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Looking for the road less traveled

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People wait in traffic Jan. 27 near South Parker Road and South Havana Street in Aurora. (Heather A. Longway/The Aurora Sentinel)

AURORA | The ideal is ambitious and comprehensive: a coordinated traffic management system that would serve the needs of commuters while linking disparate city departments via shared resources and information.

The necessary funds and materials for this lofty goal may still be a long way off, but it hasn't discouraged Aurora traffic officials from assembling a solid and detailed plan for its eventual realization.

Engineers from the city's Public Works Department are touting the Aurora Intelligent Transportations Systems Strategic Plan as the first step in an important transition for Aurora — one that would standardize data for different departments, implement new technology to help track and update traffic figures and eventually create a traffic management center.

According to staff, such a detailed and specific approach could have a positive effect in trying to win grants and funding from state and federal agencies.

"We don't have any money but we have a plan. So if we get some money we know what we're going to do with it," said Anna Bunce, project engineer for the Traffic Engineering Division of the city's Public Works Department. "When you put in a grant application, it looks a lot better to have something concrete to go with it. We want to just make sure that if we're proceeding down this path then we're doing it in a considered manner."

The new dynamic could see traffic cameras serving multiple purposes: streaming live footage for commuters, beaming images to multiple city departments and gathering data for online updates. Similarly, new tracking technology could give planners valuable, up-to-the-minute information about snow plows and city fleets.

"We felt that it was important that we were producing something that was able to be utilized by other departments," Bunce said.

Funding for the improvements and updates spelled out in the plan could depend on several factors, including the priorities of the new administration in Washington and the duration and intensity of the current recession.

So far, the project has drawn from monies available through the Denver Regional Council of Governments. The first year's grant amounted to about \$450,000 of a total estimated cost of about \$8 million to roll out the program. Implementation of the program would take 15 years. But Bunce said any future grants are difficult to predict.

"Anything that we put forward is mostly going to be going through DRCOG. It's possible in the future there could be an opportunity to seek some Homeland Security money. That's really quite a ways down the road," Bunce said. "As far as the grant monies go, that's really going to depend. We're kind of in a little bit of a holding pattern at the moment."

But, Bunce said the approval of the plan by the city's Operations and Environmental Affairs Committee earlier this month stands a solid step in the right direction. Having a formal, itemized approach to the future of mitigating Aurora's traffic can prove to be a foundation for improvements once the city's current budget crunch eases.

"This is our baseline to get people familiar with the standards," Bunce said. "Obviously, when we first started putting the plan together, things weren't looking quite the way they are. The economy is what it is. I think that development may be down, but we still have congestion issues that we need to try to manage ... It's going to have to adjust as revenue adjusts with it. We're not going to give up on it."

Navin Nageli, president and CEO of Navjoy Consulting Services, Inc., worked as the project manager for the Aurora ITS Strategic Plan. He said that despite the current economic conditions, the original function of the plan remains pertinent for the future of the city. With a vision for a unified network that links the city's streets, water, parks and emergency management staff, the plan accommodates the natural result of a growing population and more demands on local infrastructure.

"The whole reason why we did the plan is because we wanted to have a strategic vision and a framework for the whole city — not just for the traffic folks, but for all the different agencies in the city," Nageli said. "Traditionally, ITS plans would only involve the traffic folks ... The city was very receptive to the idea that we need to make this plan broader."

The plan would draw on common resources for multiple functions, Nageli said.

"If the project recommends a camera at a signalized intersection, perhaps that camera can also be used to check on the waste water treatment facility a few blocks away," Nageli said.

While a sluggish economy and a strained budget may pose immediate challenges for the system's implementation, Bunce said the approval of the plan stands as a first station on what could be a long journey for city planners.

"We're just really pleased that we were able to arrive at something, at least a starting point, so that we all kind of know where we're going," Bunce said. "We don't know exactly how we're going to get there."

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