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## 70-acre Aurora Square site could become Shoreline's urban village

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Redeveloping Aurora Square will get a boost next year when Metro opens its RapidRide E Line along Aurora Avenue North. Shoreline's City Council earlier this month took a step toward redeveloping Aurora Square shopping center by creating the Aurora Square Community Renewal Area.

The designation allows the city to work with property owners and developers on an economic renewal plan for the area, which is bounded by Aurora Avenue North, North 160th Street, Westminister Way North and Dayton Avenue North.

Ten oddly shaped properties are on the 70-acre site, resulting in disconnected islands of buildings that are difficult to navigate. It is anchored by a 290,000-square-foot Sears store that hasn't had a major update since it was built in 1967, according to Dan Eernisse, Shoreline economic development manager.

The Sears store also has a strange parking layout: one lot faces the bottom level of the store and another lot is at the store's second level. Going between the parking lots, and the retailers that surround them, requires shoppers to change levels inside Sears or drive around the edges of the site.

Eernisse said retail covers about 30 acres, but many popular stores like Starbucks are missing.

“This has been an underperforming site for Shoreline for decades,” he said. “It isn't a gathering place.”

The other anchor is a 53,000-square-foot Central Market. There also are Marshall's and Big Lots stores, the Northwest School for Hearing Impaired Children, about 20 small retailers, and a 134,000-square-foot regional headquarters for the Washington State Department of Transportation.

Eernisse said only about 25,000 square feet is vacant, but those spaces have been empty for a long time. The vacant spots include 16,000 square feet that Sears once used as a catalog call center, an old Dairy Queen, a former paint store and a defunct pizza restaurant.

Paper Zone filed for bankruptcy in the last year and closed its 5,500-square-foot store there, but another tenant is lined up for the space, according to Eernisse.

Eernisse said tougher laws for buildings and stormwater management have stymied redevelopment and limited reinvestment, and that has hurt sales, values and rents. He said there is no modern stormwater handling system for the site and too much parking.

Sales tax revenues are also low. Aurora Square generates about \$6K per acre in sales taxes while Aurora Village, two miles to the north, brings in \$39K per acre thanks to big box retailers such as Costco and Home Depot.

Eernisse said Aurora Square has more potential than its northern neighbor to become a pedestrian-oriented village like University Village, Redmond Town Center or Mill Creek Town Center. He said Aurora Village will always be auto-oriented because of Costco and Home Depot.

The potential for redeveloping Aurora Square will get a boost next year when Metro opens its RapidRide E Line along Aurora Avenue North, which the shopping center borders.

Eernisse said it's difficult to say what could be built at this point, but demolishing what's there now and starting over isn't likely in the cards. The city will look at doing infrastructure projects such as streets, a parking garage, transit center and stormwater facilities. "What we hope for is a true public-private partnership," he said.

Rick Mohler, an architect with Adams Mohler Ghillino and associate professor at the University of Washington Department of Architecture, put on a summer architecture studio at the UW that focused on Aurora Square. Eernisse said the seven students had some good ideas.

Eernisse said redevelopment could start as early as next year and proceed in phases over five to 10 years.

Two Aurora Square property owners — Joshua Green Corp. and Retail Opportunity Investments Corp. — have expressed interest in seeing the property change. "I don't think it will be hard at all (to find developers)," Eernisse said. "This is a very unusual opportunity to have a 70-acre site that can be cohesively developed."

The city is investing \$120 million nearby in the Aurora Corridor Improvement Project. Three miles of Aurora are becoming more pedestrian friendly with sidewalks, underground utilities, bike lanes and upgrades to the Interurban Trail, including a new bridge over Aurora to Aurora Square. The final phase of that work, from North 192nd to 205th streets, is expected to start in January 2013.

Eernisse said public funding for Aurora Square will be determined by the City Council as part of the community renewal area plan. The city's consultants are QBL Partners of Seattle and Donahou Design Group of Redmond.

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