

Lakewood to vote on land-for-lab swap by end of month

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LAKEWOOD — This city is set to decide by the end of the month what role it will play in the development of a critical piece of ground along its light-rail corridor that some are calling Lakewood's next Belmar.

The City Council is scheduled to vote Oct. 26 on whether it will agree to a deal with the federal government by which Lakewood would build a \$25.2 million lab at the Federal Center [in exchange for a 59-acre parcel the government owns](#) at the southeast corner of Union Boulevard and U.S. 6.

The city held an open house on the proposal for the Federal Center Station neighborhood Monday night.

Lakewood hopes that by taking possession of the land, it can help steer into reality [a cohesive plan for a transit-oriented development](#) that features residential, retail and office space along a critical transportation spine stretching from downtown Denver to the western suburbs.

"What's the right mix to make this a neighborhood?" asked Jay Hutchison, Lakewood's public works director. "We're looking for private expertise. We want the private sector to build this thing."

Before the city can invite developers into the process, it has to acquire the land. The proposed lab-for-land exchange is a unique way to go about it.

Lisa Wild, senior project manager for the General Services Administration in the Rocky Mountain region, said that by avoiding a straight cash sale, the government can effectively plow the land's value back into the Federal Center in the form of a new lab, which would be occupied by the Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Geological Survey.

The federal government would oversee the construction of the lab even though Lakewood would be responsible for bidding out the job.

"We have a tremendous backlog of capital needs at the Federal Center, and this is one way to address it," Wild said.

The city also describes the arrangement as a win-win. Instead of sending money off to Washington, D.C., in the form of a payment, a swap ensures that jobs are kept locally as part of the new lab.

"The value of the asset doesn't leave the community," Hutchison said. "This is a way to help maintain the employment base in Lakewood."

Mayor Bob Murphy, who is term-limited this year, said payment for the lab would be covered by extending the terms of debt the city holds, plus tapping \$6.5 million from the general fund. No new taxes would be raised, he said.

Critics of the proposal question the timing of the Oct. 26 vote, which comes about a week before the Nov. 3 election. Councilman David Wiechman called the timing "terrible." Money that is allocated to the Federal Center Station neighborhood is money that won't go to streets, cops or other city services, he said.

"If you're asking to spend \$25 million of taxpayer money, the people have to be invested in this," he said.

Wiechman said the process has been rushed and never went before the city's planning commission. Several residents spoke against the proposal at last week's City Council meeting.

"These things need to be vetted," Wiechman said. "There's a hell of a lot of devil in the details."

Those details include a 15-acre section that contains [a capped landfill and would need to be remediated](#) by a developer in the future. The remaining 44 acres were cleaned up by the federal government and have no restrictions on them. The land was the site of the Denver Ordnance Plant during World War II.

Murphy said the city has been discussing what to do with the Federal Center Station parcel for years. He said the time to move on it is now.

"There are people to whom waiting is always the answer," he said.

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