

opinion

MetroQuest may help you shape Colorado's future

By Susan Thornton

Posted: 03/19/2010 01:00:00 AM MDT

Updated: 03/19/2010 08:49:03 AM MDT

The Denver metro area, with its 2.8 million people, is crowded today. But, baby, just you wait.

By 2040, experts project our population will reach 4.8 million.

Where will these new people live? What kind of housing will they find? How will they commute? What impact will they have on air quality, water, the environment?

The Denver Regional Council of Governments is asking these questions as it takes a project called MetroQuest out to people across the metro area.

MetroQuest, an interactive computer program in use in major Canadian and American cities, lets

citizens explore how quality of life and the environment are affected by decisions about housing types, investment in roads and transit, and location of new developments.

As part of MetroQuest, Jill Locantore, planning communication specialist with DRCOG, has conducted 24 interactive workshops with more than 700 people across the metro area. Participants use a "keypad" system to vote on policy choices around issues such as transportation and housing, then lets them see the impacts of their choices.

Favor single-family homes and no increase in public transit? Watch as commuting times increase dramatically. Alternatively, favor compact growth and more multi-family homes, and watch as both commuting time and the area's geographic "footprint" drop.

Locantore said workshop participants have been "pretty consistent" in several regards. For one, they favor more compact growth in the future. For another, even people who live in Denver have been unanimous in their belief that it is better to focus development in multiple centers around the metro area rather than just in the central city. And overall, participants have been "very supportive" of transit, including connections between suburbs that are even more extensive than FasTracks. They like a "full web" of interconnections.

Participants in the interactive workshops come from a wide range of groups, including churches,

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schools, and civic and neighborhood organizations. "Each time I do a workshop, someone suggests another group that would like a presentation," Locantore laughed. "So the workshops just keep expanding."

Locantore is well aware that opinions obtained at the workshops are philosophical in nature. Actual decisions about land use and transportation depend heavily on location and availability of funding.

"You might favor more dense development in general, but might not favor that development if it's in your neighborhood," she said.

Locantore has heard criticism of the 71 percent increase in population that MetroQuest assumes by 2040. Some workshop participants don't believe that figure is realistic. Others think that planners should be looking at ways to slow growth instead of preparing for it.

The starting point for the population estimate, Locantore explained, comes from a panel of experts who look at projected growth of the national economy, then estimate Colorado's share of that growth, the number of jobs likely to be created here and the number of workers needed to fill those jobs.

"The experts essentially work backward to get to population growth estimates," Locantore said. "Colorado is an in-migration state."

DRCOG, charged with planning for roads, water

and other resources in the metro area, is guided by Metro Vision 2035, a plan for the region's future growth. Next year, when DRCOG begins revising Metro Vision for 2040, findings from MetroQuest will help guide decisions about the future.

Even if you can't attend one of the workshops, you can participate in MetroQuest. Go to <http://denverregion.metroquest.com>, click on your preferences and see the impact of different choices. You can also take a survey to let planners know the relative importance you attach to environmental, economic, housing, transportation and other options. Your participation may help shape the future.

Susan Thornton (smthornton@aol.com) served 16 years on the Littleton City Council, including eight years as mayor, and is a frequent contributor to The Denver Post.

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