

Urban Land Institute, Colorado District Council



Leadership in Responsible Land Use

“The Confluence” Advisory Panel, Technical Assistance Program Services (TAPS)

June 10-11, 2008

BACKGROUND

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) is a Washington, DC-based international 501-c-3 nonprofit organization that brings together professionals involved in real estate development, including investors, developers, architects, designers, planners, public officials and others committed to creating projects that strengthen communities and embody far-sighted design principles. The mission of the ULI is leadership in responsible land use to create sustainable and thriving communities worldwide.

The Colorado District Council of the Urban Land Institute (ULI Colorado) was established in 1998 and now has nearly 1,500 members representing 26 land-use disciplines. ULI Colorado conducts educational activities and community outreach focused on transit-oriented development (TOD), workforce housing, compact regional growth, urban and suburban redevelopment, and related topics, and also organizes Advisory Panels through its Technical Assistance Program Services (TAPS) to examine the best possible development alternatives for a particular site.

In 2008 ULI Colorado was asked by the panel sponsors (Suppa Corporation, the City and County of Denver, and Denver Councilwoman Judy Montero) to provide recommendations regarding design elements that should be included in the redevelopment of “The Confluence” property at 15th and Little Raven. The sponsors wanted a reliable source that could offer nonpartisan, un-biased expertise to provide concrete action steps and creative solutions that would assist them in determining the appropriate height, density and intensity for development of the site.

On June 10 and 11, 2008 a volunteer TAPS advisory panel convened by ULI Colorado and composed of ULI members came together to look at the development options.

The goal of TAPs to bring the finest expertise in the real estate and design professions to bear on complex land use planning and development projects, programs, and policies. Since 1947, this program has assembled more than 400 ULI-member teams to help sponsors find creative, practical solutions for such issues as downtown redevelopment, evaluation of development potential, growth management strategies, community revitalization and urban design. ULI advisory services have made a positive contribution on such key Colorado sites as Coors Field, the Fitzsimons medical complex, the Colorado Convention Center, the Denver Justice Center, the Denver Public Schools Property Analysis, the University of Colorado-Boulder, and the Boulder Transit Village.

About TAPS

Sponsoring entities are responsible for significant preparation before the panel's visit, including sending extensive briefing materials to each member and arranging for the panel to meet with key local community members and stakeholders in the project under consideration. This helps volunteer ULI panelists make accurate assessments of a sponsor's issues and to provide recommendations in a compressed amount of time. For The Confluence site, sponsors prepared an in-depth briefing book and mailed it directly to each panel member and copies to ULI Colorado staff about two weeks before the panel's arrival on site.

The agenda for a panel assignment is intensive. It includes an in-depth briefing composed of a tour of the site and meetings with sponsor representatives; interviews of stakeholders and key people within the community; and then formulating recommendations.

THE PANEL

ULI Colorado advisory panels are made up of real estate professionals who volunteer their time and have no financial stake in the proposed project. The Confluence at Cherry Creek panel included the following members:



Sarah Bernhard, project manager, Williams & Dame Development, Portland, Ore. Sarah brings 14 years' experience in the fields of architecture, master planning and construction project management. She has managed design and construction for a wide range of public and private projects including museums and libraries, restaurants and retail, mixed-use, office, public assembly, residential and educational facilities. Sarah is a LEED Accredited Professional and is on the Steering Committee for the Cascadia Region Green Building Council. She also periodically teaches courses on green building topics at local colleges and other organizations. While completing her Graduate Certificate in Real Estate Development at Portland State University, Sarah managed the BetterBricks Integrated Design Lab in Portland. Sarah graduated with honors from Wellesley College, and holds a Master of Architecture from the University of Oregon.



Daniel Iacofano, founding principal of MIG, Berkeley, Calif. Daniel has more than 25 years of experience in urban planning and community design, specifically for downtowns, transit-oriented development, neighborhoods and urban centers. He is nationally recognized as an expert and innovator in the areas of community participation, consensus building, and facilitation. Daniel's diverse projects have addressed such issues as public transit, traffic, housing, economic development, land use and regional growth. He has worked in a wide range of communities, from Downtown Los Angeles to Anchorage and Washington, DC, and served as the lead consultant for the recently completed Downtown Area Plan for the City and County of Denver. Daniel received his Ph.D. in Environmental Planning from the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of several books including Meeting of the Minds and The Inclusive City.



Mark Leese, director of urban design, URS Corporation, Denver. Mark Leese, AIA, AICP is an urban designer, city planner, and licensed architect with expertise in urban design, community design and infrastructure design and planning. With 30 years of private and public sector practice, Mark has extensive experience producing urban design plans, neighborhood plans, sub-area plans, and corridor studies, including downtown redevelopment plans for a number of small communities. He currently is working on transit-oriented development plans for a dozen commuter rail station areas in and around Ft. Worth, and station designs for 25 stations in three FasTracks corridors. Mark has participated in or managed several large land planning or design efforts in Denver including work in the Central Platte Valley, 16th Street Mall Extension, and the Lower Downtown Streetscape projects. He recently was awarded a Mayor's Design Award for Jurassic Leaves, the stairwell canopy at the Louisiana-Pearl Plaza.



Susan Powers, president, Urban Ventures LLC, Denver. Urban Ventures is a 10-year old real estate development firm that focuses on urban neighborhoods near Downtown Denver and in historic renovation, affordable and student housing, modular housing and mixed-use projects. Before forming Urban Ventures, Susan was for 11 years executive director of the Denver Urban Renewal Authority where she led the structuring, financing and construction of 18 complex commercial and residential projects in Downtown Denver. She holds a B.A. in Anthropology and an M.S. in Urban Planning from the University of Arizona in Tucson. She is a member of the Board of Directors of Habitat for Humanity-Metro Denver, the Denver Urban Land Conservancy, the Colorado Historical Foundation, chair of the Downtown Denver Partnership's Housing Council, ULI Colorado Executive Committee member, and serves on the Denver Mayor's Housing Plan Task Force.



Ken Schroepel, AICP, project manager and urban planner, Matrix Design Group. For a Denver-based planning and engineering consulting firm, Ken specializes in downtown revitalization, urban renewal, and urban redevelopment planning. Ken received his Master in Urban and Regional Planning degree from the University of Colorado - Denver and has served as a Lecturer at the University's College of Architecture and Planning. Ken is the creator of the award-winning *DenverInfill.com* website and blog, which tracks urban infill projects in the greater Downtown Denver area and offers news and commentary about Downtown's planning, growth, and development. Ken is a member of the board of directors of Denver Civic Ventures and Union Station Advocates, and is active with the Congress for the New Urbanism and with numerous committees associated with the Downtown Denver Partnership. Ken chaired the ULI Colorado advisory panel for the Confluence Site.



William Vitek, FASLA, principal, EDAW, Inc. Bill is an award-winning landscape architect and planner with over 25 years of experience in gaining consensus on various public realm and urban design projects. As a principal at EDAW, he has led numerous complex planning and design efforts in major urban areas throughout the country. His experience ranges from large-scale planning and urban design to site-specific design of mixed-use and transit oriented development projects. Bill managed the Coors Field Public Realm Design and Ballpark Neighborhood Influence Study, which anticipated future

land uses around the ballpark, identified influences of the ballpark on adjacent neighborhoods, identified public/private venture development parcels, and was critical in guiding the Coors Field project through the public process. Bill holds an M.A., Landscape Architecture degree from the University of Michigan and a B.S. in Environmental Design from Ball State University.



Rich von Lührte, FAIA, RNL Design. Rich has focused his career in urban design and complex architectural projects and has extensive experience with mixed-use and transportation master planning and architecture projects. He is an expert on transit-oriented development as a remedy for auto-dominated transportation systems in the redevelopment of existing communities and in models for new communities. He is a member of the ULI Colorado Chapter Executive Committee and currently serves as chair of the Advisory Board for the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado and as an adjunct professor at the University of Colorado at Denver. He serves on the Civic Center Conservancy board, the Metro Denver EDC DIA Leadership Executive Committee, National Director of the University of Michigan Alumni Association, and served on the Board of Governors of U of M's College of Architecture and Planning.



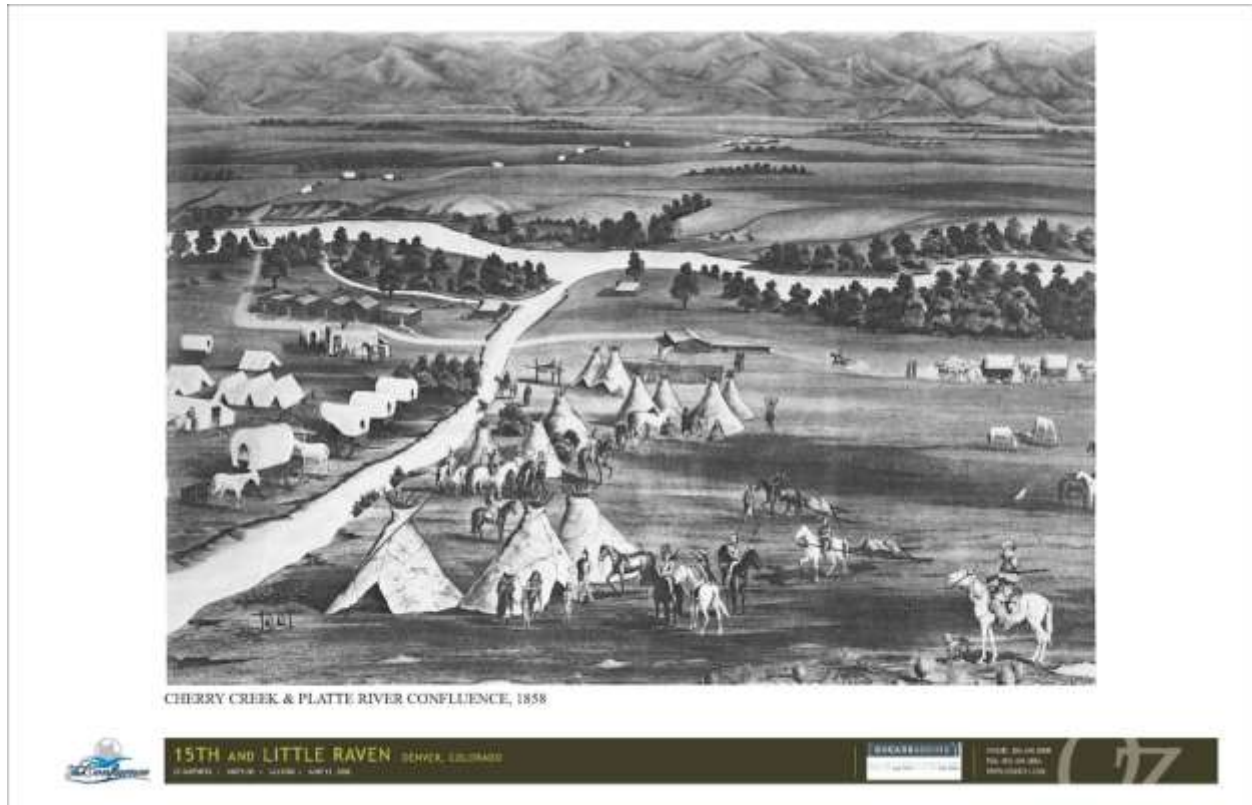
Dick Farley, FAIA, Civitas, Inc. Dick was deputy director of the Denver Planning Office in charge of urban design for nearly ten years and practiced architecture in the private sector for 13 years. As a principal at Civitas, Dick has led numerous urban design projects including Denver's Highland Garden Village, the Belleview Station TOD Master Plan and Design Standards and Guidelines, and Lakewood, Colorado's Belmar redevelopment to name a few. Dick's honors include the AIA Denver Chapter's Public Service Award for Outstanding Service to the Built Environment by an Architect in the Public Sector, and the election to the American Institute of Architects College of Fellows. Dick received a Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Nebraska and a Master of Architecture from Cornell University, and he is active in several community groups including the Golden Triangle Design Review Committee and the Denver Chapter of American Institute of Architects.

Dick served as a special Advisor to the Confluence panel. While he did not participate on June 11, he received briefings throughout the panel process and assisted the panel sponsors after June 11 with refining the panel's recommendations and providing additional analysis regarding the Confluence site's existing zoning and the panel's recommended development alternatives.

SITE HISTORY

Confluence Park, which marks the confluence of Cherry Creek and the South Platte River, is where Denver was founded.

Prospectors looking for gold established the settlement that became Denver in the Autumn of 1858 along the banks of Cherry Creek, near the confluence with the South Platte River.



Despite the fact that Denver was born at the confluence, for decades the area was little more than a dumping ground and the river a polluted eyesore. Starting in the early 1970s, Denver civic leaders began to see the South Platte as a potential amenity for the entire region. The Greenway Foundation was established and led an ambitious effort to revitalize the riverfront.

The creation of a park at the confluence was a key goal and the first phase of Confluence Park opened in 1975. Over the years there were several additions to the park, including the creation of Confluence Park Plaza in 2006, which occupies a one-acre site along 15th Street that formerly housed an Xcel Energy substation.

SITE DESCRIPTION

The Confluence site is next to Confluence Park Plaza on a small rise adjacent to the park and Cherry Creek. The site, at the intersection of 15th and Little Raven streets, is now occupied by a defunct warehouse. The Speer Boulevard Bridge over the South Platte River occupies a prominent location on the other side of Confluence Park from the site and any development would be highly visible from Speer Boulevard.



The site is the red brick warehouse above the Park

This site has become one of the most visible in the Central Platte Valley District of Downtown Denver; it marks the entry into the urban environment of the Central Platte Valley, Lower Downtown and the Denver Central Business District. It is the only privately held parcel on the north side of Little Raven within the Commons neighborhood. It is also the last remaining development parcel along the north side of Cherry Creek.

In 2001 the site was approved for RMU-30 zoning with restrictions. The current zoning would allow for the construction of a building up to 280 feet long and ranging from six to nine stories tall, taking up almost all of the space on the property.

CURRENT ZONING DIAGRAMS



Over the past seven years, the property and district have experienced dramatic change. In 2001 the property was adjacent to an Xcel Energy substation that was surrounded by a barbed wire fence to protect the large transformers and high voltage wires.



Today the property abuts Confluence Park Plaza.

In addition, the property across Little Raven has been developed as townhouses and lofts. The property diagonally across 15th remains vacant; however, a senior housing development is in the City approval process.

CONFLUENCE PANEL OBJECTIVES

The panel's objectives were to consider a variety of potential development scenarios and characteristics described through the questions below, and "answer" the questions in the form of a recommended development alternative or alternatives:

- Should the site be developed with a building that is similar in mass and scale to other nearby buildings, or should the development have distinctive characteristics that make it special? If the latter, what are some distinctive characteristics appropriate for this site?
- Regardless of building height, how much site coverage is appropriate? In other words, what kind of setbacks, if any, should occur at ground level, and where?
- 15th Street is more than a transportation connection between Downtown and Highland – it is an experience of encountering the Downtown panorama in-bound and the climb to the "high land" out-bound. How can this building enhance and articulate this experience?
- Which of the four corners (Little Raven/Creek, Little Raven/15th, 15th/Plaza, Plaza/Creek) is the most "important" corner? Why?

- Regardless of building height, where should the tallest part of the building be located?
- What kind of relationship should the building establish with the plaza? With the creek?
- What building attributes would be most advantageous in establishing relationships with the plaza and the creek?
- What are elements of a pedestrian-friendly ground floor, especially for non-retail uses?
- How should the development address the historical significance of the site as the birthplace of Denver?
- Are there uses in addition to residential that would be feasible and desirable at this location?
- What kind, if any, of commercial uses should occur on the ground floor?
- What kind of uses should face the plaza on the ground level?
- What kind of uses should face the creek on the ground level?
- Should the upper walkway along Cherry Creek be extended into the plaza?
- What process or processes would allow the development to proceed in a timely fashion?
- What mechanism would ensure compliance with agreements and or understandings established during the process?

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

As part of the panel's information gathering and evaluation process, a number of individuals representing a broad cross-section of community, business, and neighborhood leaders from throughout the Central Platte Valley and greater Downtown were interviewed the morning of June 11. The stakeholders met in small groups with members of the panel and discussed the site, its development potential, and desired attributes in depth. Specifically, the panelists sought the stakeholders' views on many of the questions posed above. The stakeholders that were invited to participate in these interviews included:

- Susan Barnes-Gelt, former councilwoman-at-large, City and County of Denver; and current Denver Post columnist
- David Booth, Riverfront Park Association
- Brad Buchanan, Buchanan Yonushewski Group
- Bar Chadwick, South Platte River Initiative
- Joe Cordts, Denver Public Works

- Dana Crawford, Urban Neighborhoods, Inc.
- John Desmond, Downtown Denver Partnership
- Tami Door, Downtown Denver Partnership
- Glenn Ehrlich, Businesses on the Platte
- Crissy Fanganello, Denver Public Works
- Chris Frampton, East West Partners / Union Station Neighborhood Company
- Tyler Gibbs, Denver Planning
- Ellen Ittelson, Denver Planning
- Frank Kemme, Denver Public Works
- Ruth Murayama, Denver Parks & Recreation
- Randy Nichols, Nichols Partnership
- Peter Park, Denver Planning
- Andre Pettigrew, Denver Economic Development
- Bill Rodriguez, Highland United Neighbors
- Jeff Shoemaker, Greenway Foundation
- Bill Sirois, RTD
- Ron Straka, LoDo, Inc.
- Steve Stretz, Downtown Denver Residents Organization
- John Tone, LoDo Neighborhood Association
- Erika Warzel, Historic Denver

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR THE CONFLUENCE SITE DEVELOPMENT

To begin the process of articulating a recommended development scheme or schemes for the Confluence site, the panel first established a set of urban design and planning “guiding principles” that the panel determined to be key in achieving a project that is considered a success for the site, the neighborhood, and the city as a whole. These guiding principles were organized by these three “levels of context”—site, neighborhood, and citywide:

Citywide Context:

- Be consistent with the Downtown Area Plan
- Reinforce a strong “edge” to Speer Boulevard
- Establish a gateway for Downtown
- Promote high-density residential development
- Be a “signature” building

Valley Context:

- Promote a “building-in-the-park” environment
- “Break” the site’s boundaries / Create integrated landscapes
- Incorporate community uses
- Celebrate the site’s history
- Enhance views to and from the site
- Continue the Little Raven Promenade

Site / Building Context:

- Divide into multiple buildings
- Integrate “green fingers” from park into site
- Activate the first floor
- Maintain the urban street edge along 15th Street
- Achieve LEED certification / Incorporate “green roof”
- Utilize “green Infrastructure” (storm water drainage, water quality, etc.).
- Integrate pedestrian / bicycle connectivity between streets, park, water
- Develop “special design review” process for the project

PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Since Speer Boulevard is a major entry point into downtown, the panel believes there is an opportunity to create a signature building on the site that could serve as a symbolic gateway into downtown. The panel also believes that by opting for a taller structure than what would currently be allowed by zoning, there would be an opportunity to create publicly accessible links

to Confluence Park through the property and increase the amount of open space adjacent to the park that would be accessible to the public. The panel sees this as preferable to a low, squat building that would create an unbroken wall between Little Raven and Confluence Park.

In looking at the site, the panel members emphasized the importance of preserving Confluence Park and helping to activate it. The best way to do this is by creating 'green fingers' that extend into the development, linking it to the park. Instead of one building, the panel agreed it would be far better to construct separate structures, including one "Signature" building. Breaking up the site into multiple buildings would allow for passageways into the park and create the opportunity for retail and restaurant uses that could further activate the park. Allowing the developer to build higher would make it possible for him to establish connections into the park without losing the total square footage allowed under the current zoning.

THE FOUR ALTERNATIVES

The panel studied four possible design alternatives for the site.

Option 1: Existing zoning entitlements, allowing a 280-foot-long building varying in height from six to nine stories with 300,000 square feet of space.

This would create a six-story wall between the park and Little Raven, doing nothing to activate the park or add new links into the park.

The panel unanimously agreed this option eliminates any potential for public benefit because it covers the entire site and does not adequately relate to the park.

Option 2: Tower at the Creek

This option would allow for the creation of three separate buildings, with the 22-30 story "Signature" building along Cherry Creek. A 6-8 story building would front 15th Street and a 10-12 story building would be in the center.

The panel found that this alternative offered several positive outcomes:

- 16,000 square feet of new open space leading into the park.
- By angling the tower toward Cherry Creek and Speer Boulevard, views from buildings at Riverfront Park would be taken into consideration.
- The "Signature" building could become a beacon along Speer Boulevard, welcoming visitors into downtown.
- Locating the "Signature" building along Cherry Creek would reduce the shadow into Commons Park. The top of the building could also be designed to reduce the shadow.
- Placing the "Signature" building along Cherry Creek enhances the view of the Millennium Bridge from many parts of downtown.
- The construction of an arcade or winter garden would further blur the distinction between public and private space.

- The building would be more energy efficient.
- Total square footage: 240,000 to 300,000

Option 3: Tower at the Corner

This option would also allow for the creation of three separate buildings, with the 22-30 story “Signature” building on the 15th Street side, a 12-14 story building in the center and a 2-3 story building along Cherry Creek.

- 7,700 square feet of new open space
- Total square footage: 240,000 to 300,000

Several panelists said they initially thought building the “Signature” building along 15th Street would be the best idea, but after looking at the computer modeling of the impacts they supported placing the “Signature” building along Cherry Creek. They believe the “Signature” building would have fewer adverse impacts on neighbors and Commons Park if it was placed on the Cherry Creek side; placing it on the 15th Street side would hamper the quality of the view along 15th toward the Highlands.

Option 4: Tower with Podium

This option would place the three buildings on top of a podium that would act as a continuous street edge. The podium would be four stories tall. Public access to Confluence Park would be through passages or arcades built through the podium.

- No ‘green fingers’ into the park but a public arcade could open into the park.
- Total square footage: **240,000 to 300,000**

OTHER PANEL OBSERVATIONS

- A city is made of buildings just as a forest is made up of a variety of trees and the view of a building is part of living in the City. The panel agreed a “Signature” building should be built on this site to add to this experience.
- The “Signature” building should be placed on the site to enhance the views from other buildings and consideration should be given on how to reduce the shadow cast into nearby Commons Park.
- The experience of driving into downtown and from downtown on 15th street should be taken into consideration and enhanced.
- An urban street edge needs to be established along 15th Street to bring new life to that corridor.
- In order to create a special street environment that would reflect the importance of the site, the parking should be underground.

- Integrating the development with Confluence Park is essential.
- Finding community uses for the first floor retail that would activate the park and celebrate Denver's history is important. Suggestions include locating the Greenway Foundation offices there or creating an interactive exhibit on Denver history or the ecology of the South Platte and related greenways, as well as adding restaurant and retail space.
- The pedestrian promenade along Little Raven should be extended to Cherry Creek.
- The walkway along Cherry Creek should be extended to Confluence Park.
- Special design review of the project should be considered, as well as LEED certification and green infrastructure.

CONCLUSIONS

- **The panel believes the current zoning is not appropriate for the site and the development of the site according to the current zoning would not be good for the site or for Denver.**
- **The Panel also agrees that adding height to the development will have several benefits, making it possible to add green space to Confluence Park and creating opportunities for retail/restaurant uses that would further enliven the park.**
- **The construction of a “Signature” building on the site could also become a beacon along Speer Boulevard, marking the entrance to downtown on what could become a grand boulevard lined with public spaces and well-designed private and public buildings.**
- **The “Signature” building should be slender to reduce the impact on sight lines and adjacent park land. The buildings should be as transparent and light as possible.**
- **Since the upper area of Confluence Plaza is disengaged from the rest of the Plaza the panel suggested a re-do of this area and also suggested allowing the underground parking garage to extend under the upper portion of the plaza.**
- **If the sponsors decide to proceed with a re-zoning of the property the application can be based in part on the massing recommended by the ULI TAP. A special design review process could also be established in the application. This will provide the opportunity for all parties to work together on the final design of the buildings to create a model of mutual benefit.**
- **The sponsors and Historic Denver should also explore finding creative ways to honor the history of a place that marks the spot where Denver was born.**
- **If Denver wants to preserve more of the site as open space, the city should consider a land swap with the developer.**

- Panel members also liked the idea of constructing another high-rise on the opposite side of Speer, so that twin ‘beacons’ would be positioned on both sides of Speer at the entrance to downtown.

ULI Colorado

Leadership in Responsible Land Use

ULI Colorado

The Equitable Building

730 17th Street, Suite 220

Denver, Colorado 80202

303.893.1760

www.colorado.uli.org

Executive director: Michael Leccese, Michael.leccese@uli.org

Chairman of the Executive Committee: V. Michael Komppa, President, Corum Real Estate

Co-chairs of TAPS committee: Al Colussy, Klipp; Chris Coble, Alliance Construction

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