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## Rail station area plan: Think 'outside the box'

By: Alisha Semchuck



PALMDALE - As city officials make plans for the area around Palmdale's proposed high-speed rail station, they are considering allowing a higher population density with a mix of residential and commercial development rather than standard single-family homes or apartment buildings.

Planners are considering earmarking the area around the station for anywhere between 20 and 120 residential units per acre, compared to six houses per acre for the standard single-family housing tract in Palmdale. At an average local household size of about 3.6 persons, that means 73 to 435 residents per acre instead of a single-family neighborhood's 22 per acre.

However, no decision has been made yet.

"It's still in the review process," Mike Behen, Palmdale's transportation manager and project manager for the high-speed rail station area plan, said Tuesday night at the city's second workshop on the station area planning process, for which the city received a grant from the California High-Speed Rail Authority.

Thirty-two community residents attended the meeting, which was presented by the city in conjunction with the Parsons Transportation Group, an engineering firm with locations in Pasadena and Chula Vista.

The 12-track station is proposed along Sixth Street East south of Avenue Q. The study's primary focus area is within approximately one-half mile of the proposed high-speed rail station location, or between about Division Street and 10th Street East, from south of Palmdale Boulevard to north of Avenue P-8.

Palmdale officials contributed \$200,000 from the city coffers in addition to the \$600,000 grant to spend a total of \$800,000 on the initial station area plan.

Behen wanted Tuesday night to assure skeptics that the train is coming - eventually.

"For me the message that's super important, construction has started in the Central Valley - 120 linear miles, with \$3 billion in construction contracts," said Behen, who added he went there and saw it. "It's happening and it's real."

Also attending was Roland Genick, a chief architect at Parsons and project manager for the consultant team working on the high-speed rail station area plan.

In addition to Parsons, other team members include Arellano Associates, Raimi & Associates, HR&A, Terry Hayes Associates, ECorp and Wiltec.

Genick told meeting participants it's being conducted open-house style to update the community of the progress and to explain a new approach to zoning along with other elements of the project plan.

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"We're about halfway through the project," Genick said, adding that a third and likely final workshop will be conducted, though a date has not yet been set.

Project planners set up an online survey to solicit public opinions about what the station area should look like, Behen said. Genick said so far 800 people have submitted comments.

Respondents were asked, "What land-uses should be located close to the high-speed rail station? Please select your top three choices."

Genick said 84% of the respondents selected restaurants for the No. 1 spot. Retail stores came in second with 52%. Entertainment venues and hotels tied for third place for 44%.

Another 43% chose parks and/or open space and 22% answered housing.

When shown four pictures of mixed-use areas - a combination of housing and retail spaces - 46% or 64% chose buildings with ornate and expressive architecture set in a plaza that accommodated pedestrians.

From another set of four pictures, 50% of the respondents chose the one picture that contained an outdoor area with an overhead shelter that protected walkers from the hot summer sun.

Genick called Palmdale "a very special place. With that comes special demands (like) protection from the elements - the sun and the heat."

Only 28% of the respondents opted for the traditional/historic look - think Union Station, while 31% went for the unique/iconic look. A modern/contemporary look was favored by 41%.

"We took a unique approach to how we do zoning," Genick said. Zoning will be "based on the character of the place, more so than on land use. Land use, in the traditional sense, creates an image we think everyone will like." The form and character approach "focuses more on elements."

Matthew Burris, a representative from Raimi & Associates, explained the differences between conventional zoning and form and character based zones.

Conventional zoning defines a one-block parcel by identifying density use, the floor area ratio, setbacks, parking requirements and maximum building heights, Burris said.

Design guidelines define a one-block parcel using conventional zoning requirements, among other specific conditions.

Form and character based zoning is a land development regulation that replaces traditional use-based zoning codes.

"Using physical form, rather than separation of uses as the organizing principle for the code, (it) aims to produce predictable results" by developing a project geared toward high-quality living standards, he said.

"Form-based codes focus less on the type of activity taking place inside a building, (that is) the use, and more on the overall form and character of a neighborhood. Use is still regulated.

"We're trying to get more certainty with the types of buildings we get in the future. We're trying to better understand what the public wants and put that into practice."

The focus is a station area as the core, Genick said.

"Right now we have an initial land use plan," Genick said. "We'll refine that land use plan based on (public) comments. We'll finalize the circulation plan between February and June. After that, a formal adoption process by the city (will take place) between June and October."

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