1,800 ground-level spaces for the I-225 corridor, a number gleaned from the Denver Regional Council of Government's 2025 transportation model published in 2002.

The latest growth study published by DRCOG in December, 2007, stretches to 2035 and may call for greater demand in the I-225 corridor. It's a possibility that may make FasTracks planners and engineers look for other funding sources to add spaces.

The question has also spurred the city of Aurora to launch its own fact-finding efforts to make sure the parking needs match the available resources.

"The city's going to be looking at their own demand," said Loretta Daniel, a spokesman for the city's planning department. "The city is just in the process now of retaining a consultant. The parking study is on quite a fast track. That will be completed in about six months."

According to FasTracks officials, they are working with the city to make up for any potential parking shortfall.

"Our challenge is going to be balancing what the model says compared to what our budget gave us. There's a possibility that the 2035 model will show a higher demand of parking than what was budgeted," Warner said. "We don't have any more money, so how do you balance the parking needs? The City of Aurora, they're doing their parking management plan and looking at opportunities to have some private parking structures."

Such private parking structures could be part of the larger mixed-use developments surrounding the new transit stations, areas that could include more pedestrian-oriented businesses and residential developments.

During the public sessions, Daniel outlined the city's current station area plans, which could re-configure the landscapes neighboring the future stations.

"What the program is looking at is what can really happen in terms of land use around the stations," Daniels said, pointing to the current development at the Florence area of Colfax as an ideal example of mixed-use development. "Aurora doesn't have a downtown, so these transit stations provide the opportunity of having a different kind of development."

RTD's expenditures could extend beyond rail and transit station construction to infrastructure improvements along the corridor. The bridge spanning I-225 at Yale Avenue would have to be reconstructed for the light-rail line, a project that currently lies within CDOT's scope. With budget constraints stalling the project, however, RTD may have to move first on refitting the bridge.

"If it's something that needs to be done for FasTracks, they would have to do it because we do not have the funding," said Mindy Crane, spokesperson for CDOT. Crane said that the current plans to widen I-225 between East Second Avenue and East Alameda Avenue would begin in 2009, and that the Yale Bridge reconstruction

would not be included in project. "We've worked very closely with RTD on these issues, to make sure that they follow the proper standards."

The new alignment would involve procuring approximately 30 feet of CDOT right of way, but FasTracks staff cited the Yale Bridge project as the biggest issue in terms of coordinating with the state.

"We agree with CDOT that we need to replace that bridge," Warner said. "We're going to be utilizing their plans, we'll be the ones building it."

Warner said that the Yale Bridge project would be included in the general contract, and that construction would begin with the rest of the corridor in 2011

While RTD staff have cited the prospect of 1,800 spaces from RTD and additional private and shared parking as a potential solution to the current capacity issues, the new corridor may produce issues of its own. Warner said that expanding the line beyond Nine Mile could ease the demand, but he questioned the logic of the equation. New riders from east of Iliff could add more strain to a strained system, he said.

"Typically, when you move an end-of-line station, it relieves that (current) end-of-line station," Warner said. "I don't feel comfortable using that in our defense. It's a gut feel. Where are the riders coming from who are using Nine Mile today? The Parker Road corridor Adding the Iliff station, or even farther up north, that's not really going to help relieve the congestion at Nine Mile, just based on the demographics of the ridership."

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