Building Healthy Places

Workshops on healthy solutions for the built environment.

Workshop #2: 40th and Colorado Station Area
Denver, Colorado
July 30, 2014
**Contents of Report**

I) Overview

II) What’s the problem with the station area?

III) Findings: Challenges and Opportunities

IV) Recommendations

V) Panelist Answers to Questions

VI) Stakeholder Comments

VII) What’s Next?

VIII) Acknowledgements

Aerial view of the 40th and Colorado station area.
In 2012, the Colorado Health Foundation and the Urban Land Institute, a 501-c-3 nonprofit membership organization dedicated to best practices in land use, launched the Building Healthy Places Initiative. The initiative links alarming health factors – particularly obesity and related diseases – to the physical design of communities that discourages active lifestyles, while limiting access to healthy food. This is especially a problem in lower-income areas where residents may not be able to afford health clubs, youth sports leagues, or shopping at Whole Foods.

The principles of Building Healthy Places suggest this: active living, healthy food, access to nature, and a strong sense of community are not a luxury. These elements should be embedded in all kinds of neighborhoods through thoughtful and creative city planning, funding, design, and development. The alternative can include such consequences as declining public health, an increasingly costly and stressed health-care system, and reduced economic competitiveness. 

The initiative seeks to make an impact in specific areas including:

- **Active living**: buildings and community design that encourages walking, cycling, play and other physical activity as part of everyday life
- **Access to healthy food**: Many communities lack a local grocery that sells fresh food, farmers markets, or community gardens. High-calorie, low-cost fast food is a cheaper alternative and often times easier to access
- **Healthy buildings**: that are energy efficient, have good indoor air quality, and invite access to natural light and fresh air
- **Access to parks and natural areas**
- **A safe (from crime and traffic) public environment**
- **A strong sense of community** to foster social and mental health

In 2013, ULI and the Colorado Health Foundation (CHF) studied three Colorado communities – Arvada, Lamar and the Westwood neighborhood of Denver—to recommend physical improvements (these reports are available for viewing and free downloads at www.uli.org). Later that year, ULI Colorado—the 1,030-member District Council of the international Urban Land Institute (ULI)—received a $10,000 grant from the ULI Foundation to work with another two Colorado communities in a new program of Building Healthy Places Workshops. These workshops are one-day intensive panels that result in expert recommendations on land use, and are geared towards implementing principles of building healthy places in communities that lack them.

The 40th and Colorado station area was one of two communities chosen through a competitive process. On July 30, 2014, ULI Colorado held the second Building Healthy Places Workshop at CAP Logistics, a business that employs 70 in the station area. Nine ULI volunteers convened to work with the City and County of Denver on this day-long workshop surrounding the future of the 40th and Colorado Station Area, including the Elyria-Swansea neighborhoods.

*Panelists discuss the 40th and Colorado Station area.*
About three miles from downtown, Elyria-Swansea saw the birth of Colorado railroads in the 19th century. Today the area comprises a sometimes uncomfortable mix of cottages, rail lines, silos, and heavy and light industry. Bisected by I-70 in the 1960s, the neighborhood has a 50 percent rate of home ownership. Many local businesses are thriving and even expanding. Yet abandoned and blighted properties, poor connectivity, and a “food desert” are issues for 6,400 residents, who live on 200 acres of residential blocks engulfed by 1,100 acres of industrial land. Residents are largely Hispanic, low-income and with relatively poor health indicators.

Elyria-Swansea suffers from an identity crisis. Despite its long history, the neighborhoods (and particularly the station area) are not well known to average citizens or even real estate professionals. Many assume the area is blighted and ready for extensive redevelopment, but they have not experienced the area except driving by on Colorado Boulevard.

The ULI panel included two industrial developers, two mixed-use developers, a real estate market analyst, expert on public-private finance, architect, urban designer, sustainability consultant, and expert on public health. Panelists were impressed by the diversity and quality of local businesses. They saw opportunities to build on these strengths rather than wiping the slate clean or allowing the market to transform the area into something completely different.

They recommended improving street lighting, drainage, and connectivity for walking to school and to a commuter rail station under construction. Recognizing that the neighborhood lacks the rooftops, Colorado Boulevard access, or demographics to attract a grocer, the panel recommended working with local produce warehouses to expand their retail presence to benefit neighbors. Another key recommendation: Repurpose an abandoned freight line as the new neighborhood “heart” providing connectivity, urban farming, parkland, and drainage.

Panelists also saw the opportunity to fine-tune city zoning to encourage “clean and green” light industry while discouraging more heavy industry and marijuana grow houses. Underlying the recommendations was the reality that the city does not have funding to pay for all these improvements. The city can however create the framework for private investments and partnerships to create a healthy and economically sustainable station area. For more detail, see sections IV and V.
II. What’s the problem with the 40th and Colorado Station Area?

(Problem statement provided by Denver Community Planning & Redevelopment)

The Denver FasTracks transit initiative, a $6.1 billion regional infrastructure investment that will add 119 miles of new transit lines and 70 new stations, brings the Denver region an opportunity to promote transit-oriented, higher density, mixed-use residential and commercial development. Recognizing this opportunity, the City and County of Denver has taken a proactive approach toward refocusing growth into neighborhoods and districts near transit stations.

Denver’s 2014 TOD Strategic Plan classifies 40th and Colorado as a “Strategize” station requiring long-term planning, investment, and research to improve the existing residential and business opportunities, to improve the quality of life in that area, and to appropriately re-develop the site based on current market needs. The station area is nestled in the North-Central Denver neighborhood of Elyria Swansea. Conditions in the Globeville and Elyria-Swansea neighborhoods include higher rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, and asthma than Denver overall. These diseases and negative health conditions impact vulnerable populations in this neighborhood, especially large numbers of children. Residents have reported concerns about exposure to pollution and odors, cancer and asthma rates, accidents and safety, as well as social conditions like crime and poverty and lack of food options.

Out of the 1,300 acres, only 16 percent of this neighborhood is comprised of residential housing, parks, and schools. The other portion of this urban community contains heavy industrial uses and fast moving paths of transport including highways and rail. The station area, similar to the larger neighborhood, is home to an irregular and disconnected pattern of residential, industrial, rail and highways.

Concerns include:

1. **Environmental quality**: issues include air and water quality, noise, and odor.

2. **Walkable access to goods and services**: the station area and neighborhoods lack this access to food stores, banks, pharmacies, child care centers, churches, libraries, schools, and parks.

3. **Connectivity and mobility**: fragmented streets, sidewalks, and blocks, the lack of sidewalks and pedestrian right of ways, as well as inhospitable and infrequent bus and transit stops.

4. **Safety**: unsafe for pedestrians and cyclists; issues with crime and fear of crime.

The station area, located along RTD’s East Corridor Line, embraces a half-mile radius of the future station platform. It will be the second station area from Denver Union Station to Denver International Airport. The platform is currently under construction and should be open by 2016.
Challenges:

- The station area’s mix of residential and industrial creates incompatible land uses, visual confusion, and a lack of identity.

- Current zoning IA (light industrial) and IB (heavy industrial) requires larger parcels, is “truck-centric” and not walkable.

- These zoning classifications also allow for marijuana grow facilities. Current industrial uses, including the influx of grow facilities, are suspected to cause health effects like irritated eyes and sore throats, as well as unpleasant odor and noise.

- Grow facilities seem to be driving up the cost of real estate and thus impeding other types of redevelopment and re-use more complementary with the surrounding neighborhood.

- Most of the area is privately owned, making it difficult for the city to issue or fund public improvements including the addition of sidewalks and parks.

- An abandoned freight rail spur, the Market Lead is considered both a challenge and an opportunity. Dividing the station area with a steep ditch, the Market Lead is difficult and scary to cross, and contains used needles, mattresses, trash, and broken glass. De facto, the Market Lead is also used for drainage, and fills quickly with rainfall.

- The station platform is not accessible to much of the surrounding area and its residents. Lack of connectivity makes reaching the station a two-mile walk for many.

- There is no connectivity for vehicles, pedestrians, or bikes within the street network. The lack of pedestrian and bike routes and the fragmented and ungroomed streets make it difficult to impossible to get efficiently from point A to point B without driving. Indirect routes can triple the expected travel time through the area.

- The station area lacks basic safety features like sidewalks and street lights. With I-70 and warehouses nearby, there is often heavy, fast truck traffic.

- Commuter rail coming to the neighborhood may be too expensive for residents (note: RTD has not yet set fares).

- Residents are concerned about gentrification pushing them out. City officials and economic development experts also express concern that mixed-use gentrification could drive industrial uses and jobs out of Denver.

- The area is a food desert and lacks other convenient retail. Without grocery stores or community markets, most residents have to travel long distances for basic services. The closest full-service grocer is 2.6 miles away: a Wal-Mart at 60th and Dahlia in Commerce City.

- There is little developable land with frontage on Colorado Boulevard, which is key for attracting quality retailer operators who need access and exposure.

- The controversial reconstruction of I-70 remains an unknown. Will it help or hurt the neighborhoods? Some think the proposal to put I-70 below ground and building a deck (and possible park) over the highway will knit together Elyria, Swansea, and Globeville. Others see a lost opportunity to remove highway traffic, noise and pollution from the city.
Opportunities:

- Rail transit tends to catalyze change. The station area will bring opportunity to the neighborhood as a whole.

- The future rail station itself can catalyze a multi-modal area including bus, bike routes, and sidewalks.

- With good views and access to downtown, the area could also attract new residential development, especially as more buyers and renters are priced out of central Denver.

- The A-Mart produce warehouse at 3770 E 40th Avenue recently added a small walk-up market. Although there are no sidewalks and the store is surrounded by wire-fencing, this site could be transformed into a lively and convenient food hub for residents.

- The Market Lead has strong potential to be revamped as pedestrian-cyclist corridor, for new park land, for creative stormwater management, and for growing food locally.

- Current industrial uses provide numerous jobs and positively affect the local economy. The city would like to see economic development building on this economic base with clean industrial jobs and opportunities for start-ups.

- Proximity to I-70 can help attract these “clean and green” industrial owners and businesses.

*The Highline in New York City (pictured above) is an example of how a dilapidated railway, once used to service Manhattan industrial area, was converted into a park and corridor.*
IV. Recommendation Summaries

1. Create a multi-phase redevelopment plan for the neighborhood to drive and govern the process.

2. Break up the larger station area into smaller districts that emphasize different residential and industrial uses (see drawing at right). This will help define neighborhoods, connections, and future uses.

3. Determine how to leverage the potential of the new RTD station.

4. Document key safety concerns such as traffic and poor lighting. Articulate steps, costs and timing for addressing these issues.

5. Consider “Healthy Places” improvements including community gardens, safe pedestrian and bicycle trails and supportive infrastructure, improved streetscapes with tree lawns, storm retention and water quality, and access to education and health care.

6. Create an areawide infrastructure plan and associated finance plan.

7. Explore costs and returns of implementing a Tax Increment District, Business Improvement District, or related public-private funding vehicle.

8. Re-zone to I-MX to encourage a creative mix of “clean and green” light industry with new residential development looking for proximity and access to downtown. Adding population will also draw attention to the area and built market support for a grocer and other needed services.


10. Work with retail brokers and developers to bring in neighborhood amenities and retail like a grocery store, a community center, bank, and Laundromats.

11. Preserve and enhance the lighter, more labor-intensive industrial employment centers emphasizing clean tech.

12. Build on the neighborhood “food cluster,” such as caterers and produce warehouses, to create community kitchens, culinary training centers, community gardens, food education programs, and markets. These will provide new job training, jobs, services, and access to healthy food for current neighbors.

13. Creatively combine such community uses with other needed facilities such as a recreation center or health clinic.

14. Improve connectivity by re-establishing the street grid and filling in gaps in the sidewalk network. This will link schools, services and businesses. Projects could include safe street crossings, bike lanes and paths, street trees, and appropriate lighting.

15. Work with RTD to create a Neighborhood Eco Pass (NECO) program to make rail and other transit affordable for residents.

16. Redevelop the Market Lead with a mix of pedestrian/bikeways, parks, community gardens, and drainage.
1. How can the aspirations and concerns of current residents be addressed, including:

a. Improved neighborhood environment, safety, access to services, parks etc?

The current market provides a huge opportunity to bring people into this area. Denver is seeing a record growth in the last 24 months in areas like housing, employment, consumer spending, and commercial real estate. In Northeast Denver, there is a growing need for office, flex and retail space with a decrease in rental vacancy rates and more homeownership. There needs to be a city-led effort to improve the public realm, to transform the Market Lead, to create parks and pedestrian connections, and to protect and nurture industrial employment.

   Neighborhood-scale interventions should be small, but geared towards improving the health and well-being of area residents. Some community programming implemented in Denver Housing Authority's (DHA) Mariposa project would work well here, including community gardens, health and nutrition classes, and neighborhood clinics. An example is Chicago’s Inspirational Kitchen, a social enterprise restaurant that has helped hundreds of individuals gain skills to find employment and move away from homelessness through training programs.

The panel identified the Market Lead as an opportunity due to its connection with other neighborhoods and central location. In figuring out what to do with this eyesore and safety concern, it’s important to note that it does not have to be all or nothing. You could fill in part of it to redevelop it in the form of public parks and pedestrian right of ways, as well us using it for drainage and retention. Something drastically different and new must occur here to overcome this existing fear and to encourage new life and use.

b. Concern of rising rents and property values affecting lower-income residents and business owners?

The panel agreed that the station area needs to be rezoned. The current zoning which includes I-A (light industrial) and I-B (heavy industrial) does not protect the interests of residents or business owners. Instead, they suggest re-zoning to I-MX, which is more suitable for a variety of industrial, commercial, civic, and residential uses.

Benefits of rezoning include:
- the ability for more residential development if desired
- More jobs and housing in the area will build market demand for a grocer and other services
- New regulations would require a different development pattern and urban design. Industrial buildings are typically designed with parking surrounding the structure, or in front, and oftentimes with raised loading docks, which present access challenges. I-MX requires building placement to be closer to the street, with parking, loading, and access in the rear of the site. These I-MX districts tend to be more “urban” with a rectilinear street grid/network and alley access.
- While grow facilities are protected under the former zoning code, rezoning would limit new grow facilities. In turn, this would help keep the cost of real estate down (and thus encourage new investment) for the short term.

2. What are more immediate opportunities for a healthier living environment, vs. longer-term prospects?

Missing elements of a healthy place include: walking and biking, connectivity and safety, access to food, air quality, green infrastructure, active design, and access to health clinics. Immediate action items for the station area:

**Walking and Biking:** More connections along 40th Avenue to nearby schools and the South Platte River. For example, 40th Avenue could be striped to provide lanes for pedestrians and for bikes. The added lanes provide an immediate solution versus the long-term and more costly option of building sidewalks. To improve safety, and to separate automobile traffic and pedestrian/bike traffic, the panel recommends installing temporary bollards.

In addition, traffic calming at 40th and Colorado will help people safely navigate between the east and west sides of Colorado Boulevard. As an alternative, the panel suggests making improvements to encourage more pedestrian and bike use along East 41st Avenue, which runs parallel to 40th and may provide a second option for walking and biking without the heavy automobile traffic.
**Access to food:** an immediate solution would be to create a temporary farm stand or market. The panel also recommends using some vacant land to begin urban farming that may eventually blend with neighborhood programs like cooking classes and volunteer opportunities. Another suggestion: duplicate the GrowHaus, a nonprofit indoor farm, market and education center at 4751 York Street (also part of Elyria-Swansea). Redevelop the Market Lead to include community gardens.

Long-term solution: bring in a grocery store for this neighborhood. The issue with recruiting a grocer is you need more density to support a store. The most likely location for a grocery store is on or visible from Colorado Boulevard. Since there are not enough households to support a large grocer today, the city should consider incentives to get more food into these target areas.

Another idea would be to put in a slightly non-traditional grocery store like a smaller corner market. Is there a building that the city can re-purpose with free rent or heavily subsidized rent provide a neighborhood market? The other obvious strategy to attract a grocer is to keep building housing at Park Hill Village West, thus building population to support this business.

**Air quality:** Limit truck traffic throughout the neighborhood by creating separate truck routes. In addition, rezoning to limit grow houses may improve air quality.

**Green Space/Infrastructure:** Look at adding green roofs (planted roofs) and solar roof panels to existing industrial buildings. The other opportunity to add parks, trails and community gardens is along the Market Lead.

**Active Design:** How do we make this a healthier industrial area? Get sidewalks! Placing buildings closer to the street eliminates the curb cuts and allows you to put parking behind buildings. In terms of urban design, it's important to "face" compatible uses and forms across the street from each other, and to buffer residential uses from the more intense side of industrial uses. This can be done by applying the principles of walkable development to residential and light industrial flex uses on opposing sides of the street:

- Pedestrian friendly buildings, placed close to the street with street facing windows and entrances.
- Interesting facades and application of materials, awnings or other elements.
- Pronounced block corners.
- Wide sidewalks with space for on-street amenities like trees, and parking.

The majority of truck parking and loading for light industrial flex uses should be to the rear of the building(s). This approach can create a successful transition that buffers residential uses from existing larger scale industrial uses. Light industrial flex buildings can even provide neighborhood services and retail that could benefit the neighborhood.

Active design includes access to transit. People who use transit walk twice about as much as those two drive to work. The city/RTD could offer neighborhood-discounted Eco Passes to make trains and buses convenient for resident and workers. RTD currently issues about 6,500 Neighborhood Eco Passes and also has a business Eco Pass program. Long-term solutions would include building a community recreation center, a health clinic, and/or a community kitchen. These could perhaps be combined in one building.

**Safety:** immediate action items include the addition of street lighting.
3. What public improvements are most critical to encouraging private investment, while improving the overall health and well-being of established residents and future development?

The panel suggests balancing the needs of private investment and neighborhood needs to include: an improved street network, better connections, and more pedestrian-friendly streets. Additional recommendations include adding an enhanced North/South pedestrian corridor on Monroe and the Market Lead, as well as an enhanced East/West pedestrian corridor along 41st Avenue.

Recommended implementation steps include:
- Develop an area-wide infrastructure plan with an associated financing plan.
- Create a special district to allocate costs for improvements like street lighting and sidewalks to the city and property owners based on benefits, such as increased market for properties and higher property values.
- For example, create a General Improvement District (GID): city-initiated GID would allow property owners (subject to their approval) to finance area-wide improvements.
- Integrate and coordinate with North Denver Cornerstone Collaborative (NDCC) and the Mayor’s Corridor of Opportunity.
- Establish urban renewal area to enable property assembly and tax increment financing of public improvements.

4. What is the appropriate mix of uses (employment, high tech manufacturing, industrial mixed use, residential mixed use, retail, office, etc.) for this area near I-70 and Colorado, and along the East Corridor commuter rail?

The panel recommends rezoning the station area to industrial mixed-use (I-MX) and allowing the station area to evolve into a more intensive “job center” that hosts more clean tech and entrepreneurial start-ups.

Suggested uses include labor-based manufacturing facilities that are cleaner. The city should promote a clean tech for this area by recruiting the businesses they want to be there. Examples include growing hydroponic foods or tech-based businesses with associated tech schools and job training. This approach will help improve the air quality in this area, preserve existing jobs and create new ones, and promote the idea of a healthy workforce.

It is important to preserve the higher-value industrial uses with better paying jobs that already exists, while allowing vacant land space-intensive warehouses to be redeveloped. These vacant and underused spaces can be creatively redeveloped to add higher-density residential, especially affordable and workforce housing.

The city presented the concept of a multi-story industrial building combining the uses of light industrial with office, and retail. Uses may include warehousing, manufacturing, distribution, service, intellectual or high-tech, support office, storage, and related retailing. The five-story New York building in Portland, Oregon, embodies this concept (pictured right).

Its 20,000 square-foot floorplates may be divided into 1,000 square-foot spaces for small business and start-ups for high-tech and other knowledge-based businesses. While intrigued with this idea, the panel considered it “ahead of the market” at 40th and Colorado, where industry still prefers parking lots and loading docks.

What other ideas would work near the rail station?
The panel considered storage and parking. Given the connection and proximity to DIA, this could be a popular spot for people to park on their way to the airport. Given proximity to I-70 and I-25, it could also be a popular spot for people who like to vacation in Colorado to store snowmobiles, motorcycles and skis.
“There is a clandestine nature to the neighborhood because of grow houses” – Property and business owner

“With a couple changes, I think this spot is prime for residential”-- Property and business owner

**Q: Do you have an access point that takes you around the tracks?**

A: “No, that’s part of the problem, you would have to walk around. There is no access on my side of the street right now. If any of this developed into residential, there would need to be better access.” – Property and business owner

**Q: When you were looking at the property, what drove you to this part of town?**

A: “Access, being able to hop on the interstate is convenient.” – Property and business owner

“In these areas it’s been tough to keep violence down, we need to grow jobs, we have a lot of industrial, but what can we do with this in terms of real estate? We want to grow and restore a manufacturing element to this space to encourage statewide investments.” – Local elected official

**Q: How do you see the economic development side engaging with the residential, as it’s a place with some problems for those who already live here?**

A: “An increase in manufacturing space close to residential will encourage people to walk or bike to work… our hope is to try to develop those in tandem where you have new urbanism synergy around people’s ability to work and live close to each other.”

– Local elected official

**Q: What’s it like to live here? What would you like to see improve?**

A: “One thing she is worried about is the lighting in this area and the crime. For example, between Steele and Colorado on 40th, this is an area she needs to access to get to the rail and it’s really dark, and there aren’t any sidewalks. The whole area is really unsafe for pedestrians. She would also like to see more stores, like a market.” – Translator for Swansea homeowner

“If you have a car you can get to things, if you don’t have a car, even public transportation is really hard, so it would be nice to have things in the neighborhood that people use every day like laundry facilities and grocery stores.” - Swansea Resident

We think light industrial/flex is compatible across the street from residential if it is based on good principles of walkable urban design.”—City Planner

“There are lots of 1950s-era industrial sites with an awkward mix of light industrial and residential. You can see there is residential to the South and industrial to the North. The public streets are neglected; there are lots of potholes and no sidewalks at all.” – City representative during site tour, looking down 38th Avenue

**Q: How do residents feel about the I-70 project?**

A: “There is a bit of confusion. There is a fear of gentrification. Almost half of the community is home ownership; they feel as rents go up they won’t have anywhere to go. Some who own or rent fear rising in property taxes. People have been coming here and seeing Colorado as a place to migrate to because of marijuana laws; so, rent is going up and will continue to do so.”

– Executive Director of local community based non-profit.
“Some fear that allowing more residential development starts to change the market value and potentially threatens the stability of light industrial. Hopefully well-established businesses can remain mixed with light-industrial ‘infill’ and new workforce housing. This may come up as we work through internal review and public comments this fall and winter.” —Denver city planner

**How do we make this a healthier industrial area today?** Start with an area-wide, detailed plan, and work your way forward. Use this plan to guide the first small, incremental changes that will make the area more livable and attractive.

Get pedestrian walkways. Get street lighting. Improve the primary connections and paths of transit. Change the zoning. Create temporary food hubs and community programs. From here, and using the areawide plan to address gradual

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**VIII. Acknowledgements**

Thank you to our volunteer panelists participating for ULI Colorado:

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