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## A citizens academy for transit

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The metro area is a "national laboratory" for transit.

That's the official word from the Transit Alliance, a nonprofit coalition of 40 businesses, local governments and organizations. The coalition was instrumental in helping to pass FasTracks in November 2004, raising funds and organizing speakers, mailings and grassroots efforts to educate voters about the 12-year, \$4.7 billion plan to build 137 miles of transit across the metro area.

Now, with both the southwest and southeast light rail lines carrying record numbers of passengers, the alliance has turned its attention to educating citizens about the remaining lines and how to turn the 75-plus transit stations and areas around them into "people-oriented places."

According to Kathleen Osher, executive director of the alliance, people-oriented places are locations where people feel safe, where there is food, shopping, art and music, and where people want to just "come and hang out." Such places occur, she says, when the "four Ds" - design, density, diversity and distance - encourage a sense of belonging.

Osher adds, "We need to get people to understand the long-term implications of the developments that will come around transit stations. We need an army of people with educated, open minds" about transit-oriented development.

To build that "army," the alliance is planning a Citizen Academy, modeled after those used by police departments across the nation to explain policing issues.

Up to 30 participants in the academy will meet one evening a week for seven weeks. Each meeting will include a dinner, followed by speakers representing the perspectives of land planners, business leaders, home builders, Realtors and others. Discussions will span a wide range of topics, from how transit stations and stops can be integrated into existing neighborhoods to how the changing demographics of the metro area - increasing numbers of older people, and immigrants, who are used to using public transit - are fueling the desire for more transportation choices. Participants will focus on what great people-oriented places look and feel like, and how residents of the metro area can positively affect the change that is coming so quickly.

FasTracks is due to be completed within 10 years, Osher points out. "Environmental studies are underway and major decisions are being made right now," she says. "We want people to explore how we can make the most of this opportunity."

Graduates of the Citizen Academy are expected to become active participants in planning for multimodal transportation options. Osher says that change of the scope that is coming with the build-out of FasTracks is "always affected by emotion," so additional topics of the academy will include active listening and conflict-management skills.

In addition, the debate about transit is often complicated by a "battle of semantics," Osher states. As a result, participants will also learn a "common language" about transit, such as the meaning of "transit-oriented development" and "density." What is dense to someone living in rural Colorado is likely very different from what density is to someone living on Capitol Hill, for example.

Participants in the academy will form teams based on common interests. They will be expected to complete homework assignments and develop action plans specific to a transit station in their neighborhood or to metro-wide goals, such as making pedestrian and bicycle access a priority at all transit stops. Eventually, Osher expects that they will become part of an "alumni network," participating in planning for individual corridors, helping to educate others, and nominating interested community members for future academies.

As difficult as the FasTracks election campaign was, it may have been the easy part. The sheer magnitude of building out so many stations and stops requires input from residents who are educated about the complex issues involved. In Madison and Seattle, where planning for transit is also underway, community leaders are struggling to engage people in the process. With its Citizen Academy, Transit Alliance is taking important steps to ensure that is not the case here.

Nominations are now being accepted for participants in the first Transit Alliance Citizen Academy, which will begin Feb. 28. For more information, go to [www.TransitAlliance.org](http://www.TransitAlliance.org) or call Osher at 720-596-9962.

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