

Landowners' appeal to city: 'Grow east'

2 miles of frontage along Interstate 25 awaits development

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FORT COLLINS - Locked for years behind an invisible barrier to Fort Collins' growth, a group of landowners will begin a push for city cooperation in turning the east side of Interstate 25 into a commercial money-maker.

At stake for them and the city, they say, is economic viability.

"It's an opportunity for Fort Collins to gain back what it's lost," said Steve Pfister, a commercial broker who owns property at the northeast quadrant of Interstate 25 and Prospect Road, at the southern end of the swath.

"Our sales tax is eroded. Our employment base has eroded. Until now, the political climate has been unfriendly. But I think now the chances are excellent. The climate is right."

The ownership group, organized informally under the name "E-25 property owners," controls about 400 acres of land spread from Vine Drive on the north to Prospect Road on the south. Pfister said interest from adjacent landowners in the cooperative planning effort could add another 200 to 400 acres, leading to a tract as large as 800 acres that could be master planned with economic development, rather than residential lots, in mind.

Besides Pfister, the owners' group includes:

- n Les Kaplan, former city planning director who has developed residential and commercial projects in Windsor and Fort Collins.

- n Jim Mokler, like Pfister a broker with Realtec Commercial Real Estate and developer of the Interchange Business Park at the southeast corner of I-25 and Mulberry Street.

- n Fort Collins builder Dennis Sinnett, Mokler's partner in the Interchange Business Park project.

- n Brothers Dave and Rick White, Denver-area real estate developers who last year purchased 130 acres of I-25 frontage between Mulberry and Prospect from Wellington cattleman Dallas Horton.

Kaplan said the group might benefit from the abrupt shift by Alabama-based Bayer Properties Inc. away from plans to build a "lifestyle" shopping center on East Harmony Road.

"The future for the city's sales tax base is not on Harmony Road, but on I-25," said Kaplan, "The city misplaced its desire to work with retail developers when they put an emphasis on having another regional shopping center on Harmony Road. That was misplaced energy and misplaced public expense."

Kaplan, who plans to develop a 47-acre tract he owns south of Colorado Highway 14 near the junction of I-25 to accommodate an "entry-level" housing project, said his development would move forward with or without city annexation. He said his support of a unified plan for the adjoining parcels was in the city's interest rather than his own.

The city's political history - one that drew a line at I-25 to constrain urban growth - has begun to shift, partly through revisions last year to City Plan, Fort Collins' framework for growth and development.

While most of the land owned by the E-25 group lies outside the city boundary, the plan revisions put much of it within a newly set growth management zone.

Chief Planner Ken Waido said that might open the door to development proposals.

"If they're talking about second- and third-story commercial development, then that something I think we would be interested in talking about," Waido said. "The boundary is not set in concrete."

The group has already hired an unnamed design firm to work on plans that would unify the various parcels under a single master development scheme.

But what the frontage might look like in the next several years will depend on the city's willingness to embrace the thought of jumping the highway wholesale.

"I guess people are always making comparisons," Pfister said. "You could compare what we have in mind, on a smaller scale, to the Denver Tech Center, Centerra, Flatirons. But we're in the early stages of looking at it as one big piece."

Dave White, a partner with his brother and other family members in Land Acquisition and Management LLC of Littleton, said he preferred to assume a low profile until he and other property owners meet with City Manager Darren Atteberry and other city officials, a meeting the group requested in a letter last week.

"The city's input is critical right now," White said. "I see Fort Collins now as being in a very similar position that Boulder was in a few years ago, when their tax base shifted to nearby towns."

Kaplan said that the owners' offer to work with the city on a plan for appropriate commercial development of the east side of I-25 would be the best economic strategy for building employment and boosting sales tax opportunities.

"I think losing the lifestyle center is what the universe intended to have happen," he said. "This gives the city a chance to capitalize on more than a mile and a half of frontage on I-25. We're saying, 'Here we are. We want to work with you, and we're making it easy.'"