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## **EPA Honors Denver RTD with Phoenix Award**

Special to *Passenger Transport*

Denver's Regional Transportation District accepted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Region 8 National Brownfields Phoenix Award™ for its Elati Light Rail Facility at EPA's national conference in May.

The Elati Light Rail Facility opened in January 2005 to serve as the main operations and maintenance center for the RTD light rail system. RTD constructed the facility on the former General Iron Works plant site, which began operation in 1921 and employed over 1,000 people during World War II. It was the largest iron foundry west of the Mississippi River and earned the nickname "Shipyard of the Rockies."

The plant operated until 1986, but over the decades the site accumulated up to 10 feet of landfill foundry sand, slag, metal shavings, and other waste. For more than 15 years following the closure, the site was in a bad state of repair and created a nuisance to the neighborhood. Also, it was vastly underused from a brownfields perspective.

In 2000, RTD selected the former iron works site as the preferred location for a new light rail maintenance facility as part of the Southeast Corridor Light Rail expansion project Environmental Impact Statement. The agency needed the rail facility to support light rail expansion in the Denver metropolitan area. As a result of the Southeast Corridor project, the light rail system more than doubled in size.

Because the land surrounding the former General Iron Works site was predominantly residential, RTD heard numerous questions and comments during the public EIS process, particularly about contaminated soil. Neighbors of the site wanted reassurance that their neighborhood would not be contaminated as the light rail facility was built.

RTD held several public meetings to communicate the development and environmental management plan done by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's voluntary cleanup program. The meetings also provided a forum for district officials to listen and respond to the concerns of the community. The process also included other forms of outreach, such as a project web site, mailers, and door handle flyers. Numerous related agencies and interested stakeholders remained involved throughout the process.

### **Voluntary Cleanup**

Through the voluntary cleanup program process, RTD officially acquired and revitalized the old industrial site to accommodate the Elati Light Rail Maintenance Facility. The VCUP program was a perfect fit for this project because the light rail project was under a tight schedule: it also provided a regulatory mechanism to develop a plan that would be approved and validated by the CDPHE. This proved very important in discussions with the community that RTD's environmental management approach was valid, that it would protect human health and the environment, and, most importantly, that the neighborhood would be better off at the completion of the project.

The VCUP program was so successful at this site that RTD is using the same approach to build out the six additional rail corridors and redevelop Denver's historic Union Station into a multi-modal transportation hub as part of RTD's \$6.1 billion FasTracks expansion program.

Improved visual impact and environmental cleanup are among the community benefits, but RTD also has seen other benefits occur and continue to contribute positively to the community.

The Elati Facility cost \$40 million to design and build, which provided a positive monetary impact to the local economy. As the facility became operational, RTD created 311 permanent maintenance, transportation, and administrative jobs. Currently RTD is expanding the facility to accommodate additional light rail vehicles as light rail expansion occurs through the FasTracks program, creating even more jobs. RTD also demonstrated good stewardship by bringing the project in on time and within budget.

The Elati Light Rail Maintenance Facility is more than just a brownfield development site; it is sustainable development that contributes to the Denver metropolitan area by supporting mass transit. In addition to being a world-class facility using sustainable design, it is critical to the support and expansion of Denver's light rail system.

Currently, the light rail system supports more than 22 million passenger trips per year, or approximately 62,000 trips per day. Using the greenhouse gas protocol spreadsheet, assuming the average trip distance of five miles and subtracting out the light rail carbon dioxide emissions, the 22 million passenger trips equates to a savings of approximately 26,000 tons of carbon dioxide per year. This ongoing environmental contribution will continue to grow as RTD brings several light rail expansion projects on line in the next seven years.

EPA created the Phoenix Award in 1997 to honor individuals and groups who are working to solve the critical environmental challenge of transforming blighted and contaminated areas into productive new uses. One award winner is selected from each of EPA's 10 regions.