

Aurora Avenue Land Use Visioning and Urban Design Study Summary from Community Meeting #2 – December 8th, 2008

Approximately 30 residents and business owners were in attendance. Paul Fischburg, OPM, Gordon Clowers, DPD, and Eric Schmidt of Cascade Design Collaborative, described the agenda for the meeting and reviewed results of the previous meeting on November 10th. The purpose of the meeting was to review and gather comments on four possible alternatives with different geographic emphases and different levels of change. Three of these alternatives represent different geographic focuses and different degrees of change in the identified focus areas. One of the alternatives assumes that existing regulatory and geographic focuses would continue indefinitely with no changes.

- **Public Feedback:** The discussion about these alternatives was meant to assist City staff and consultants in focusing the urban design study properly in its next stage. The discussion touched on relationships to transit stops and the desired level of improvements in the sidewalk environments, but also provided perspectives on whether more intensive land use or zoning strategies should be explored in greater depth. Two of the three small-group discussions tended to favor a higher degree of change and a more aggressive strategy. One of the small groups included several persons that were more cautious about the need for aggressive land use or zoning strategies and were concerned about the potential for negative spillover impacts into the adjacent neighborhoods. Regarding geographic areas of focus, there seemed to be a majority of interest among all the groups in addressing the southerly portion of the business district just north of Winona Avenue N. However, a variety of opinions were expressed that also favored examination of possibilities in other parts of the corridor as well.
- Other commentary during the meeting expressed an interest that any strategies that would affect the area's zoning, especially the more aggressive approaches, should be shared with a broader public audience and be thought out in more detail. These commenters believed there would be widespread public interest in knowing about such changes and understanding them in enough detail to provide for a broader cross-section of public input. Including such information in the City's website, along with opportunity for comments on that website, was the preferred way to proceed.
- At the end of the meeting, participants used small stickers to note their preferences about specific transit station area concepts as well as their favored approach among the four alternatives portrayed on large posters. The distribution of stickers favored the most aggressive change-alternative, and the stickers related to geographic areas were distributed fairly evenly among all three of the targeted subareas in the district with a slight emphasis on the Winona Avenue vicinity.

Review of Issues

1. Potential urban design/streetscape improvements

The consultant and city staff quickly reviewed some of the input received from meeting #1, and described the overall relationship of the displayed alternatives to targeted design and

streetscape improvements around transit station areas. They described the possible limited-area or broader-coverage with streetscape improvements covered by the alternatives.

Public Feedback: Consistent with the workshop meeting #1 discussions, the discussions in meeting #2 tended to agree with the list of functional needs as well as the full set of urban design improvements suggested by the consultants. A complete set of street and sidewalk design and other functional roadway and pedestrian safety elements would generally support the functional and aesthetic objectives that most commenters voiced as needs for Aurora Avenue.

Favored types of urban design improvements included:

- Median with aesthetic treatment (plants, special paving and street light)
- Wider sidewalks (in the 10' to 15' range) and improvements to accessibility and comfort of all users on the sidewalks (for example, fixing narrow and bumpy patches and removing impediments to ADA-compliant pedestrian passage)
- Improved pedestrian realm (art, improved lighting, landscaping, and furnishing treatments)
- Creation of public spaces with amenities along the sidewalk
- Provide weather protection for pedestrians
- Incorporate historic icons within building facades

Functional needs included:

- Fix drainage problems
- Limit curb cuts
- Slow down vehicles to aid traffic safety and pedestrian safety (reduced speed limit?)
- Improve police protection
- Improve maintenance and upkeep of streets and sidewalks
- Reduce vehicle noise impacts on surroundings (through different pavement?)
- Maintain or expand on-street parking supply on Aurora Avenue; be mindful about spillover parking in the neighborhood streets
- Make the street work for pedestrians, local and regional traffic, and transit

2. Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) station locations

BRT station locations and their relationship to subareas shown in the alternatives were discussed. BRT stations were noted as preferred by Metro to be located at the far side of each of three signalized intersections. The consultant recapped the design conceptual process that led to the identification of a few different selected street-end closures or partial closures of local streets' intersections with Aurora Avenue (possibly only in one direction of travel). This was described as a method favorable to accommodating larger sidewalk amenity areas as well as transit stations, generally at the first residential cross street after each signalized intersection. According to this concept:

- The 90th Street BRT stop would have stations at 91st Street (northbound) and 89th Street (southbound).
- The 85th Street BRT stop would have stations at the current bus stop location northbound (there is no cross street at this location) and at 84th Street southbound.

- The 77th Street BRT stop would have stations at 78th Street (northbound) and 76th Street (southbound).

The full or partial street-end closures were described as likely helping to calm traffic, reducing parking impacts to the neighborhood, and helping to develop pedestrian focused “green” streets and sidewalk amenities for accessing transit. Transit station plazas would need good lighting and preferably be spaces activated by adjacent pedestrian oriented business uses for public safety and security.

Public Feedback: Public commentary on the street-ends concept was mostly supportive. Also, the idea of concentrating sidewalk improvements in the immediate vicinity of the BRT stations was supported as a logical approach, especially if improvement funding would be limited. A few commenters were interested in ensuring traffic safety at these revised street-end locations, as well as dealing with the potential spillover effects of other traffic on the next cross-streets. How they relate to adjacent businesses was also of interest.

3. Sidewalk widening

Each of the alternatives would provide a framework that seeks to require an improved and more pedestrian supportive environment with future development along Aurora Avenue. However, the geographic extent of these private improvements varies in the alternatives. Sidewalk needs were identified in the Action Agenda and reinforced by public commentary at the first workshop and Aurora Avenue Merchants Association meeting.

Due to the need to use most of the right-of-way for vehicle travel lanes, the sidewalk can probably only be widened if it is extended into adjacent private property. If all other things remain equal, this would mean narrowing the property depth available for buildings, at least at the ground level. Because many of the properties along the corridor are of limited depth, any sidewalk widening would also be a factor that discourages the financial feasibility of new development, unless creative strategies are sought. The consultant provided a number of sketches to the small groups, illustrating possible layouts of buildings and how they relate to property depth as well as financial feasibility of development.

Creative strategies to accommodate sidewalk widening and future development feasibility were described during the small group discussions. Options such as a flexible height limit strategy (allowing one additional floor in new buildings), changing zoning boundary lines to allow for deeper Aurora-facing parcels, or other combinations of such strategies are ideas that have been used in other cities to strengthen and improve streetscapes.

Public Feedback: Most commenters agreed that the existing sidewalks are too narrow, especially in the width that is available for foot traffic, due to the impediments of poles, trees and adjacent landscaping. The sidewalks also are seen as offering pedestrians not much physical or psychological buffer from traffic (although parked cars help), and no protection from splashing of puddled water believed to be caused by poor drainage.

Parcel dimensions were described by the consultant as critical in determining whether redevelopment can be done efficiently and profitably by a developer. Parcel depth dimensions in increments of 65 feet and/or incremental increases of about 25 feet provide for efficient and logical

architectural design for parking, residential, and hotel building layouts. In addition, due to the noise from traffic on Aurora, the consultant suggested that residential uses would preferably face the quieter side streets, not Aurora, and therefore expanding the land use boundaries for some shallow parcels near the transit stops could be beneficial for higher density redevelopment.

Public Feedback: Interactive discussions in small groups suggested that the participants understood the implications of parcel depth and how it affects feasibility for new structures to be built. They also understood the difficulties posed by needed vehicle traffic lanes, limited-width sidewalks and limited-width properties. A diversity of opinions were expressed in the groups that showed interest in examining the possibilities of different arrangements for future uses, but also a sense of caution about the possible spillover changes that might extend further from Aurora Avenue into side-street areas. There was not a clear consensus verbally expressed as to which among the three subareas might be more favored or less favored for the possible future growth strategies. However, several persons noted the logic of focusing around transit station areas. There was also no consensus as to the desirability of mixed-use development in the given areas, although the groups generally understood the benefits of “new urbanist” and “transit-oriented development” principles.

4. Land use alternatives

City staff and the consultant described the possibility of making changes to zoning boundaries and allowances in order to encourage future growth and change in the subareas along Aurora. The consultant described the range of change represented within the alternatives, and how they would also relate to facilitating improved sidewalks in the transit station areas.

Alternative #1 – No Action

Would maintain the existing zoning boundaries and height limits along the corridor. Could require additional sidewalk setbacks of five feet upon redevelopment.

Alternative #2 – Focused Transit Station Overlays

Would expand the commercial (NC) zone boundary along the Aurora corridor by one to two parcels east or west of existing zone boundary lines and would allow an additional one floor of building height for parcels directly adjacent to and across from the BRT stations (approximately 800 ft. north and south along Aurora at each station area). This transit station area overlay would intensify mixed use residential densities just at the station areas while allowing existing zoning for commercial areas to continue unaffected for about 65% of the Aurora corridor commercially zoned area. The commercial (C or NC) zoning boundary depths would increase to approximately 130’ to 180’ along Aurora.

Alternative #3 – Expanded Transit Station Overlays

Would expand the commercial (NC) zone boundary along the Aurora corridor by one to four parcels east or west of existing zone boundary lines and would allow an additional one floor of building height in a six to eight block area adjacent to and near the BRT stations (approximately 800 to 1,200 ft. north and south along Aurora at each station area). This potential transit station area zoning overlay would intensify mixed use residential densities at the station areas while allowing existing zoning for commercial areas to continue unaffected for about 40% of the Aurora corridor. This alternative would also include a new multifamily/

townhouse (L-2 or L-3) zoned buffer area two to four parcels deep between the mixed use station areas and adjacent single-family zone areas. These L-2 or L-3 zoned residential areas would join existing L-2 and L-3 zones to form contiguous buffers between commercial and single-family zones along the corridor. The zoning boundary depths would increase to approximately 300 feet for commercial NC zones, with an additional 100 foot depths for L-2 and L-3 zoned transition areas from the Aurora Avenue frontage.

Alternative #4 – Transit Oriented Corridor

Would expand the commercial (NC) zone boundary along the Aurora corridor by one to two parcels east or west of the existing zone boundary lines (similar to Alternative #2) and would allow an additional floor of building height along most of the corridor as part of the BRT station areas (approximately 800' to 2,600' north and south along Aurora at the various station areas). This potential transit station area zoning overlay would increase mixed use residential densities along most of the corridor while limiting existing commercial zoned areas to about 20-25% of the corridor. The multifamily/townhouse L-2 or L-3 zoned residential areas would extend for one to two parcels deep on the east and west sides of Aurora Avenue. These L-2 or L-3 zoned residential areas would join existing L-2 and L-3 zones to form contiguous buffers between commercial and single-family zones along the corridor. The zoning boundary depths would increase to approximately 180 to 230 feet.

Notes on Small Group Discussion Commentary

Table 1 (Paul)

- Preference for wider sidewalks
- Do the dead end plaza areas become dangerous places?
- Preference for one-way vehicle traffic through the plaza – safer
- Dead end plaza does create opportunities for outdoor cafes
- How about commercial NC zoning deeper – one lot more, in exchange for wider sidewalks rather than more height?
- Perhaps require height step-downs adjacent to Single Family parcels
- Like the concrete bench and planter edge for safety in the plazas – at curb edge
- “Nodes” of wider sidewalks would be more realistic. It can concentrate redevelopment in those nodes for more rapid transformation.
- What is the possibility for low income housing in these redevelopment schemes?
- Who would be in charge of the maintaining the plaza spaces- with or without shelters?
- How much traffic is there on these proposed dead-end streets? Need to study those impacts
- Could shop the idea to each street neighborhood and see if they are interested, and which option they would like
- How does the Aurora traffic compare to traffic on Lake City Way?

Table 2 (Gordon and Eric)

- Should place photos of these types of street ends (Vancouver B.C.?) on the web site.
- Neighborhood side streets have many impacts from Aurora corridor commercial uses – Noise, cut-through traffic, and parking for Aurora businesses and bus riders
- Not enough on-street parking!
- Future development needs more on-site parking of 1 space per residential unit is NOT enough
- What are impacts to single-family residential home values if the commercial zoning is increased in height or boundary lines are expanded?

- Traffic on Linden Street is already increasing as Aurora is overcrowded
- Citizen opinion: neighborhood parking stickers are not a likely parking control strategy, due to the City's cost to manage
- Do we need three bus nodes in this area? (75th, 85, and 90th?) Can we do with fewer – two now and more later? Will there still be local service as well as BRT?
- What effect would these choices have on bus travel times to Downtown?
- Might it be a good idea to favor the residential part of mixed-use development in the rear portions of Aurora Avenue parcels – to avoid noise issues on Aurora and harmonize better with residential areas to the sides? Possibly there should also be a step-down in the height or bulk of buildings nearer the single family properties
- Need different types of multi-family residential designs and effective design review processes to protect against development like the recent multi-family project that would place parking on a residential alley!
- What are the residential and commercial growth trends for these areas, and what would they be for transit oriented development nodes?
- Is this exercise just an excuse to rezone single family zones across a much wider area, such as west to Linden Street?
- Can we develop a web based discussion forum for the ideas and results of this study?
- No clear opinions expressed about focusing in one particular geographic area or excluding certain areas

Table 3 (David)

- The plan *should* be visionary (i.e., should not be conservative and limited by current constraints)
- Like the holistic approach of using land use changes and right-of-way improvements to create a pedestrian supportive environment
- 15-foot wide sidewalks (face of curb to back of sidewalk) are inadequate and should be wider to accommodate a generous planting area, buffer, and pedestrian amenities
- Really like the street-end plazas for BRT stops
- The land use alternatives that have more pronounced nodes (#2 and #3) have less cumulative impact (i.e. interface length) on single family zones, so may be more politically tenable
- In land use alternative #3, perhaps allow only residential uses along Aurora between the station area zones?
- Favor the “organicness” or the unique character that each of the nodes might develop in the node alternative (#3).
- The 85th Street node could and should accommodate much more density and height than the other two nodes
- Green Lake Drive is a gateway street to Green Lake and should be treated like a boulevard
- Alleys parallel to Aurora should be encouraged
- Buildings should be tall along Aurora
- The 85th Street corridor will also become more dense over time
- Should look at the Greenwood Design Guidelines, as they have been successful
- Not sure about the BRT stops on either side of Winona in Alt #4; the diagonal crossing at Winona is awkward and seems dangerous
- Don't like Alt #4 because there is no focus; too much of the same along the corridor
- Should consider building arcades as a way to provide sidewalk space without restricting development too much