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Imagining a new near East Side

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July 1, 2010

By **ANDRE SALLES** asalles@stmedianetwork.com

AURORA — Imagine that money, time, feasibility, and even zoning were no issue. How would you reimagine the near East Side?

That's the question about 30 people tried to answer this week, in the second of three meetings aimed at revitalizing that section of Aurora. Participants came from all spectrums, and although only 30 percent of them live on the near East Side, they all have a stake, as workers or property owners or just interested neighbors.

The meetings are hosted by the Metropolitan Planning Council and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, and the feedback collected from them will be used to determine how Aurora spends federal block grant money. The area being considered is area roughly from Lake Street to East Avenue, and from Liberty Street to North Avenue.

Participants at Tuesday night's session were broken up into groups, and each group was given a map of a particular intersection, and blocks representing types of buildings — townhouses, retail strips, single-family homes. Then they were asked to design their ideal neighborhoods.

At each table, a developer and an architect worked to crunch numbers and sketch out ideas. Organizers tried to get participants to think bigger — one group even suggested green roofs for buildings in their neighborhood — but many offered the benefit of their own experiences living around and driving through those intersections.

The group of seven assigned to Jackson Street and North Avenue, near the south end of the target area, said that instead of placing any development at the intersection, space should be used to straighten North Avenue and ease traffic.

Mollie Millen, who grew up in that neighborhood, pushed for that idea. Millen now lives near Farnsworth Avenue, but she said she spent 30 years in that neighborhood, and she knows how bad traffic can get.

Chris Welsh of Oswego, who works with the Quad County Urban League, agreed that the intersection needed more beautification and less retail.

"Everyone's gonna love a green space, trust me on that," he said.

In the end, the group agreed to try out a couple of residential and commercial developments as well, and land planner Dave Gravel of Wheaton dutifully sketched them all out. The options will be presented in the third meeting on July 22, along with expert opinions on how feasible these ideas really are.

That idea didn't thrill everyone. Auroran John Laesch, who has twice run for Congress in the 14th District, called the meetings "a waste of time and money," and said the process leaves the door open for developers to take all the money, leaving none for the community.

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But Karen Christensen, Aurora's director of neighborhood development, said the purpose of the meetings is to "imagine what's possible," and to connect with the community. She pointed out the younger couples who attended Tuesday night as a sign that the East Side can be revitalized, with the right people and the right energy.

Millen, who has worked for Kane County as a zoning administrator, said connecting with people is the most important part.

"Do I think this will actually bring in dollars and cents and developers? No, not immediately," she said. "But they will make more people aware of what needs to be done, economically and aesthetically."

The third and final revitalization meeting starts at 6 p.m. July 22 at the Fred Rodgers Community Center, 501 College Ave.