

Big Lake BR&E Visitation Program Case Study

Project: Business Retention & Expansion Transit Oriented Development Committee

Background

In 2006, the Big Lake BR&E Task Force interviewed 40 local businesses to survey their perception on the community's strength and weaknesses. Four priority projects were identified to address the issues learned during the interviews:

1. Pursue workforce development strategies that a) retain and motivate young potential employees in Big Lake, and b) inform businesses of workforce attributes to aid recruitment
2. Form a Business Roundtable
3. Improve cultural and recreational opportunities by creating a "Passport" program for area residents and visitors
4. Strive to serve as a resource to the City of Big Lake Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) Committee

Each project had a team of individuals that worked together to develop and accomplish the project. This case study focuses on priority project #4: Business Retention & Expansion Transit Oriented Design Committee

The Project

The BR&E TOD committee was chosen as a priority project because the Northstar Commuter Train was the largest economic impacting project Big Lake has experienced to date and it was determined this group could assist the City's appointed TOD Committee in various tasks. Most importantly, they could serve as the "local voice" for the business community. The BR&E TOD committee's main projects included identifying TOD related issues and having a presence at the TOD related meetings and workshops.

The group identified four issues they felt needed immediate attention in regards to the TOD site:

- ***Public Safety (Pedestrian movement to and from the TOD site)***

A meeting between City and County Engineers was held to discuss options for pedestrian movement. Possible suggestions included a tunnel underneath the railroad tracks, an overpass over Highway 10 and an at-grade crossing. The BR&E TOD committee learned the City did not have jurisdiction of the site and it would be the responsibility of multiple governing agencies to provide safe passages in and around the site.

- ***Signage (both directional signage in and around the site and on & off-site signage opportunity for local businesses to market their business)***

After hearing the business community concerns about advertising at the TOD site, the BR&E TOD Committee has proposed off-site signage as an allowed use within the TOD design standards. It will be up to the Planning Commission and City Council to review this issue at future meetings.

- ***Public Amenities***

The business community was concerned about the lack of restrooms, shelter and retail stores close to the Northstar Commuter track. Although this was identified as an issue, the BR&E TOD group learned that these issues could not



(Northstar Commuter Train October 2008)

be addressed until the Metro Council gains control of the site after the construction of the station is completed by the Federal Government.

- ***How to get riders from the TOD site to local businesses and points of interest***

The BR&E TOD committee invited a River Rider representative Chad Gessell to one of their monthly meetings to discuss transportation options for riders once they get off the bus (or options on how residents can get to the train). The group felt it would be more beneficial to the community and visitors to address this issue prior to operation of the commuter line. The group had a chance to learn about River Rider and the many services they provide to the region. However, the group learned that River Rider would not consider providing bus lines to the commuter station until the Northstar Commuter Train was operational and a need for this service was justified.

In addition to addressing the above issues, the BR&E TOD committee attended a variety of TOD related meetings. It was at these meetings and workshops they were able to communicate issues the local business community had. Meetings in which a BR&E TOD representative attended include:

- City of Big Lake TOD meetings (monthly)
- Groundbreaking of the Northstar Commuter Maintenance Facility and the Northstar Commuter Rail Station
- Northwest Area Consultants Open House (TOD design standards/zoning ordinance)
- City sponsored Developer Feedback Forum (on proposed design standards/TOD Ordinance)
- City TOD educational trip to Chicago area
- Business Retention & Expansion Roundtable monthly meetings (to educate local business on issues and provide updates)

The Challenges

The BR&E TOD committee identified three challenges that prohibited them from accomplishing their projects that were identified at the initial stages of Phase Two.

1. Misconception of the City of Big Lake's control over the TOD site.

The station and the parking lot will be controlled by Met Council. The vacant land surrounding the site is owned by private land owners. The majority of the land is not within the City limits.

2. No budget

The City TOD Committee has limited planning funds, while the BR&E TOD Committee had no funds available to them.

3. No decision making authority

The BR&E TOD group would have had to work with the Federal Government as well as other governing authorities if any of the suggestions the BR&E TOD group discussed were to be accomplished.



(Northstar Commuter Train October 2008)

Resources

The main resource for this project was volunteer time from task force participants. Monthly BR&E TOD meetings were held during the day so group members had to take time out of their work schedule to participate. Also, the City TOD committee meetings and the various workshops which group members attended were scheduled during the evening hours.

Results: TO BE DETERMINED!

The results of the BR&E TOD committee, was the creation of a forum in which local businesses could come to discuss issues and ideas of the future TOD site. As stated before, many of the issues the group discussed can not be resolved until the Met Council gains control of the property sometime in 2010. During the last year, BR&E TOD members were present and active in the City TOD meetings as

well as related workshops/meetings regarding the TOD site. It was at these meetings the issues brought forward by local business owners were heard.

The BR&E TOD group will be available to assist the appointed City TOD committee with any tasks in the future as the start date of the Northstar Commuter Train nears. Task members attended a research tour to suburban Chicago cities to learn how the commuter train has impacted local businesses in other cities and will be proactive in addressing such issues prior to the start of the commuter train. Also, the group plans to work with the Big Lake Chamber of Commerce to give a Northstar Commuter Train an update on October 28th to area businesses at a regular scheduled Chamber meeting.

The City of Big Lake has a TOD Committee which will continue to meet on the 3rd Wednesday of each month. One member of the BR&E TOD Committee will be joining forces with the City TOD Committee effective October 2008. Chuck Heitz, chair of the City TOD Committee, and staff can be contacted for direct questions regarding the North Star Rail.