

CONCRETE CHANGES: Light rail construction at Iliff and I-225 cements disruption

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AURORA | A dotted line on a map is all that represents a planned pedestrian bridge between Heather Ridge neighbors and the Iliff Avenue light rail station. The larger picture for 33 acres of blighted, mostly vacant land near Interstate 225 has many lines — some dotted — as the city and contractors work to fill in the rest of the picture for residents around the light rail station. Financing is a major part of the picture, too.

The bridge detail was the primary concern for residents who crowded into a meeting room at Heather Ridge Golf Course on Feb. 13 to hear the city's first public update on what will be done with areas near Iliff and Nine Mile stations, where land has been approved for urban renewal projects.

"When you're looking at votes and people, I think you should move the bridge up to a higher level of priority," said one resident during the meeting, pointing out that more residential units are located on the west side of the highway versus the east where the Iliff station, and much of the city's new development, will be based.

Andrea Amonick, the city's director of development services, said the walkway is part the city's longterm vision for transit-oriented development around the station, which would include higher-density housing and mixed-use neighborhoods.

"Urban renewal plans should be viewed as living documents that can and should be amended as conditions change," she said.

According to the plan, improvements such as roadway realignment and pedestrian pathways to the station could be obtained through tax increment financing, which uses some tax money to reimburse developers for project costs.

So far, a minimum 600-space parking garage that will be located on the northwest corner of Harvard Avenue and Blackhawk Street is making the most progress. The city expects a private contractor to be selected to build the structure by July based on a request for proposal it issued in January. Amonick said the parking structure, which the city along with RTD budgeted \$9 million for, was chosen over two surface parking lots for the area as a way to encourage diverse development near the future Iliff light rail station. "The more development we get, the more parking we will have available," she said, describing the concept of shared parking, where some retail and restaurant parking could also serve light rail commuters. Whether the King Soopers near Regatta Plaza would be affected by future development of the 56 acres deemed blighted by the Nine Mile urban renewal plan was also a concern for residents at the meeting. The Nine Mile blighted area—bounded roughly by East Cornell Avenue to the north and west, South Parker Road to the south, I-225 to the east, and some property north of Cornell Avenue and south of Parker Road—is considered to have 11 blight factors, according to the Nine Mile plan, with the redevelopment of Regatta Plaza projected to have the most significant impact on the area. "We've been working with King Soopers and they are very interested in staying within the area," Amonick said. "They would like to expand, and give you guys a newer store. The site they currently own isn't big enough for them to expand. There is the possibility as part of this collaborative process to try to figure out if they can relocate on the site and get a brand new building. Key Bank is interested in that as well." -- Key Bank is interested in that as well."

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to redeveloping the plaza has been getting the four property owners located in it to support a proposal, according to the plan.

"The purpose of the urban renewal plan is to provide tools that will act as incentives to make them act together. We can help them finance a group project, we have certain acquisition tools available to us. We can look at RFP from developers that might involve other purchases of property. The reason we do urban renewal is we have more available to us financially and process-wise," Amonick said.

The city has used tax increment financing for the past decade to re-invent its aging, strip-mall infrastructure with mixed results. Incentives like use tax rebates and tax increment financing have created large-scale shopping centers like Gardens on Havana. They've also floundered with projects like the \$1.8 billion mixed-used development called Horizon Uptown that never materialized.

The next public hearing for the adoption of the Nine Mile Urban Renewal plan will be April 14. The plan can be viewed online at auroragov.org/NineMile. A public hearing for the Iliff Urban Renewal Plan has not yet been scheduled. The plan can be viewed online at auroragov.org/IliffTOD.

- See more at: <http://www.aurorasentinel.com/news/concrete-changes-light-rail-construction-iliff-225-cements-disruption/#sthash.4B33PY0D.dpuf>