

What To Do With The Lutheran Site?

■ By Mike McKibbin

Seldom do cities get a chance to redevelop a big part of their downtown core. Yet that's what Wheat Ridge city officials will begin over the next eight months with a master plan process to guide future uses of the current home of the SCL Health-owned Lutheran Medical Center.

"Right now we have a blank slate in terms of what could happen with that site," said city Planning Manager Lauren Mikulak. "And we have more questions than answers, but we have all options on

the table."

Lutheran Medical Center, 8300 W. 38th Ave., is a 100-acre campus bordered by West 32nd and West 38th avenues, Allison Court and Dudley Street. The site is approximately 12 city blocks in size. Lutheran is one of the city's largest employers with some 2,000 associates, 900 physicians and 600 volunteers.

In 2018, SCLH purchased a 26-acre parcel in the Clear Creek Crossing

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THE FIRST STEP IN RELOCATING LUTHERAN MEDICAL CENTER from its current downtown Wheat Ridge site to the Clear Creek Crossing development at I-70 and 40th Avenue is underway. A master plan will be jointly developed by the city and SCL Health to help guide how the current 100-acre site is redeveloped.

PHOTO: SCL HEALTH

Site

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development west of Interstate 70 at 40th Avenue. It plans to relocate there in the near future.

SCLH spokeswoman Sarah Ellis said hospital officials were not available to discuss their role in the master plan process. Instead, she emailed a statement that noted the SCLH board of directors will meet in late April to further discuss the new medical campus.

"It's important to note that there are many steps in the development process and the City of Wheat Ridge and SCL Health are committed to partnering with the community to ensure all voices are heard as the project develops," the statement read in part.

SCLH plans to "largely divest themselves" of the property, according to city information. Some services, such as hospice care, may remain and some medical office buildings operated by third parties may as well. A significant portion of the site is undeveloped so the city considers the situation to be "a significant opportunity to repurpose the site."

"It's pretty rare to have 100 acres with a single landowner right in the middle of the city," Mikulak noted.

City staff will be the master plan project

manager and SCLH will fund it (estimated at \$120,000-\$150,000). The city and SCLH selected MIG of Denver as the planning consultant to lead the effort. MIG was among four firms to respond through the city's procurement process.

The site is currently zoned planned hospital district, which limits uses to hospitals, hospice care and other uses often associated with a medical campus. Any redevelopment or repurposing of existing buildings will require a zoning change. That, in turn, needs to be supported by the comprehensive plan, according to the city.

The master plan will be reviewed and adopted by the planning commission and city council as an amendment to the comprehensive plan. It will focus on zoning and land use, transportation and connectivity, utilities and infrastructure, economic conditions, opportunities and challenges.

Mikulak said there has been one meeting with MIG and a community engagement plan is scheduled for April. It will include a small stakeholder committee that will include residents, a campus walking tour, focus groups, large-scale public meetings, online platforms such as Zoom and WhatsUpWheatRidge.com to supplement in-person events. Project updates and input opportunities will be announced by SCLH and the city.

One issue to decide deals with some current structures, Mikulak said. During a January 2021 workshop, some city council members wanted to ensure historic structures are preserved.

A master plan or vision document is increasingly common practice in the metro area as communities deal with change and growth through infill development, the city information noted. Most frequently, they are developed where light rail stations are built, along with others. For example, Denver's stadium district, which includes stadiums for the Denver Broncos and Colorado Rockies. The city has asked MIG for examples of master plans in other communities, such as Lakewood's Belmar redevelopment project and the former site of St. Anthony's Hospital in Edgewater, Mikulak added.

"There are models for things like traffic or market analysis, parking, open space and trails so we don't have to reinvent the wheel," Mikulak noted.

In February, SCLH submitted a preliminary site plan at Clear Creek Crossing. It includes a six-story hospital and separate medical office buildings. Services will be similar to those offered on the current campus.

Hospitals are an allowed use at the new site, so no zoning change will be needed, Mikulak noted. It could take

4-6 months to review the site plan and make a recommendation to the city planning commission.

The downtown property was used for medical purposes decades before Wheat Ridge was incorporated in 1969. It began as the Evangelical Lutheran Sanitarium in 1905, with tents for tuberculosis patients.

In 1961, Lutheran Hospital opened as a non-profit general medical facility. In the 1970s, the site became known as the Lutheran Medical Center and services continued to expand with the construction of new buildings, including the six-story tower in 1973.

In 1998, Lutheran became part of Exempla Healthcare. In 2010, Exempla joined Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth.

Mikulak said she had already heard "a million suggestions" about future uses of the current site.

"We need to figure out what it can support and then recommend the best use or uses" through the master plan process, she stated.

"Lutheran has been in Wheat Ridge for over 100 years and it means a lot to a lot of people," Mikulak said. "We know there's always a fear of change but this is an opportunity that doesn't come along very often. Having a site that's 12 city blocks in size right in the middle of the city is unusual. We want to get it right."



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