

MAX Strategy earns national award

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Construction of the Interstate MAX light rail line is the first step in a plan to create a more vital section of North Portland. The future vitality of the area also hinges on a redevelopment strategy to guide the creation of new jobs, residences and development along the line. The strategy, created by the Portland urban design firm of Crandall Arambula, recently won an award from the national American Institute of Architects.

A Portland urban design firm has earned a national award for its work on a plan to revitalize neighborhoods near a light rail line currently under construction along Interstate Avenue in the northern portion of the city.

Those neighborhoods have struggled in past years, trying to turn around declines in affordable housing and employment opportunities.

The decision to install 5.8 miles of light rail, destined to hook into the city's overall light rail system, promised to bring a solution to the problems, but only if stakeholders — from community residents to business owners and developers — could be convinced to work together in a common direction.

Enter Crandall Arambula, PC, the local design firm handed the task of creating the Interstate MAX Light Rail Transit Corridor Revitalization Strategy, recently named one of the top urban and regional design projects in a 2003 competition sponsored by the national American Institute of Architects.

The strategy focused on redevelopment in areas near six stations along the line, driven by goals that included creating housing and employment opportunities and designing a pedestrian-friendly environment to entice people to use the rail line, which is expected to begin operation next year.

"The issue for everyone was how to integrate those stations into the neighborhoods so that you get activity — some addition of density and development — not only in the station but along the corridor," said design firm principal George Crandall.

The firm worked with groups from the six neighborhood areas, holding workshops where residents, business owners and developers could work together to create plans for what they wanted to see occur in their respective communities, and along the rail line in general.

"Our job was to outline the possibilities and give them a number of alternatives so they could react and give us their ideas," Crandall said. "Then we refined their ideas into a final plan."

Key to creating cohesion among the varying interests of the workshop participants was providing estimates of how much money could be drawn into the communities through an organized redevelopment and the amount of investment dollars that would be lost if a coordinated plan wasn't created.

The approach was similar to one Crandall Arambula used when creating a development plan for the downtown area of Racine, Wis., another project that captured a national AIA urban and regional design award for the firm. Less than two years after the plan was implemented, Racine officials saw \$150 million worth of new projects in an area that hadn't had investment in more than 30 years.

Neighborhoods along Interstate MAX could see a similar success if they follow the strategy plan, Crandall said. His firm estimates implementing the strategy in the proper order will result in about \$300 million of new investment, compared with \$80 million worth of investment if development proceeds willy-nilly.

The strategy offers several phases of development, which will be conducted over a number of years to provide an incentive for the community to stick to the plan, Crandall said.

The Interstate MAX strategy was recognized earlier this year by the Oregon chapter of the American Planning Association, which presented the project with an award for professional achievement.