



Urban Land Institute (ULI) Colorado Revitalizing Denver's South Platte River Corridor A Technical Advisory Panel Report



A Report from the Denver South Platte River Technical Advisory Panel

By ULI Colorado

October 7-8, 2021



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Supported by:

The City and County of Denver and the Denver Regional Council of Governments

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Overview of ULI Advisory Services

Since 1947, the national ULI Advisory Services program has assembled 400+ ULI-member teams to help sponsors find solutions for issues including downtown redevelopment, community revitalization, and affordable housing, among other matters. In Colorado, ULI Advisory Services have provided solutions for such key sites as the Colorado Convention Center, Coors Field, Fitzsimons, and the Denver Justice Center.

Technical Advisory Panels (TAPs)

ULI Colorado’s Technical Advisory Panels (TAPs) offer the same expertise at the local level. Each panel is composed of qualified and unbiased professionals who volunteer their time. Panel chairs are respected ULI members with previous panel experience. Since 2003, ULI Colorado has completed more than 60 TAPs, leading to positive policy changes and built projects across the state.



ULI volunteer panelists tour the South Platte River corridor with City and County of Denver staff.

Executive Summary

The City and County of Denver asked ULI Colorado to study the South Platte River corridor and surrounding land uses within its borders. In October 2021, ULI Colorado convened a Technical Advisory Panel (TAP) composed of volunteer experts to provide recommendations. This report includes the findings and recommendations that came out of that TAP.

The Community Planning and Development department of the City and County of Denver sought the panel’s insight and recommendations in answer to the following problem statement and questions:

Recent development and planned projects along the riverfront vary significantly in terms of the relationship, design, and placement between buildings, infrastructure, and the river. The City would like to examine what approaches to planning, public realm and building design, and riverfront improvements would facilitate the City’s vision for development that improves access and river function, provides for a mix of uses and demographics, and fosters equitable mobility and recreational access to and along the water. This analysis and resulting recommendations should address the fact that much of the river and adjacent development will be one-sided, as major transportation infrastructure in the form of I-25 and/or major rail corridors are along one side of the river.

1. What type, uses, and scale of buildings should be located along the riverfront that address and foster a healthy river ecology, recreational, and mobility needs?
2. What should the interface between development and the river look like, in terms of urban design and quality of building frontage, site planning, and the public realm?
3. What best practices exist for building placement and setbacks as well as public realm and landscape improvements that allow for healthy river function?
4. What should the relationship and design of the riverfront, recreational opportunities, and mobility infrastructure look like?
5. How can we address potential challenges that may be present between publicly accessible river access and private development?
6. Identify opportunities to encourage private investment in river revitalization efforts, including precedent projects from outside of Denver and funding sources that can be leveraged to attract investment.
7. Through the lens of equity and social justice, evaluate how potential impacts to the surrounding community be mitigated, and access to opportunity can be enhanced, through riverfront development and investment. This evaluation should include socio-economic and environmental impacts.

The panel's recommendations are divided into the following sections:

- **South Platte River Corridor Master Plan:** pages 10-17
- **Governance & Finance:** pages 18-21

Key Takeaways:

- The South Platte River is a key regional asset that should be celebrated, restored, and protected.
- Create a South Platte River Corridor Master Plan to establish a regulatory framework for leadership and clear guidance for decision-making related to the river corridor. Key principles for the master plan should include healthy ecosystems, equitable access, and a great city.
- Equity must be a critical component of the process, planning, and implementation of the South Platte River Corridor Master Plan and governance structure development.
- Formalization of consistent leadership for river governance, public investments, and funding is essential for restoring river ecosystem health, enhancing the river corridor as a primary public space, and ensuring that the river contributes to the quality of life of all residents.
- Design standards and guidelines and a river overlay will help with implementation of the South Platte River Corridor Master Plan.
- Character zones along the South Platte River based on surrounding land uses and neighborhood attributes provide key placemaking opportunities. In addition to stitching together the river and adjacent areas, neighborhood nodes could integrate authentic and unique neighborhood characteristics into their design and uses. While the overall riverfront should have consistent design elements, the diversity of neighborhood nodes could allow local residents to feel a sense of ownership over the river corridor.
- River-oriented development is already underway with more opportunities coming, so Denver needs to focus on river corridor planning and design guidelines to ensure desired outcomes for the city and the river.
- With climate change affecting the river and the city, there is a need for immediate action.



View of the South Platte River and Denver from Cuernavaca Park.

I. Background

On October 7-8, 2021, ULI Colorado convened a Technical Advisory Panel (TAP) to provide guidance on land use along the South Platte River in Denver. For this two-day workshop, ULI Colorado assembled seven land use experts (see panelist bios on pages 24-26) who volunteered to offer objective, third-party advice. The panel reviewed a detailed advance packet of information about the area, toured the site, and interviewed local stakeholders, including city staff, public officials, and local organizational leaders (for a list of stakeholders interviewed, see pages 23-24). This TAP was part of a series of advisory services provided by ULI Colorado on the South Platte River and its adjacent land uses.

The Community Planning and Development department of the City and County of Denver gave the panelists the following problem statement and questions to address during the TAP:

Problem Statement

Recent development and planned projects along the riverfront vary significantly in terms of the relationship, design, and placement between buildings, infrastructure, and the river. The City would like to examine what approaches to planning, public realm and building design, and riverfront improvements would facilitate the City's vision for development that improves access and river function, provides for a mix of uses and demographics, and fosters equitable mobility and recreational access to and along the water. This analysis and resulting recommendations should address the fact that much of the river and adjacent development will be one-sided, as major transportation infrastructure in the form of I-25 and/or major rail corridors are along one side of the river.

The City and County of Denver sought the panel's insight and recommendations in answer to the following questions:

1. What type, uses, and scale of buildings should be located along the riverfront that address and foster a healthy river ecology, recreational, and mobility needs?

2. What should the interface between development and the river look like, in terms of urban design and quality of building frontage, site planning, and the public realm?
3. What best practices exist for building placement and setbacks as well as public realm and landscape improvements that allow for healthy river function?
4. What should the relationship and design of the riverfront, recreational opportunities, and mobility infrastructure look like?
5. How can we address potential challenges that may be present between publicly accessible river access and private development?
6. Identify opportunities to encourage private investment in river revitalization efforts, including precedent projects from outside of Denver and funding sources that can be leveraged to attract investment.
7. Through the lens of equity and social justice, evaluate how potential impacts to the surrounding community be mitigated, and access to opportunity can be enhanced, through riverfront development and investment. This evaluation should include socio-economic and environmental impacts.

This report includes findings and recommendations related to each of these questions.

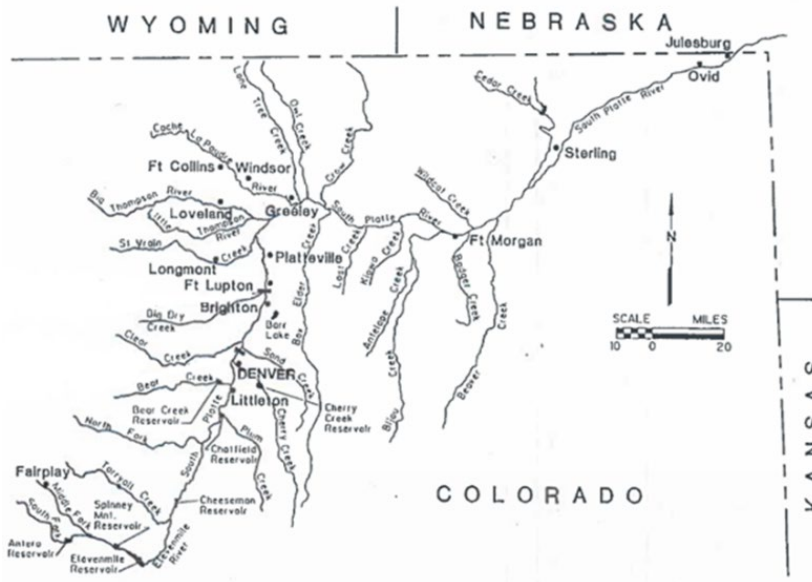
About the Study Area

The South Platte River runs 11 miles through Denver, from Globeville in the north to the Overland and Collegeview neighborhoods in the south. The City and County of Denver owns the Official Channel of the South Platte River, which is 200 feet wide and extends throughout the river corridor. The river winds through a variety of environments, with the majority of its extent running through and along industry and infrastructure. In many reaches, the river is constrained significantly by I-25 and rail infrastructure. Connections to and across the river are limited, impeding easy access for residents and travelers—particularly those traveling on alternative modes of transportation.

The TAP focused on studying the interface between development, mobility, and recreational infrastructure along the South Platte River within the City and County of Denver's boundaries. Historically, development along the river has been industrial and employment-focused, taking advantage of rail and highway access. The natural river channel has been modified with dams and channelization over the last 100 years, facilitating the use of land directly adjacent to the river corridor while minimizing opportunities for restoring the river's ecological health, recreation, and connectivity.

During the past 20 years, approximately \$100 million has been invested in river improvement projects. Additionally, multiple master and visioning plans have been developed for all or portions of the river by a variety of organizations, including the City and County of Denver, Mile High Flood District, and the Greenway Foundation. At the same time, significant development interest along the river corridor has resulted in projects like the National Western Center, the River Mile, Stadium District, and Sun Valley redevelopments.

Development pressure continues to exist along the river corridor, particularly adjacent to Downtown Denver. The City is currently working to develop a cohesive vision for the South Platte River that addresses its function, role, and accessibility as an environmental and community resource. The first phase of this process comprises an in-depth analysis of river function and flow, that will serve as a basis for consideration of the river's bank width, opportunities for mobility and recreational infrastructure, and how adjacent growth will integrate with this amenity. The vision will also integrate goals from the One Water Plan, as well as Blueprint Denver's goals for equitable outcomes for all new development and infrastructure investments, ensuring that the substantial economic, social, and cultural benefits of the City's growth are available to and shared by all residents.



Map of the South Platte River watershed within Colorado.
 Map courtesy Camp, Dresser, McKee (CDM), 1994.



Map of the South Platte River, shown in blue, within City and County of Denver boundaries.
 Base map courtesy Google Maps.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOUTH PLATTE RIVER

The South Platte River is tied to the history of Denver. The area was originally home to Ute, Cheyenne, and Arapaho Peoples, among other tribal nations, who congregated at the confluence of the South Platte and Cherry Creek. After the first mining settlement was established along the river in 1858, the river valley came to serve as a railroad corridor and magnet to industrial interests that used the South Platte as a source of water and a way to dispose of wastes. The South Platte was once declared by settlers to be “a mile wide and an inch deep, too thin to plow, and too thick to drink.” The South Platte has been and continues to be the lifeblood of Denver, which relies upon it for drinking water, electrical power, landscape irrigation, recreation, wildlife, industry, and natural respite.

Historically, flows along the South Platte River were variable, rising in spring pulses from snowmelt in the Rocky Mountains and lowering to almost dry conditions during other times of the year. It is these dredges and deluges of precipitation and runoff that created the pristine functional watershed. In its natural state, the South Platte River was able to ebb and flow, expanding and contracting with the changing seasons and precipitation. Urbanization reshaped the natural environment, and the South Platte River experienced pressures of a prosperous Denver. The river was channelized and degraded, and the surrounding land developed creating unintended consequences and placing people and property at great risk.

As of 2019, the flood of 1965 remains the biggest and costliest in metro Denver’s history, costing 21 lives statewide, more than 600 injuries, and the loss of many businesses and thousands of homes. The damage totaled nearly \$4 billion in today’s dollars. The Cherry Creek dam and reservoir, constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1950, was credited with saving hundreds of lives. The South Platte River finally captured attention statewide earning the respect it deserved.

In the flood’s aftermath, efforts focused on controlling the river. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers undertook the construction of Chatfield and Bear Creek dams and reservoirs. The Mile High Flood District was established by the Colorado legislature in 1969. Although these projects made great strides in reducing flood risk, the river could not be tamed and flooding along the river still could occur. Additionally, impoundment of the river and controlled releases have severely impacted the downstream ecosystem, affecting the riparian, wetland, and aquatic habitat.



TAP panelists tour the South Platte River corridor with City and County of Denver staff.

II. Findings

During the workshop, the panelists toured the study area, spoke with local stakeholders, and reviewed materials from the City and County of Denver about the South Platte River corridor. Before diving into recommendations, the panelists came up with the following findings.

Assets & Opportunities

Panelists agreed that the river corridor has many assets and opportunities, including:

- The river is a major asset to the city and region
- Opportunity to further celebrate the river
- Opportunity for additional stakeholder coordination, and a designated point person for the river
- Opportunity for a more uniform process for development along the river
- Existing groups of river stakeholders
- The City's Needs Assessment is underway
- Opportunities for nodes and links along the river

Challenges

The panelists identified the following challenges specific to the river corridor:

"We need recognition of the river as a sacred resource in our geography and climate."

- Laura E. Aldrete, Executive Director, Community Planning and Development, City and County of Denver

"Value of property along the river has gotten more expensive, which is a great problem to have, but it will make it more difficult for people to give up space and help make the improvements desired."

- Peter Baertlein, Director, Implementation, Denver Department of Transportation and Infrastructure

- Everyone and no one owns the river. No clear leadership.
- Degraded ecosystem health
- People don't feel safe along the river
- Lack of consistent connectivity and access to and along the river
- Lack of wayfinding and visibility
- Homelessness
- Industrial uses along the river
- Infrastructure, like railroad and highway, along the river
- Conflicting needs of stakeholders

"How do we integrate density with the natural environment?"

- Laura E. Aldrete, Executive Director, Community Planning and Development, City and County of Denver

"We need to prioritize restoration of natural habitats, public access, and safety."

- Grace Rink, Director, Denver Climate Action, Sustainability & Resiliency

"There's not good wayfinding, visibility, or access along the river currently. The river could be celebrated more."

- Emily Gloeckner, Director, Transportation Engineering, Denver Department of Transportation and Infrastructure

Takeaways from Last 21 Years

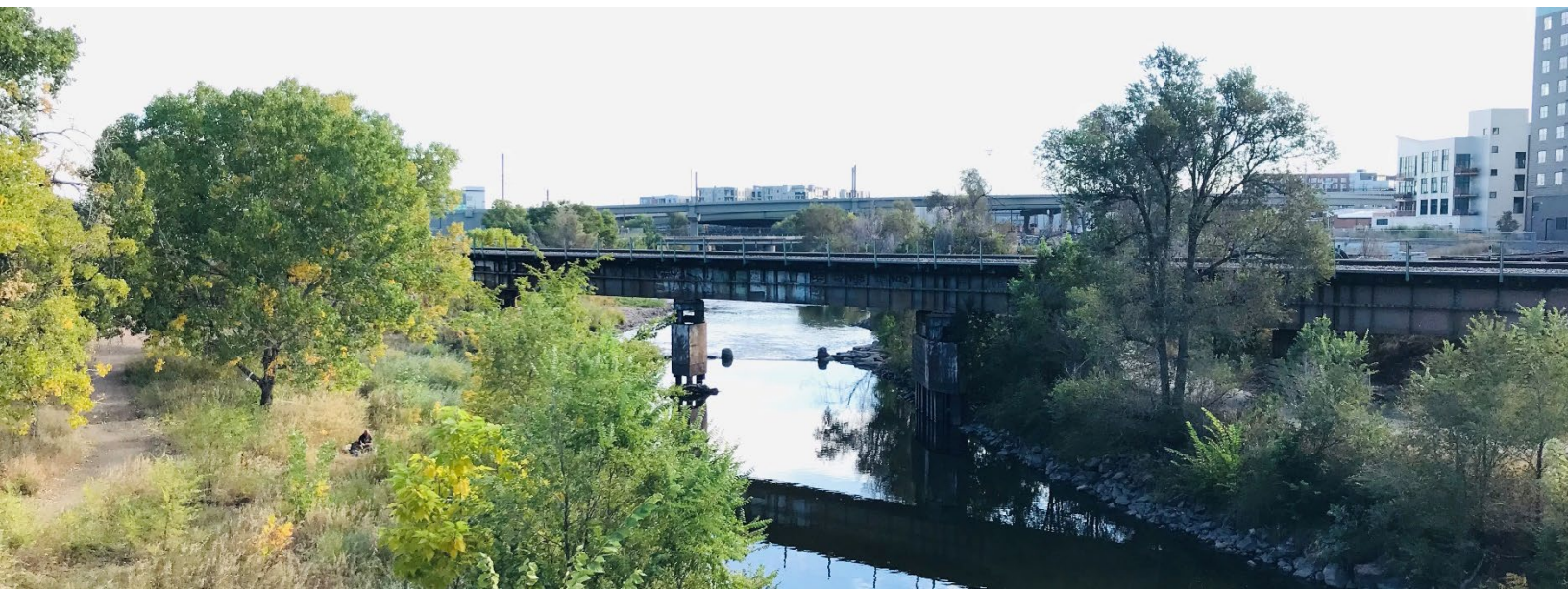
The panel examined the historic role of the South Platte River, how the river shaped Denver's development, the changing role of the river, and its legacy as a parkway or 'green thread' unifying the City. The panel looked to other national and international cities with significant river systems and the regulatory frameworks in place for managing river restoration and governance. The panel also examined the management and planning history of the South Platte River and discovered various visioning and framework plans. One of these documents was the [Long Range Management Framework Plan](#) that was adopted in 2000 under Mayor Wellington Webb. This document recommended the creation of a South Platte River Corridor Council "to promote and implement a commonly agreed-upon and adopted Vision and Long-Range Management Framework for the South Platte River Corridor within the City and County of Denver." Unfortunately, the council was never created since Mayor Webb left office.

In 2010, the [River Vision Implementation Plan](#) was published by the Greenway Foundation. The visioning within this document has been the basis for many of the projects that have occurred along the river in the past decade. However, like the Long Range Management Framework Plan, there was no entity dedicated to implementing the vision in the River Vision Implementation Plan. Without institutionalized management or an entity dedicated to implementation, the visions and plans within these documents were not fully actualized when staff left, or administrations changed.

The panel formulated the following takeaways from the past 21 years:

- Significant improvements to the river and trail system have been made over time.
- Political, community, and business leadership is critical for river corridor improvements.
- Changes in political leadership can shift priorities and derail momentum.
- Complexity of river issues has changed:
 - Climate change impacts on the river ecosystem
 - Private development interest adjacent to the river
 - Increased appreciation of the river and trail systems
 - Increased need for open space and recreational opportunities as regional population has grown
- Need long term continuity of leadership, funding, and focus on the river.
- Need to institutionalize who is responsible for river improvements.

These takeaways helped form the basis of the panel's recommendations.



View of the South Platte River near Park Avenue West.

III. Recommendations

Three primary drivers and goals frame the panel’s recommendations. These include:

- Addressing climate change and restoring the ecological health of the river corridor.
- Enhancing the river corridor as a primary public space for Denver residents and reorienting development so that it faces the river.
- Ensuring that the South Platte River, one of Denver’s most valued and historic assets, is accessible and contributes to the quality of life of all residents.

Equity was a key consideration for the panel as it formulated recommendations. The panel looked for alignment with Blueprint Denver’s equity concepts, which include improving access to opportunity, reducing vulnerability to displacement, and expanding housing and jobs diversity. To ensure that the South Platte River is accessible and contributes to the quality of life of all residents, the panelists identified the following equity considerations for the river corridor:

- Examine access from multiple scales, such as by community, neighborhood, block, and parcel.
- Consider equitable access and connectivity for each mode of transportation, including by transit, on foot, by bike, or by car.
- Find ways for neighborhoods, their histories, and their residents’ cultural identities to be reflected in character nodes along the river, cultivating community ownership and stewardship of the river and sharing voices and stories about the many people that are part of the legacy of the South Platte River. These character nodes could include cultural art, custom identity features like gates, benches, and signage, placemaking, and heritage elements, like native edible planting areas.
- Focus on public health opportunities along the river, such as publicly accessible natural areas and parks, space for social interaction, and connected trail systems for active transportation and exercise.

“We are in a new era of climate change. We need to examine what this river will be for Denver over the next 100 years.”

- Laura E. Aldrete, Executive Director, Community Planning and Development, City and County of Denver

What is Equity?

“Equity is when everyone, regardless of who they are or where they come from, has the opportunity to thrive.”

- Blueprint Denver, 2019

The panel's recommendations are divided into the following sections:

- **South Platte River Corridor Master Plan:** pages 10-17
- **Governance & Finance:** pages 18-21

South Platte River Corridor Master Plan

Rivers don't exist within regulatory frameworks in most cities. When they are not included within official city comprehensive plans, they are usually not planned for intentionally. People, ecosystems, and regions can lose out as a result.

The panel determined that it would be important for the City and County of Denver to create a South Platte River Corridor Master Plan to establish a regulatory framework for leadership and clear guidance for decision-making related to the river corridor.

This master planning would be important since past plans related to the river have been standalone (as opposed to tying into Denver's other plans), they have lacked coordination across departments, agencies, and organizations for implementation, and the city would benefit from a comprehensive master plan for the entire river corridor within the City and County of Denver.

The panelists recommended including two primary elements: the South Platte River Corridor Master Plan, and design standards and guidelines.

"People are excited about making the South Platte an interactive space. The South Platte used to be a geographic marker, but not really a place people would go. It can become a place for community again."

- Jamie Torres, Council Member, Denver City Council District 3

South Platte River Corridor Master Plan

The purpose of the South Platte River Corridor Master Plan would be to:

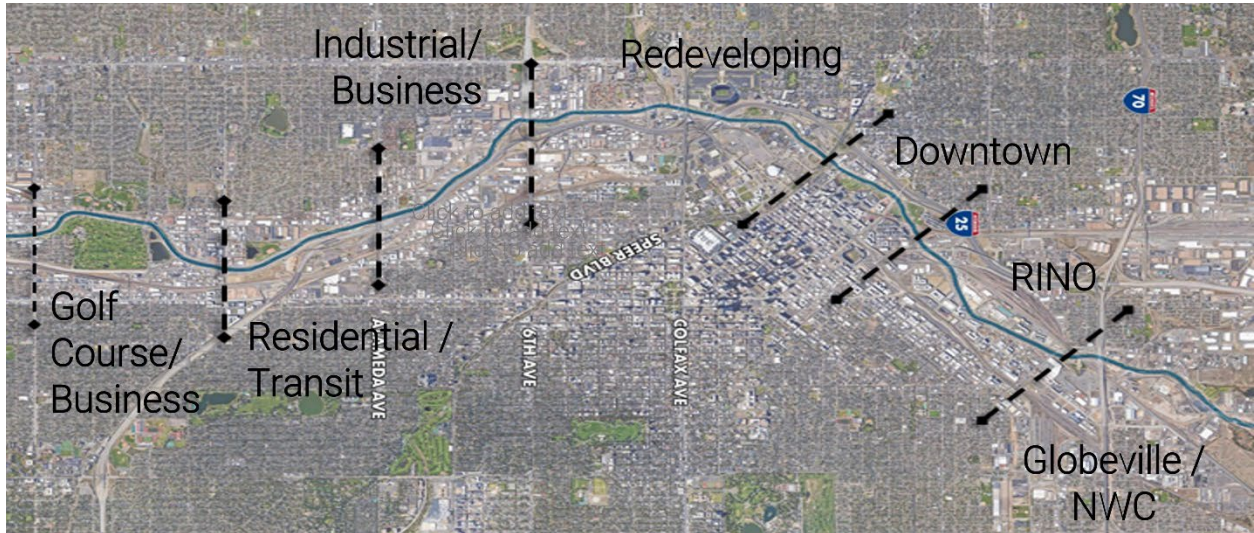
- Elevate the importance of the natural river system as a key public asset within Denver
- Improve the health of the river ecosystem
- Support riverfront access and connectivity, mobility, recreation, and placemaking
- Honor and respect the history of the river, indigenous and local cultures, and the varied character of the corridor
- Identify sites for preservation of existing land uses and opportunities for new uses
- Provide clear guidance for decision-making
- Develop the master plan with leadership across departments and from key partners

Within the master plan, the panelists recommended including the following components.

Establish Character Zones and Neighborhood Nodes

As part of the South Platte River Corridor Master Plan, the panelists recommended establishing character zones along the South Platte River based on surrounding land uses and neighborhood attributes. These character zones could connect with Denver's Neighborhood Plans as appropriate. Within the character zones, they recommended identifying neighborhood nodes along the river that represent key placemaking opportunities. These nodes could serve as bike and pedestrian connection points between the river and surrounding neighborhoods.

In addition to stitching together the river and adjacent areas, the neighborhood nodes could integrate authentic and unique neighborhood characteristics into their design and uses. They also provide opportunities to pay homage to the area's indigenous cultures. While the overall riverfront should have consistent design elements, the diversity of neighborhood nodes could allow local residents to feel a sense of ownership over the river corridor.



Draft character zones along the South Platte River in Denver. Map courtesy Bill Mahar.



Examples of character zone designs along the river. From top, counterclockwise: the RiverWalk in Calgary, photo by Roy Ooms Photography; rendering of riverfront park in downtown Danville, VA courtesy Danville Register & Bee; the San Antonio, TX Riverwalk, courtesy Thinkstock.

System-Wide Mobility, Access & Crossings

An important part of the master plan would be to improve riverfront access, connectivity, and multi-modal transportation. The panelists provided the following recommendations toward those goals:

- Enhance pedestrian-focused connections from surrounding neighborhoods
- Increase trail width to allow for the separation of bicyclists and pedestrians, especially in high use areas
- Balance mobility corridor needs with spaces for people and pedestrians. This could be accomplished with a separation between bicyclists and pedestrians and with “slow zones” to prioritize safety in space-constrained areas. Lanes could be used to separate modes of differing speeds, and different paths could be created for local use and regional high-speed use.
- Identify locations for bike and pedestrian bridges across the river throughout entire corridor
- Add a wayfinding system to improve navigation from surrounding neighborhoods to the river, from the river to surrounding destinations, and along the trail to communicate distances, amenities, and historical, cultural, and environmental information



The Dequindre Cut in Detroit provides an example of separated lanes on a trail. Photo courtesy DetroitRiverfront.org.



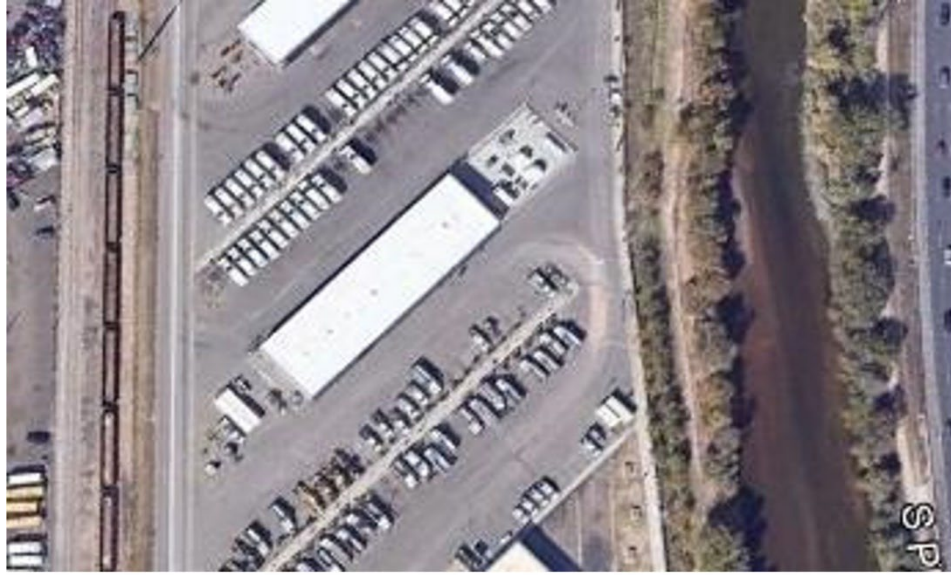
Example of separated paths for bikes and pedestrians from architecture firm Batlleiroig. Photo by Jordi Surroca.

Develop a River Zone Overlay

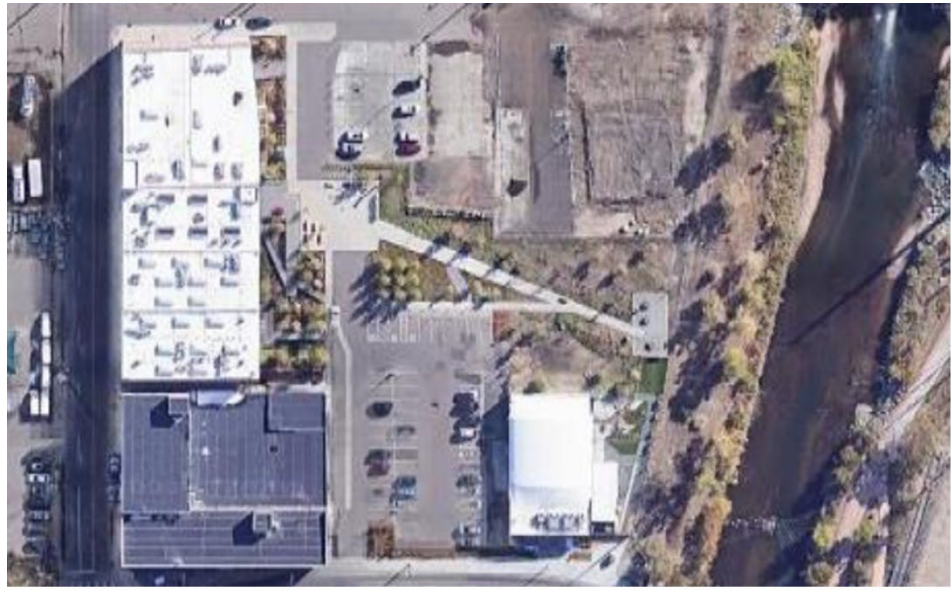
The panel recommended establishing a River Zone Overlay for the river corridor and surrounding land uses. The Overlay would include defined zones that vary based on local context. The defined zones could include:

- **The River Corridor Zone:** This zone includes the Official Channel of the South Platte River, which is 200 feet wide and extends throughout the river corridor. The City and County of Denver owns the channel and within the zone could focus on ecosystem restoration, natural habitats, the trail system, and open space.
- **The River Benefit Zone:** This zone includes the land directly adjacent to the river corridor, which could be public or private property depending on the area. The panel recommended that this zone should be where the landowners provide publicly accessible open space and community access to the river, with the size and design based on the conditions of the zone. In exchange, the landowners could receive incentives for land uses in the River Incentive Zone.
- **The River Incentive Zone:** This zone is where landowners can use incentives from providing community access in the River Benefit Zone. Incentives could include higher density (where height is a function of lot size, not adjacent uses) or expedited entitlements, for example. Development in this zone could be encouraged to include improved access, mixed uses, mixed-income and affordable housing, and orientation toward the river.





River Benefit Zone varies in size



River Benefit Zone varies in size

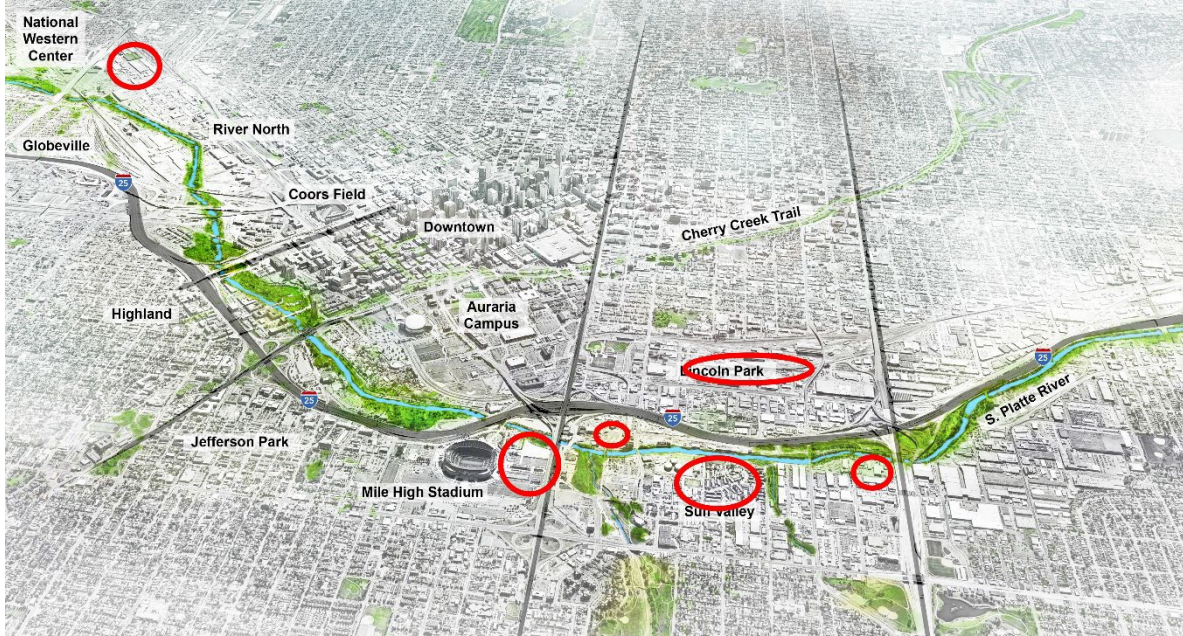
Examples of how the river overlay zones will vary depending on the local context.



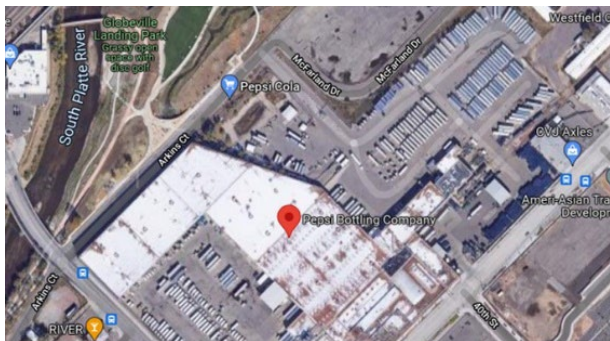
From top, counterclockwise: Rendering of riverfront design along the Willamette Blocks in Portland, OR by architects Hensley Lamkin Rachel; Rendering of the River Mile in Denver, CO courtesy M2 Development with red circles indicating areas for lawns, beaches, and river access; Rendering of the Sun Valley Cultural Plaza in Denver, CO courtesy Livable Cities Studio; Rendering of river access included in the Sun Valley Redevelopment Master Plan courtesy Livable Cities Studio.

Identify Opportunity Sites

As part of the master planning process, it would be helpful to identify sites with the potential for large parcel assemblage along the river. City staff could proactively plan for and monitor catalytic sites to ensure the desired redevelopment outcomes are achieved.

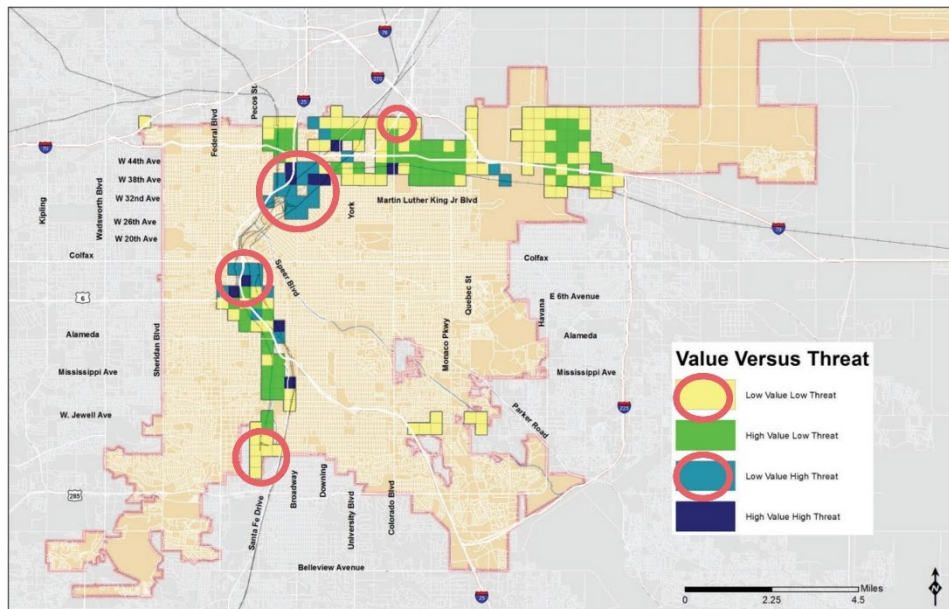


Panelists identified areas with red circles that could serve as catalytic sites for the future riverfront. Map courtesy Livable Cities Studio.



Potential opportunity sites for catalytic redevelopment along the South Platte River. From top left to bottom right: Xcel Energy's Zuni Generating Station in Lincoln Park, photo by Kevin J. Beatty for Denverite; the closed Robison Dairy production plant at 6th and Bryant Street in Denver, photo courtesy Cushman & Wakefield; the Pepsi Bottling Company in Denver, courtesy Google Maps; Union Pacific's Burnham Yard in Denver, courtesy Google Maps.

Identifying opportunity sites will likely involve an analysis of existing conditions along the riverfront. Due to its industrial past, many parcels along the river had or have industrial uses. While some of these sites can be viewed as redevelopment opportunities, the City should seek to preserve some industrial sites, given their economic contributions. Economic & Planning Systems recently conducted an analysis of industrial sites in Denver, many of which lie along the South Platte River. The following map shows areas circled in red that could be opportunity sites for redevelopment, since they are providing relatively low value compared to other industrial sites.



Map showing areas circled in red that could be opportunity sites for redevelopment along the South Platte River, since they are producing relatively low value. Each square is a quarter acre, and the colored squares include industrial sites. The relative value of each site was determined based on the longevity of the jobs on the site and long-term economic viability. Threat levels were determined based on market pressures. Map courtesy Economic & Planning Systems.

In 2013, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) published the [“Denver South Platte Corridor Study: EPA Brownfields Area-Wide Planning Pilot Program,”](#) which includes an analysis of the river corridor and potential catalytic sites for redevelopment. It would likely be worth revisiting this study when selecting opportunity sites along the river.

Design Standards and Guidelines

Along with the South Platte River Corridor Master Plan, the panel recommended developing a set of design standards and guidelines that are consistent for entire river corridor, but that allow for variation between character zones.

The panel provided the following recommendations for elements to include in the design standards and guidelines:

- **Access & Public Realm:** Public access to the river from surrounding communities, neighborhoods, blocks, parcels. Transition from private property to publicly accessible South Platte River corridor and its amenities.
- **Connections & Mobility:** Options for multi-modal connectivity including transit, car, bike, pedestrian, and universal mobility.
- **Community Stewardship & Ownership in Character Zones:** Incorporation of cultural elements, such as art, custom identity features and amenities like gates and benches, heritage elements such as native edible planting areas, wayfinding and signage, and public space design. This could also include community engagement.

- **Resilience & Health:** Inclusion of natural areas, green infrastructure, publicly accessible parks and open space, placemaking for social interaction, safety features, and connected trail systems for active transportation and exercise.
- **Adjacent Development:** Incentives for setbacks, density, mix of uses, mixed-income and affordable housing, green infrastructure and other stormwater quality features, native landscaping, custom solutions, and frontage along the river.

The panel also recommended using an incentives-based approach to implementing the design standards and guidelines to allow for needed flexibility. This could include a point-based system for guidelines that encourage the design and provision of high-quality public spaces that incorporate culture, art, and native landscaping, for example. A certain number of points would need to be achieved to gain incentives. The incentives could change based on the character zone and desired designs. A similar incentives-based approach is currently under development for Sun Valley in Denver.


Culturally Based Community/Public Art

INTENT


1. To establish Sun Valley as a leader in diverse culturally based public art.
2. To elevate the presence of local artists within Sun Valley.
3. To add visual interest.
4. To celebrate the various cultures within Sun Valley.

STANDARDS

1. Public art shall be incorporated into each parcel either by incorporating art into the public realm, or on an external wall of the building.
2. Art shall be incorporated into the 10th Avenue linear open space and within the riverfront park.
3. Public art shall be placed in highly visible locations and serve as beacons to draw trail users into the district.



Public art shall be incorporated into each parcel either by incorporating art into the public realm, or on an external wall of the building.



Add visual interest.

GUIDELINES POINTS	MAX POINTS	YOUR SCORE
The project includes high quality murals, or graphic treatments on blank walls facing alleys or other underutilized spaces.	1	
Public art installed as part of the project connects to community through story telling or other themes.	1	
Local (Sun Valley) artists are selected for murals or public art installed by the project.	1	
Local (Sun Valley) residents, youth and artists are involved in the design and/or selection of public art or artists.	1	
Developments include space for culturally relevant ground-floor tenants and/or space for community related meetings and programs.	1	
Development includes ground-floor space for existing resident-owned businesses.	1	
TOTAL		

Incentivized approach to design standards and guidelines currently under development for Sun Valley in Denver. Draft courtesy the Denver Housing Authority and Livable Cities Studio.

Governance & Finance

While various entities have influence over the South Platte River, there is no single entity with the broad-reaching authority and financial resources to implement a long-term plan for the entire river corridor in coordination with all those entities. There is a clear need for long-term continuity of leadership, funding, and focus on the South Platte River. The best way to accomplish that is to formalize who is responsible for river governance and funding.

Goals for Structure & Revenue

There are many options for a future structure to oversee the South Platte River. Any consideration should fulfill the following goals:

- Provide clarity and leadership
- Advance objectives related to river quality and the public realm
- Establish momentum that can be sustained through changes in elected officials and staff
- Convene and coordinate various governing entities with overlapping jurisdictional interests (US Army Corps of Engineers, Mile High Flood District, Colorado Department of Transportation, multiple departments within Denver, etc.)
- Generate revenue streams and leverage them using city, state, and federal sources to address operations and maintenance needs and capital projects
- Ensure private investment along the river advances the larger goals identified in the South Platte River Corridor Master Plan

Financial Needs & Sources

Capital Improvement Projects and Operations & Maintenance

It is important to continue leveraging existing public entities to fund large capital improvements along the river corridor. As additional investments are made along the river corridor, operations and maintenance needs will increase. It is critical that funding is available to maintain infrastructure and investments over time.

Some of the entities and available resources include:

- **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE):** The USACE Omaha District has jurisdiction over the South Platte River Basin. In 2010, USACE completed the South Platte River & Tributaries (Denver SPRT) study (now project). The Denver SPRT project is now ready for implementation and is authorized for a total cost of \$550,273,000 with a federal share of \$344,076,000 and a non-federal, local share of \$206,197,000.
- **Mile High Flood District (MHFD):** MHFD's revenues have recently increased since the last election enabled organizations to retain revenue. MHFD's revenues have doubled to \$6M for the region, portions of which are dedicated to the South Platte River.
- **City and County of Denver:** Denver has made commitments of approximately \$30M over the past decade to the South Platte River, with contributions from Great Outdoors Colorado, Natural Resources Damages Funds, Mile High Flood District, and others. City departments, such as the Department of Transportation & Infrastructure (DOTI) and Parks & Recreation, also bring to bear resources for the river corridor. Denver

Facilities System Bonds generate \$40M annually, and so far, there has been limited deployment within the river corridor.

- **The Greenway Foundation:** The Greenway Foundation is a Denver-based nonprofit that has led efforts, since 1974, to revitalize the South Platte River and its tributaries.
- **Potential for Bond Projects:** Other cities, like Los Angeles (see page 21 for more information), have successfully leveraged bonds to invest in their river corridors. Denver could do the same.

Public Private Partnerships

To fully implement the vision for the South Platte River corridor, the river must be leveraged as an asset to attract private sector investment. The South Platte River and its amenities could provide a competitive advantage to developments, as long as public investments are made to improve the river corridor. Public and private sector entities are already committing to river corridor improvements for the federally authorized Denver SPRT project. Tax Increment Financing (TIF) could also be leveraged for eligible sites, which could help with the formation of public private partnerships to invest in improvements in key areas along the river corridor. The Denver Urban Renewal Authority (DURA) would be a key partner for generating TIF resources for these improvements.

Governance Options

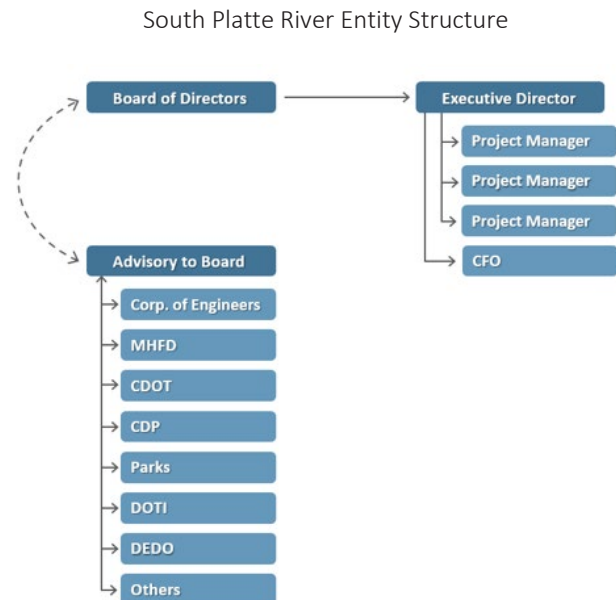
The panel presented three potential options for governance, with the goal of stimulating discussion and ideas for the long-term oversight and funding of the river corridor.

South Platte River Entity

The South Platte River Entity would be a nonprofit organization that could be either newly formed or built off an existing organization, like the Greenway Foundation, which already focuses on the South Platte River. To garner sufficient funding, the panel recommended that the organization be funded by a quarter cent sales tax or property mill levy, applied to the entire city and approved by ballot measure. As an independent nonprofit, it would be autonomous from the City and County of Denver, but it could have public accountability on the use of funds through annual reporting to the mayor and city council.

Pros:

- Autonomy from City enables organization to be nimble.
- Entity solely focused on the river.
- Funding could be substantial. A quarter cent sales tax translates to around \$42M annually.
- A quarter cent sales tax increase or property mill levy collects money directly from citizens who benefit from improvements made to the South Platte River corridor.



Con:

- Funding relies on successful City election outcome.

South Platte General Improvement District

The formation of a South Platte General Improvement District (GID) could be executed through policy adoption by the City and County of Denver. The greatest advantage of this option is that it does not require a favorable election outcome to be implemented. The GID would have a Board of Directors appointed by the mayor. Since the GID operates as a subset of the City, GIDs are typically staffed with City employees and would function as part of the City.

GIDs are usually funded through a mill levy on property owners within the GID – in this case, property owners along the river. The panel recommended a relatively low mill levy (for example 4 to 8 mills) within the GID of the river corridor. Funding from the GID would increase incrementally based on requests for entitlements and permits within the river corridor.

Pros:

- No election required. Governance formation and revenue source can be executed within the current framework of the City and County of Denver.
- Mayoral board appointees provide City oversight of governance.

Cons:

- Limited funding potential, especially when compared to a sales tax, since a GID only taxes property owners in the GID (in this case, within the river corridor).
- A City division head would likely be required to oversee the GID. The division head would be a staff person embedded within another City department, creating the potential for their attention to be divided and lost within the larger City organization.
- Typically, board composition for GIDs consists of property owners within the boundaries of the GID. Special care would need to be taken to ensure that the board represents a diverse group, such as with an advisory board.

New District or Modification of Existing District

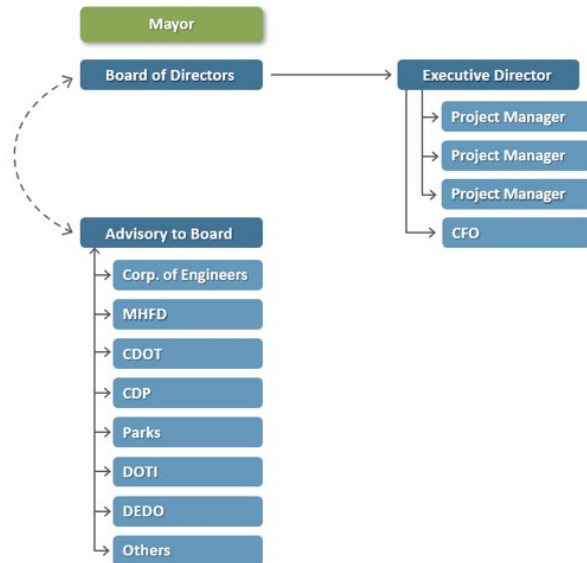
Another option explored by the panel is the formation of a new district or the expansion of an existing district. Expansion of an existing district, such as the Mile High Flood District, offers the advantage that an organizational structure already exists and could be leveraged rather than starting from scratch. An existing district could add a division that is able to offer a greater commitment to the Denver reach of South Platte.

Funding for the district could come from an increase in mill levy for Denver property owners, approved by election. The autonomy of a district from the City and County of Denver allows it to have a greater focus on the river corridor.

Pros:

- Could create a new district or modify an existing district.
- Leveraging an existing entity provides a known organizational structure.

South Platte River General Improvement District Structure



- Autonomy from the City and County of Denver provides opportunity for greater focus on South Platte River corridor needs.

Cons:

- This option has limited revenue potential. Funding would either rely on the resources of an existing district or on an increased mill levy for property owners in Denver, which would require approval by election.
- May involve complexity related to existing district's structure and whether it can focus specifically on Denver's portion of the South Platte River.

LEARNING FROM THE LOS ANGELES RIVER REVITALIZATION MASTER PLAN, GOVERNANCE & FUNDING



When Los Angeles began investigating ways to revitalize their channelized river, they looked to what Denver had done along the South Platte River, especially in the Confluence Park area, in the 1990s. In 1996, LA published the first version of the LA River Revitalization Master Plan. They recently updated the plan in 2020 to address flood risk, water quality, ecosystems and biodiversity, connectivity and access, and social health and equity. Now Denver can learn from LA's river efforts.

Currently, the LA County Flood Control District operates and maintains approximately half of the LA River right-of-way. The US Army Corps of Engineers oversees permitting across the entire river for changes to the river channel and operates and maintains approximately half of the LA River right-of-way. The master plan recommends the consolidation of river right-of-way operations, maintenance, and permitting under the Flood Control District.

The LA river passes through seventeen municipalities, so the master plan includes design guidelines for a broad array of topics from life cycle costs and operations and maintenance requirements to biodiversity, trail construction, and project development. LA County Public Works' administration of river resources will require inter-county department coordination with LA County Parks and Recreation as well as new collaborations with the LA Homeless Services Authority and the LA County Development Authority among other agencies and departments.

The plan mentions that it is critical to establish a framework for project funding beyond individual municipalities to enable support from federal, state, and LA County funding mechanisms. The LA County Flood Control District (FCD) is a special district overseen by the LA County Board of Supervisors. The Flood Control District funds development projects that relate to their mission of flood risk reduction, water conservation, and water quality on lands owned or managed by the District. The FCD mandate also includes the ability to fund passive recreation projects along FCD property and rights-of-way. Several projects in the Master Plan could be partially funded by the Flood Control District.

Additional funding opportunities noted in the plan include bond measures, direct funding and appropriations, and the creation of an Enhanced Infrastructure Finance District (EIFD). EIFDs can be used to finance public capital facilities, including affordable housing, by leveraging anticipated future increases in tax revenue due to these investments. Creating an EIFD for the LA River and/or specific LA River projects could create long-term revenue for revitalization efforts.

For more information, the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan is available here: www.larivermasterplan.org.



A view of the South Platte River at Confluence Park in Denver.

IV. Conclusion

The City and County of Denver is wise to proactively plan for the future of the South Platte River corridor, which faces pressures from both development and climate change. Overall, City investment in planning, governance, and financing for the river corridor can allow it to tie together the region in ways that it hasn't been able to in the past.

Key Takeaways

- The South Platte River is a key regional asset that should be celebrated, restored, and protected.
- Create a South Platte River Corridor Master Plan to establish a regulatory framework for leadership and clear guidance for decision-making related to the river corridor. Key principles for the master plan should include healthy ecosystems, equitable access, and a great city.
- Equity must be a critical component of the process, planning, and implementation of the South Platte River Corridor Master Plan and governance structure development.
- Formalization of consistent leadership for river governance, public investments, and funding is essential for restoring river ecosystem health, enhancing the river corridor as a primary public space, and ensuring that the river contributes to the quality of life of all residents.
- Design standards and guidelines and a river overlay will help with implementation of the South Platte River Corridor Master Plan.
- Character zones along the South Platte River based on surrounding land uses and neighborhood attributes provide key placemaking opportunities. In addition to stitching together the river and adjacent areas, neighborhood nodes could integrate authentic and unique neighborhood characteristics into their design

"The river gives us life, so we need to bring life back to the river - both ecological health and life and human health and life."

- Mark Johnson, President, Civitas

"The river is only a mildly tapped resource so far, but a large regional opportunity."

- Brad Buchanan, Chief Executive Officer, National Western Center Authority

and uses. While the overall riverfront should have consistent design elements, the diversity of neighborhood nodes could allow local residents to feel a sense of ownership over the river corridor.

- River-oriented development is already underway with more opportunities coming, so Denver needs to focus on river corridor planning and design guidelines to ensure desired outcomes for the city and the river.
- With climate change affecting the river and the city, there is a need for immediate action.

V. Stakeholders

Stakeholders Who Participated in the Workshop

Mobility:

- Peter Baertlein, Director, Implementation, Denver Department of Transportation and Infrastructure
- Emily Gloeckner, Director, Transportation Engineering, Denver Department of Transportation and Infrastructure
- Sam Piper, Principal Planner, Denver Moves Everyone PM, Denver Department of Transportation and Infrastructure
- Justin Begley, Transit, Denver Department of Transportation and Infrastructure
- David Krutsinger, Director, Transit, Denver Department of Transportation and Infrastructure

Land Use & Environment:

- Grace Rink, Director, Denver Climate Action, Sustainability & Resiliency
- Laura E. Aldrete, Executive Director, Denver Community Planning and Development
- Matthew Karnes, Chief Operating Officer, Denver Economic Development and Opportunity
- Sarah Nurmela, Planning & Implementation Manager, Denver Community Planning and Development
- Fernando Abhud, Urban Planner, OV Consulting

Water Resources:

- Dave Jula, Water Resources Engineer, Denver Department of Transportation and Infrastructure
- Barb Chongtoua, Manager, Development Services, Mile High Flood District
- Ryan Aids, Deputy Director, Greenway Foundation
- Greg Johnson, Chief, Plan Formulation and Project Management Section, Planning Branch, U.S. Army Corps of Engineering Omaha District

Housing and Equity:

- Erin Clark, Vice President of Master Site Development, Urban Land Conservancy
- Council member Jamie Torres, Denver City Council, District 3
- Council member Debra Ortega, Denver City Council, At Large

Development:

- Brad Buchanan, Chief Executive Officer, National Western Center Authority
- Kirsty Greer, Senior Vice President of Multifamily and Urban Mixed-Use Development, McWhinney

Parks, Recreation, & Urban Design:

- Gordon Robertson, Director, Planning, Design & Construction, Denver Parks & Recreation
- Mark Bernstein, Chief of Staff, Denver Parks & Recreation
- Sarah Cawrse, Senior Planner, Urban Design, Denver Community Planning and Development
- Gretchen Wilson, Principal Partner, Dig Studio

VI. ULI Volunteer Panelists



TAP Chair Meredith Wenskoski, President and Owner, Livable Cities Studio

Meredith Wenskoski, a landscape architect, urban planner and President at Livable Cities Studio, comes with over 18 years' experience in parks and public space design, master planning and significant public engagement processes. She is distinguished for her leadership, design, and project management of large-scale complex efforts. She has worked on public parks, streetscapes, urban design, and parks planning projects focusing on developing responsible and innovative designs that respond to the needs of the place and community. Meredith's projects emphasize the role of parks and public space to stimulate redevelopment and create socially active spaces that provide long-term benefits for cities. Her work on both planning and implementation allows her to seamlessly transition between a variety of project scales bringing a broader understanding to each one. Meredith is known for her interdisciplinary team leadership, her responsiveness to clients and her excellent communication skills. A firm believer in the benefits of collaboration, she forms strong long-term working relationships with design teams and clients. Meredith is recognized for her rigor and follow-through and for instilling discipline and accountability into design processes.



Mark Johnson, President, Civitas

Mark co-founded Civitas in 1984 and has led major public space projects, urban design plans and strategies, and has become widely known for his impact on several cities, on education, and on the role that landscape architects can play in leading complex projects to successful results. He has led many communities through challenging programming and design conditions and has established Civitas as a leading firm on a national and international level. He received his Bachelor of Landscape Architecture from Utah State University and an MLA in Urban Design from Harvard.



Bill Mahar, Principal, Norris Design

Bill is a planner and urban designer with 20 years of experience in urban planning, landscape architecture, active transportation, and public health in both the public and private sectors. He is well-versed at successfully managing complex and controversial projects and is uniquely skilled at helping the public and community leaders develop a collaborative vision and achievable goals for projects and processes. Bill's interest in urban river corridors and open spaces began early in his career. As a planner for the City of Fargo, he developed the City's first Riverfront Parks and Trails Master Plan, which was a catalyst for downtown redevelopment and thoughtfully integrated city-wide flood protection infrastructure. As a

national Public Health Leader for the Urban Land Institute, Bill brings a valuable perspective on the connection between health and the built environment. He is the past co-chair of the ULI CO Building Healthy Places committee and currently serves as a co-chair of the Explorer Committee.



Renee Martinez-Stone, Director, West Denver Renaissance Collaborative

Renee is working with the Denver Housing Authority to align resources, critical assets, leaders, and investments in West Denver with the goal of moving community priorities and integration opportunities from concept to implementation. Renee’s prior work includes many Denver metro infill redevelopment projects where she has provided master planning, site development studies, and revitalization strategies for more than 20 years as a private consultant. Renee’s “community-based” approach has creatively incorporated community stakeholders into plans and award-winning built projects with meaningful community outcomes. Renee is a fifth generation Colorado native, wife, and mother of two daughters.



Andrew Knudtsen, Managing Principal, Economic & Planning Systems

Andrew is a planner and economist with 20 years of experience in the areas of real estate feasibility analysis, market assessment, public-private partnership formation, fiscal impact assessment, and affordable housing strategic planning and development. He has developed implementation strategies that leverage investment and externalize costs by incorporating public finance. His work involves a range of funding tools applied to a variety of projects across states, including tax increment finance, special improvement districts, downtown development authorities, housing authorities, and urban renewal authorities. Affordable housing work spans from regional needs assessments to implementation strategies. Andrew holds a Bachelors of Environmental Design from the University of Colorado. He is a Co-Chair of ULI Colorado’s Technical Advisory Panels.



Brian Murphy, Founder and Principal Engineer, River Works

As a native of Spokane, Washington, Brian grew up exploring the lakes and streams of eastern Washington and northern Idaho creating his passion for water. Brian has worked in the water resources consulting field for 20 years, recently starting his own consulting practice, River Works. He is currently seeking his Ph.D. in Civil and Environmental Engineering at Colorado State University. His PhD research focuses on addressing the “wicked problems” caused by natural and anthropogenic changes to river and stream hydrology and geomorphology in the built environment.



Susan Powers, President, Urban Ventures

Susan Powers is President of Urban Ventures, LLC, a Denver real estate development company that has built multiple mixed income and mixed-use projects in and around downtown Denver over the past 23 years. The focus is to build communities which provide opportunities for residents and commercial tenants to live and work in a healthy environment. Urban Ventures developed STEAM On The Platte, an adaptive reuse of a former industrial property on the Platte River south of Mile High Stadium. It includes the renovation of a 100-year-old warehouse into office space for creative businesses and a separate building that was renovated for the city’s first Latino owned and operated craft brewery, Raices Brewing. Urban Ventures is also involved in various roles with affordable

housing developments in Colorado. Prior to creating Urban Ventures, she was Executive Director of the Denver Urban Renewal Authority for 11 years and participated in the redevelopment of downtown Denver.

Special thanks to the ULI Colorado TAP Committee Chairs Al Colussy, Andrew Knudtsen, and Anna Jones and to the sponsorship of the City and County of Denver and the Denver Regional Council of Governments.



ULI Colorado Leadership in Responsible Land Use

ULI Colorado is the 1,400-member District Council of the global Urban Land Institute. ULI Colorado consists of a four-person staff, 25-member executive committee, and 15 committees with more than 250 volunteers. More than 40 programs a year include advisory panels, leadership and mentoring programs, panels, project tours, publications, and community service. ULI is a non-lobbying educational and research institute supported by its members, sponsors, and foundations. Key issues include affordable housing, healthy communities, transit-oriented development, and sustainable design and planning.

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Principal, Strae Advisory Services

Chair of Mission Advancement:
Marilee Utter, President,
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