

# Planners betting on light-rail boom

## But projects along I-25 have to deal with negative impact of busy highway

By Stuart Steers

Rocky Mountain News

The light-rail line along Interstate 25 is spurring a development frenzy around the rail stations that will open next year, marking what could be a back-to-the-future change in the way the metro area grows. The rail line, part of the T-REX project between Broadway and Lincoln Avenue (south of C-470), will have 13 new stations, most of them on the west side of I-25. Plans are under way for new residential and commercial development that will create homes and workplaces for thousands of people within walking distance of the stations.

Ironically, this new growth pattern is a throwback to the way Denver neighborhoods were shaped a century ago, when homes and businesses sprang up along streetcar lines.

The T-REX rail line is next to a freeway, however, which some say is a major detriment to creating pedestrian-oriented zones around the stations. But that hasn't stopped developers from backing new projects along the line.

"Transit is a super amenity," said Gary Woods, principal of Bradbury Properties, which is planning as many as 2,000 condos and apartments around the Lincoln Avenue station.

"Light rail will take you downtown reliably; it's at your doorstep. We're betting on this."

### Residences already going up

Hundreds of condos and apartments already have been built around the Lincoln station site, which won't open until the end of 2006.

That is just the beginning of the development along the new rail line. Denver is planning as many as 4,000 homes and 2.2 million square feet of commercial development at the former Gates Rubber plant near the Broadway station. That area will be a crucial hub in Denver's emerging rail network, with three rail lines intersecting there.

Greenwood Village is creating a 45-acre downtown around the Arapahoe station, which it calls Village Center. The plan, which is now being finalized, calls for a high-rise district on both sides of I-25 that would allow residents to do without their vehicles.

"We envision it as a focal point of our community where people can go for shopping and eating and live and work within walking distance of a high-quality transit system," said Melissa Gallegos, spokeswoman for Greenwood Village.

Veteran Greenwood Village developer John Madden is planning residential projects near the future Orchard and Arapahoe stations, too.

"We're talking about 1,000 or 2,000 residential units," said Madden. "There will be a lot of people buying who want to get rid of one car and have something new and exciting. It's something we're ready for."

Smaller developments also are planned at several of the other light-rail stations along T-REX. Gas topping \$3 per gallon has boosted RTD ridership, and developers like Madden are convinced that home buyers will leap at the chance to get out of their cars.

### **Walkable neighborhoods**

Public officials are hoping these projects - known as transit-oriented development - will help the metro area grow without creating gridlock on the freeways. They also view it as an opportunity to create new walkable neighborhoods like those found in cities with established rail systems.

"Some of the greatest neighborhoods around New York and Chicago were built around transit," said Peter Park, Denver's manager of planning and community development.

"We have the opportunity to do that again."

Park notes that many of the neighborhood shopping districts that Denverites love - including South Gaylord in Washington Park and the 32nd Avenue and Lowell Boulevard area in northwest Denver - were originally along transit lines.

"If you look at old streetcar maps of Denver, all of the commercial districts evolved because of the trains," he said. "Denver has the DNA to make a city around transit."

However, many planners who work to link neighborhoods to train stations say creating pedestrian-friendly areas next to a freeway is problematic.

"Building around highways is incredibly difficult," said Tim Van Meter, a Denver-based architect who consults on transit-oriented development around the country.

Van Meter says the lanes of screeching traffic down I-25 mean that projects will have to wall off the freeway, as well as the light-rail station.

"I can't think of anything worse to live next to than a highway - (except) maybe an oil refinery," said Van Meter.

He is more optimistic about the development potential along the FasTracks lines, which won't debut for another decade. Most of those light-rail lines run along existing rail beds, without the disruption of huge highways.

"They go through old industrial parts of town with wonderful opportunities for redevelopment," he said.

### **Adjacent to the highway**

Many of those involved in planning the areas around the T-REX stations acknowledge the difficulty of creating walkable neighborhoods there, but insist that it can be done.

"The ideal transit-oriented development is to have the station, and you draw a half-mile radius and have intensive uses within walking distance," said Peter Kenney of the Metro Mayor's Caucus. "If your station is adjacent to the highway, you only get a half-circle of development."

Many of the planned urban villages along I-25 will have pedestrian bridges spanning the freeway. That can be daunting to some commuters.

"If you ask people to walk on a bridge over a freeway, it's not as comfortable as walking to a station in a city," said Shelley Poticha of the Center for Transit Oriented Development in Oakland, Calif.

Poticha said creating walkable neighborhoods near stations is essential to the success of mass transit, since people within walking distance of train stations are five times as likely to use them as people who drive to the station.

"Park-and-rides are fine, but walk-and-rides generate the most ridership," she said.

Judging by the response to the loft and apartment projects already open near the Lincoln station, many people will jump at the opportunity to live near light rail.

"The first weekend we opened we took 120 reservations," said Laurie Merrill, who has worked on marketing for the Lincoln Square Lofts, a 140-unit development across the street from the rail station.

Merrill said everyone involved in the project was surprised at how strong a draw the future rail station was to buyers.

"It appeals to them in a way we didn't comprehend until we opened that property," she said.