

Fort Collins Coloradoan

BY KEVIN DUGGAN • KevinDuggan@coloradoan.com • June 3, 2010

Fort Collins seeks vision for Harmony 'gateway'

Imagine office buildings, shops and a variety of housing types built along a waterway where gravel piles now sit southwest of the interchange of Harmony Road and Interstate 25.

Sound familiar? Local developer Jay Stoner and his business partners have been talking about such a development - Riverwalk - for several years. But now Fort Collins officials have conjured similar images as they craft a land-use plan for the area they are calling the Harmony Gateway District.

The vision for the gateway would be solidified through an amendment of the Harmony Corridor Plan that was adopted in 1991. The plan mentions the concept of a gateway area west of I-25 but notes additional work is "required to develop a strategy" for it.

"The existing plan doesn't state a preferred approach to land use and development in the area and did not result in standards tailored to the area," Clark Mapes of the city's advance planning office told the City Council last week during a work session.

The proposed gateway area would cover 540 acres on either side of Harmony Road, including the Arapaho Bend Natural Area and a 125-acre reservoir near Kechter Road.

The developable area would feature a mixture of uses and building heights and would be pedestrian-oriented, Mapes said. Open areas would feature the Poudre River's landscaping.

"The whole approach to development would emphasize a unique look and feel based on the river valley setting," he said.

In the current plan, the area could have light industrial and employment uses such as a business park.

No formal development proposal has been submitted for the site. The plan would designate the design standards and zoning for the area a proposal would have to meet.

Although Stoner has talked about Riverwalk for years, he is not expected to ultimately develop the property. That would be left to the Turnkey Property Services, which is expected to buy Stoner's 293 acres and then sell 128 acres to the city for open space and a reservoir.

The council has agreed to pay \$4.4 million for the reservoir site. But first Turnkey and Stoner must close their deal, city officials say.

Last August, the city had a contract to buy Stoner's property for \$5.8 million, but the deal fell through.

Some council members last week were cool to the preliminary vision for the plan. Council member David Roy said the concept of building around a channelized water feature didn't seem to fit in with the area's history.

"Try as I might, I have a really hard time picturing Venice on the Front Range," Roy said.

Council member Lisa Poppaw said the city should focus its efforts on supporting redeveloping the city's "spine" along College Avenue rather than looking to I-25.

Poppaw said she had serious reservations about the plan but wanted to hear what the public has to say about the idea before making a decision.

The local group Save the Poudre has raised several questions about the plan, its impact on the river's flood plain and whether a full environmental impact statement process under the National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA, would be required.

City officials say the Army Corps of Engineers has stated it does not have jurisdiction over the site and does not believe a NEPA process is necessary.

Much has changed at the Harmony/I-25 interchange during the past 19 years. Gravel mining has reshaped the landscape around the interchange to the extent that no natural features remain, Mapes said.

A bitter annexation battle between Fort Collins and neighboring Timnath over the land west of the interchange has come and gone. The dispute started when Stoner approached Timnath about annexing his property after he felt rebuffed by Fort Collins officials.

Interchanges along I-25 to the south all the way to metro Denver have become hubs of retail development featuring big-box stores and national chain restaurants.

Already at Harmony Road, Timnath has placed a Walmart Supercenter on the northeast corner of the interchange and has tentative plans for more commercial development to the south on its side of the interstate.

The goal behind the gateway district is to build something different on the Fort Collins side of the interstate, city officials say.

Mayor Doug Hutchinson said he supports continuing with the planning process. Concerns about the plan can be worked out, he said.

Rus Hackstaff of Turnkey has said the Riverwalk project would be built in the image Stoner suggested but with less intensity of uses.

In an interview, Hackstaff said the project is moving along "step by step."

"We're looking forward to working with city staff and then the council to make it come true," he said.

If the city adopts the proposed plan for the Harmony Gateway District, construction on the project would still be at least a couple of years away, although some ground-moving work could begin sooner.