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CU students to help design areas around Union Station

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Graduate students are stepping into a potential public policy minefield by taking on a class assignment to design the plaza areas that will surround historic Denver Union Station.

The station is being redeveloped as part of RTD's FasTracks program, and plans call for a lot of commercial development on and around the grounds nearby. But some areas are reserved for plazas and other open space.

But, the design hasn't been completed. So in comes Jeremy Nemeth's graduate class in planning and design at the University of Colorado Denver.

To help pay for work at Union Station, RTD and its partners Denver, CDOT and the Denver Regional Council of Governments are joining with a developer to build commercial buildings around the property, an underground bus station and new rail platforms.

With so many constituencies involved, including downtown residents, businesses, preservationists and transit advocates, the arrangement of those high rises and the protection of views and access to the 126-year-old station are fraught with controversy.

Tonight, the 16 students of planning, design or architecture are hosting a reception at the Oxford Hotel's grand ballroom to invite public input into their assignment. The event runs from 6 to 8:30 p.m.

Nemeth, assistant professor of planning and design, leads a studio session every semester in which students take on real-world assignments. In the past his students have examined the East Colfax Corridor, a transit village in Boulder and redevelopment along Broadway in Littleton.

Nemeth said even if none of the students' ideas are adopted into the final project, right now they can be catalysts.

The focus will be on what RTD calls the Wynkoop Plaza, the broad area in front of the station along Wynkoop Street.

Darcy Varney grew up in Denver and remembers taking the train from Union Station to Glenwood Springs with her family. She has fond memories of the building that she hopes to bring to her class work.

"The outside of the building has always been a parking lot," she said. "I would like to help bring the attachment to Union Station to the outside of the building and give people a better appreciation for it."