

'Wheat-Ridgey' Lutheran Master Plan Approved 7-1

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A MASTER PLAN TO GUIDE THE FUTURE OF THE 100-ACRE LUTHERAN MEDICAL CENTER site in downtown Wheat Ridge was recently adopted by the city council. The site, shown in this image, is expected to be sold by SCL Health when it relocates the hospital to the Clear Creek Crossing project. PHOTO COURTESY CITY OF WHEAT RIDGE & SCL HEALTH

The “Wheat Ridge-ness” in a 100-page Lutheran Medical Center Legacy Campus master plan was nearly unanimously endorsed at the Monday, Oct. 25, city council meeting.

The council approved the plan — a 20-year vision for the site and amendment to the city’s comprehensive plan — by a 7-1 vote. Councilwoman Judy Hutchinson was opposed. It had previously been approved 5-1 by the city planning commission.

Lutheran Medical Center, 8300 W. 38th Ave., is a 100-acre campus approximately 12 city blocks in size, between West 32nd and West 38th avenues, Allison Court and Dudley Street.

In 2018, SCL Health, Lutheran’s owners, purchased a 26-acre parcel in the Clear Creek Crossing development west of Interstate 70 at 40th Avenue. The hospital is to relocate there in the near future and SCL Health plans to sell the current site. Earlier this year, a preliminary site plan submitted to the city for the new site called for a 6-story hospital, medical office buildings and services similar to the current campus.

Hutchinson explained her opposition to the master plan was based on what she heard from residents.

“I work for the people in Wheat Ridge and some of their concerns before this were either ignored or just brushed aside,” she said. “Most of the people who spoke tonight were not in favor of this plan, so I don’t see why we have to rush at this point. We can do a pause, so I will not be voting for it.”

Councilwoman Rachel Hultin cited the plan’s “Wheat Ridge-ness” several times in explaining her support.

“What works best for Wheat Ridge is to retain a certain amount of Wheat Ridge-ness to what we do,” she said. “We are stewards of Wheat Ridge-ness that has a touch and feel, where we look around and we’re anchored by the sky and the land, a feeling of nature. I think that is inherent in this site and will continue to be with this plan.”

Hultin also cited a sense of community and connectedness within neighborhoods as an important part of “Wheat Ridge-ness.”

A three-hour discussion included 20 in-person and live online comments, mostly opposed to the plan and the site’s redevelopment. However, when combined with a review of written comments submitted on the Wheat Ridge Speaks website before the meeting, the overall tally was 14 in favor, 11 opposed and nine other comments addressed to related issues that follow the plan, such as zoning changes.

Current zoning for the legacy campus limits uses to hospitals, hospice care and other medical campus-associated uses. Any redevelopment or other use of existing buildings will require a zone change. That, in turn, needs to be supported by the comprehensive plan through the master plan, according to the city.

MIG of Denver was chosen by the city and SCL Health to guide development of the master plan. SCL Health paid MIG for their work.

Project Manager Mark De La Torre said the goal was to balance the value of the land with city and community values. The plan identifies a range of development options, with high-density multi-use in the center of the campus tapering off to the edges.

Open space would be emphasized along the Rocky Mountain ditch that runs through the property.

Jay Renkens, a principal for MIG, said a previous statement that the ditch could be a water amenity was removed from the plan. It was interpreted as a potential splash area for children and caused concerns.

Retail development was identified along 38th Avenue and Lutheran Parkway, along with a potential civic center in the middle of the campus. Parks, plazas and open space were identified along the east and west edges. Other amenities could include an amphitheater.

Renkens noted expected traffic impacts should be minimal, although the times of day when vehicles use the site would likely change. He also said a recently announced planned merger between SCL Health and Intermountain Healthcare of Utah should not affect the redevelopment of the downtown site.

Several council members asked about the “robustness” of the public outreach process used over six months to gather input. Several speakers claimed many nearby residents were unaware of the upcoming changes at the site.

Planning Manager Lauren Mikulak directed the council to a memo that listed four public meetings, two surveys, four public study sessions, two public hearings and 10 meetings of stakeholder and focus groups.

The master plan appeared in three editions of the city's *Connections* newsletter, which is mailed to every Wheat Ridge household and business. Email updates were included in monthly *Mayor's Matters* newsletters between April and September and emails sent through the What's Up Wheat Ridge website from April through October went to 4,258 recipients. Those emails were opened at rates up to four times the industry standard of 21 percent, the memo noted.

Also listed were four news releases; seven articles in the *Neighborhood Gazette*; Facebook, Twitter and Nextdoor social media posts; event flyers posted at city facilities and notices on the city website and calendar.

De La Torre said the next step in the process is for SCL Health to market the site for sale, then the city and new owner or developer will work on what's suitable and economically feasible at the site. That's when any rezoning could happen, with more public input.

Mikulak estimated the process could take years.

"If we had a rezoning application today, I think it would likely be at least a year before we'd have our first public hearing," she said. "I don't have a crystal ball, but I think a rezoning will not be done any quicker than two years."

Lutheran will likely remain where it is until 2024 or later before relocating to Clear Creek Crossing, she added.

Mikulak also noted the Clear Creek Crossing rezoning started in 2009 but was not approved until 2018 due to changes in ownership and other factors.