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Cinderella City-style success envisioned as Mason corridor slowly, surely redeveloped

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Two years from now, Mason Street will look entirely different.

CSU graduates returning to visit their alma mater will be surprised how the city has changed.

Tourists will see a cutting-edge corridor complete with retail, office and residential options and an easy-to-hop bus rapid transit system that will take them wherever they want to go along the strip.

Think of the 16th Street Mall in Denver. Or CityCenter Englewood. Or the many other similar developments popping up all over the country.

Transit-oriented developments are the new way to create urban and suburban infill developments that remove cars from the equation.

They combine many of the elements people are looking for - places to live, work, shop, eat and have fun - all within a walkable community.

And for the times when residents need to get somewhere a little farther away, mass transit can take them from their loft or apartment at one end to work or shopping at the other end.

"There is no one single definition" of transit-oriented development, said Shelley Poticha, president and CEO of Reconnecting America, who oversees activities of the Center for Transit-Oriented Development. "I think a lot of times, that gets in the way. People think to have transit-oriented development, you need to have high-rises around the transit line, but we're seeing all sorts (of developments)."

The Mason Corridor will transform Mason Street from a thoroughfare that runs parallel to College Avenue and that houses the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad line to a 5-mile-long, mixed-use development corridor.

And many city officials, developers, community leaders and business owners couldn't be more excited.

"I think it's huge," said Jon Prouty, a longtime Fort Collins developer who owns residential and office projects being built along the Mason Corridor.

"The Mason Street rapid transit system and project in Fort Collins is probably the biggest and most important new development in terms of the quality of community and, I guess, I'd say redevelopment of Fort Collins that we're going to see in the next 50 years."

Rise in popularity

Transit-oriented development is booming across the country.

According to a report released Wednesday by The Center for Transit-Oriented Development in Oakland, Calif., there are roughly 400 new transit-oriented projects worth \$248 billion in the United States and transit ridership is at its highest levels in 50 years.

"Something's happening in America, and transit is not just for people with no other options," Poticha said. "The thing is that demographics are changing and part of the reason why these projects are so successful is because they're tapping into a market that has been underserved.

"It's a fast-growing market of people who are interested in living in walkable neighborhoods where they can connect to downtown and other places without having to drive."

According to numbers from the Center for Transit-Oriented Development, at least one-third of the housing market for the next 20 years is looking to be in transit-oriented communities, but Porticha thinks the portion is closer to one-half, with people ever-concerned about gas prices and the size of the carbon footprint they leave behind.

Successful example

Denverites and long-time Coloradans remember Cinderella City in Englewood.

When it was completed in 1968, it was the largest mall west of Chicago.

The name of the 55-acre development, located at Santa Fe Drive and Hampden Avenue, came to be a perfect fit: Much like the fairytale princess who turned to shambles at the stroke of midnight, the same happened for the mall, which began dying in the late 1980s and continued its downward slide into the 1990s.

The area was deemed blighted and in urgent need of infill development.

And while Cinderella had a fairy godmother to make her dreams come true, the city of Englewood had a strict City Council, a short time frame and a large plan to complete, almost requiring magic.

Now the area has a new name and a new face.

CityCenter Englewood is home to more than three quarters of a million square feet of residential, office and retail space.

But one of the largest factors is the transit that runs right through the development.

RTD's light rail system provides public transit for the area.

Overall, those within the city of Englewood say the project is a success.

Mike Flaherty, deputy city manager for the city, was along for the ride while CityCenter Englewood went from concept to reality. CityCenter doesn't include for-sale housing as initially planned; rather, all of the units are for rent, and it has 350,000 square feet of retail space, compared with 1 million square feet when it was Cinderella City.

But the housing is successful, with a 90 percent to 95 percent occupancy rate, Flaherty said, and the light rail is a huge advantage.

Transit will drive, I think, for people to locate in that area," he said.

The challenge can be in redeveloping a 5-mile-long corridor with major train operations on it and

existing developments.

The difference between CityCenter and Fort Collins is that Englewood financed a large portion of the redevelopment.

In Fort Collins, Mason Corridor is being funded largely by federal and state money, not city funds.

Of the \$68 million price tag for the Mason Corridor, \$58 million will come from federal funding. An additional \$8 million is state funds, and the city of Fort Collins will make up the remainder.

And Flaherty stressed the importance of flexibility and patience as development continues.

For those who are impatient and want to see results now, too bad.

The Mason Corridor "is not an overnight, 'flip-a-switch-poo' type of solution," said Realtec broker Eric Nichols at a transit-oriented development seminar Tuesday.

He instead pointed to what is tangible, such as four-story residential units in Penny Flats, located at Cherry and Mason streets, and others.

Affordable housing

True affordable housing for the Mason Corridor hasn't been discussed yet but would be a viable option, said Julie Brewen, executive director of the Fort Collins Housing Authority.

"We could very easily develop with partners. We would love to," she said Wednesday. "For example, if a developer is doing 20 units, we could partner with them and make a percentage of units affordable."

Fort Collins Senior Transportation Planner Kathleen Bracke, who has played an integral role in developing the Mason Corridor project, did not return phone calls last week to discuss the project.

That affordable housing portion is key, Poticha said, especially when research has found that people who live in transit-served neighborhoods spend roughly 9 percent of their household budget on transportation compared with 25 percent when they live in neighborhoods where they rely on their cars to get around.

"That savings represents \$6,000 to \$8,000 a year for households, so this is really important to low- and moderate-income households," she said.

Retail, especially local

Fort Collins residents love their local shops. Ask local business owners, who say sales are doing well despite hard economic times and a decline in big-box store revenue.

If a transit-oriented development is to be successful, that local element can't be lost.

"One of the really terrific things about Denver and the same about Fort Collins is there are all kinds of local businesses, and people in communities seem to value those local businesses that give local character and value to their communities," Poticha said. "It's so hard to build new developments and still retain that local flavor."

While Englewood included local retail such as a coffee shop, craft store and other small businesses, not all of its retail hit the mark.

Along with local shops, emphasis needs to be given to those shops that would thrive in a

walkable neighborhood. An electronics store that sells big screen TVs, or a membership store like Costco or Sam's Club, are not the best choices for communities that encourage people to walk, bike or use public transit.

"In reality, transit-oriented development is really a loose term," Flaherty said. "We ended up with certain elements of the retail ... such as Wal-Mart, Petco, Sports Authority, that are more auto-oriented than transit-oriented."

How to make Mason a success

Porticha has traveled the country looking at transit-oriented developments, including stops in Denver to see the 16th Street Mall and other redevelopments.

She's seen what works and what doesn't, but her biggest advice to Fort Collins: Be "forward-thinking."

"Denver has really taken hold of their future, and the fact that citizens voted to tax themselves to build a regional transit network is really forward-thinking," she said.

From a developer's point of view, it's going to take developers with big plans and big budgets, Prouty said.

He's developing an office park and condo site, called Red Tail Ponds, at the future site of the south terminal of the Mason Street bus rapid transit line, just south of Harmony Road. But he says even more ambitious developers will be needed, and it will be out-of-town developers expressing the most interest and acting the strongest.

"You need to be a pretty big developer with money and a vision," he said Wednesday. "These are big bites, these are not little deals."
