

Written by Steve Porter

GREELEY, WELD WORK TOGETHER ON SUB-AREA'S FUTURE

GREELEY - Greeley and Weld County planners are asking the public to help shape a vision for a rail-served area that could produce the same kind of economic benefits seen in nearby Windsor.

The Great Western Railroad runs diagonally through the 15,600-acre area now primarily used for agriculture and sand and gravel operations. Just to the west, the short-line railroad has helped bring some big new manufacturers with high-paying jobs to Windsor, including wind-turbine maker Vestas, glass bottle producer Owens-Illinois, structural materials supplier Hexcel and ethanol distiller Front Range Energy.

On Nov. 19 a public open house brought a stream of local residents and landowners to hear about a proposed North Greeley Rail Corridor Sub-Area Plan that city and county officials hope will help steer development over the next 20 years.

"The whole exercise is to try to come up with a vision so landowners can come up with choices for them," said Brad Mueller, Weld County planner.

"Without a plan, it's anybody's guess where investment will go. It tries to create some predictability for landowners but also flexibility according to market changes. That's the balance we're trying to strike."

The timeline is to have the study draft available in March for discussion at a final open house in April followed by public hearings and plan adoption in May and June.

Carlin Barkeen, planner for the city of Greeley, said the city is not trying to dictate what should develop within the sub-area. But a rail line already running through the area makes it a good candidate for industrial development and the jobs that could come with that, she noted.

"I guess the railroad is the main part of it," she said. "The line is a nice direct line to Fort Collins and on to Wyoming, and that makes it a nice attraction to the industrial folks."

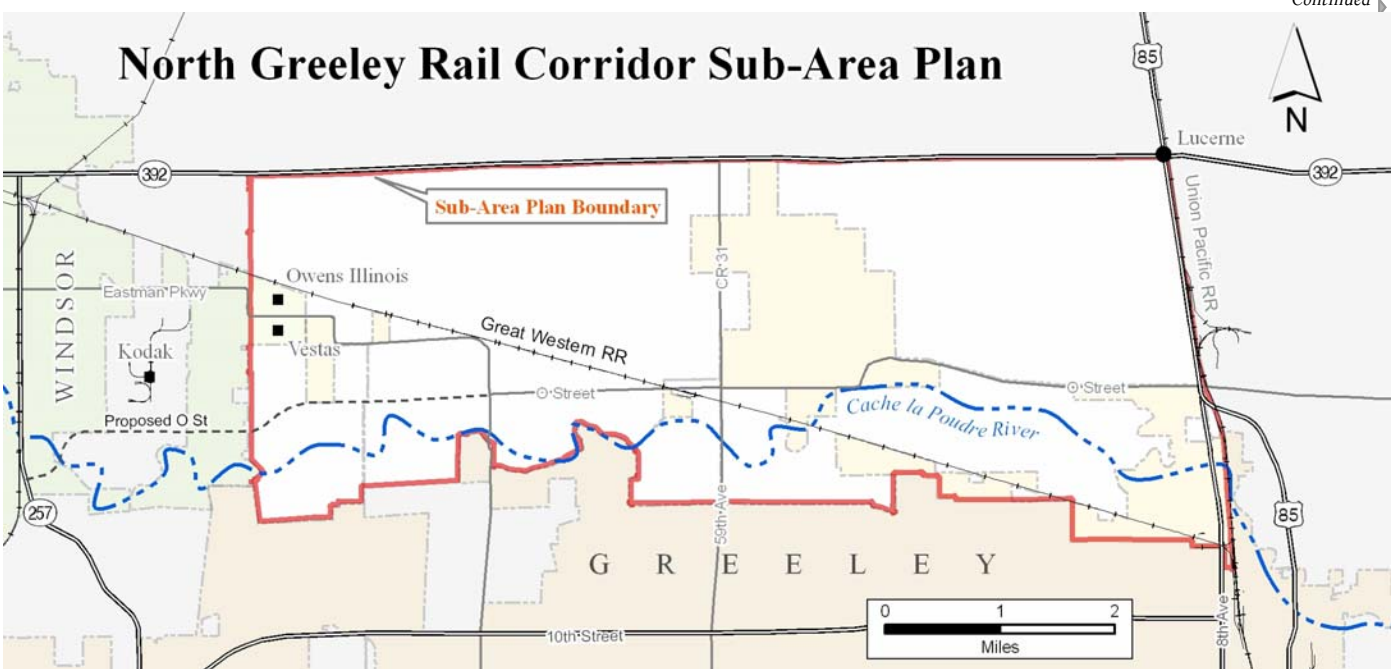
Broe supportive

Rich Montgomery, vice president for Denver-based Broe Group - which owns the Great Western Railway Co. - said his company is supportive of any development plan that would have positive results for the community.

"One of our business objectives is to bring new industry and investment to our railroads and our real estate," he said. "However, we are always supportive of positive economic growth for the communities in which we operate."

Broe's cooperation with Windsor has netted that city hundreds of jobs and an economic engine on the southeast corner of town, which has increased spend-

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GREELEY, WELD WORK TOGETHER ON SUB-AREA'S FUTURE (continued)

ing in local businesses and brought new property tax revenue to city and county coffers.

Montgomery said the Greeley sub-area plan potentially could bring the same kind of economic prosperity to Greeley as has already been seen in Windsor.

"We are very supportive of the planning process that Greeley and Weld County have undertaken in order to ensure the availability of land that will provide primary job growth in the future," he said.

Ensuring land availability for industrial use rather than residential is at the heart of the discussion. Two planned residential subdivisions - The Grainery and Poudre Ridge - have been platted in the area but no homes have yet been built.

Barkeen said the sub-area would likely not prohibit residential development but that it should be done with an eye to the railroad and what it could bring.

"You want to discourage people from purchasing properties next to a line that could potentially be very busy," she said. "We just want to make sure (residential development is) not right up against the rail line."

Mueller said the intent of the plan is to come up with a "preferred scenario" that optimizes the "natural assets" already in the area. Those assets include the railroad, water and proximity to a large population center.

Mueller said there have already been inquiries from possible industrial developers who are seeking "shovel-ready" ground.

"One of the things we hear from the industry is a desire to have shovel-ready land," he said. "It's pretty rare to have infrastructure already there. It brings it

further along the continuum to shovel-ready."

Ahead of the curve

Local officials are hoping to get ahead of the development curve and preserve the potential of what could be a jobs engine in the future.

"I think it's incredibly important to Greeley that the freight line be developed industrially," said Donna Sapienza, a Greeley councilwoman and former chair of the Greeley Planning Commission. "We want to alert people that it's time to plan for that open space. I think it's fair to let people know that if they want to sell their property within the next 10 to 20 years they should know that the area is most likely going to be industrial."

Sapienza said Greeley, too, has had "many inquiries coming in" about the area's development future, although she said the ultimate build-out will be up to market forces over time.

"The market will drive those things," she said, adding that Greeley also is planning to create some recreational opportunities in the area with trails along the Poudre River and park redevelopment of gravel pits.

"There's so much about that area that's a real win for us," Sapienza said.

Larry Burkhardt, president and CEO of



Upstate Colorado which focuses on economic development in Weld County, said the sub-area is an important asset for the region.

"We're seeing a fairly good percentage of our new prospects and leads desiring to have rail availability," he said. "That's going to be an important asset to maintain."

Burkhardt said Upstate is glad to see Greeley and Weld County working together. "If we're going to encourage manufacturing in this area and the higher wages it can bring, it behooves us to be doing this kind of planning."

But Mueller emphasizes that landowners will continue to hold the key to development. "One of the conversations we want to have with them is at the end of the day it's up to them what they want to do with their property," he said.

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