

The new downtown plan

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Power brokers and city leaders have spent the past year sifting through ideas about how to shape downtown Denver over the next 20 years.

About 40 architects, developers, financiers, lawyers, neighborhood activists, business owners and city officials have compiled the best of those ideas into a document called the Downtown Area Plan. On Thursday, they will unveil it in a public meeting. It will then be sent to the City Council.

"We wanted to define and capture a vision folks can get excited about," said Peter Park, Denver's planning director and member of the plan's steering committee. "But it also has to be grounded in the reality of, is it implementable?"

"There are some very strong opinion leaders on the committee, and if they're convinced, it will help convince others. That's how things will get done."

Once it is approved by the city, the document will provide a map to private developers as they consider projects throughout downtown. It will also spur the city to improve streets, lighting and landscaping and make zoning changes.

"We're responsible for having a good framework and infrastructure, and then getting out of the way and letting the private sector do what it does," Park said. "If the city follows up and creates regulations that support the plan, it will help developers not waste time."

The new plan builds on one that was created in 1986, which focused on making 16th Street the spine that connects Lower Downtown with Civic Center.

It includes some suggestions that will strengthen the spine, including one that calls for a public market somewhere near the center of the 16th Street Mall, plus dozens of others that bolster surrounding areas.

"The next level of enriching the 16th Street experience is connecting the side streets," Park said.

Side streets need attention

While the 16th Street Mall will remain the commercial spine, the plan identifies four key areas that will become economic engines, and suggests ways to connect them with transit and on strong feeder streets:

Union Station, which will be redeveloped as the hub of Denver's mass-transit network.

Civic Center, which will remain a government center surrounding downtown's signature park.

Auraria campus, which will add retail, classrooms and offices.

Arapahoe Square, which could become a high-density neighborhood as well as a home to small businesses.

"The symmetry all works around those areas," said Jim Basey, co-chairman of the plan's steering committee. "Then you have various overlays. You have the transit piece and an overlay that really goes more to connecting the neighborhoods.

"Part of it is turning our focus to the pedestrian. The connections will really need to have an emphasis on the pedestrian."

Union Station

The redevelopment of Union Station will help put the the spotlight on the pedestrian.

Denver's historic train station will be redeveloped to greet transit riders from throughout the region. Another 19.5 acres around the station will be filled with offices, retail space and residential units.

Civic Center

At the other end of downtown, Civic Center is in need of revitalization. Now a haven for vagrants and a barrier between downtown and the emerging Golden Triangle, the 88-year-old park will become a more pedestrian-friendly conduit between the two neighborhoods.

Auraria campus

Bridging the gulf between downtown and the Auraria campus is another critical need.

"If you stand at Larimer and 14th and look down toward the Tivoli, it's quite an expanse," said Dean Wolf, executive vice president for administration of the campus.

Students are forced to cross six lanes of Speer Boulevard traffic and walk past two block-long parking lots on their way to and from 16th Street. As Auraria officials develop their own master plan, they are brainstorming ways to encourage downtown visitors to cross that gauntlet.

"One of the things you look at is trying to get more density along Speer in that particular area," Wolf said. Another is creating a pleasant environment between the campus and downtown.

The Auraria master plan recommends building shops and housing on the northeast corner of Speer and Auraria Parkway and on the southwest corner of Speer and Colfax. The campus intends to partner with a private developer to bring the plan to fruition.

"It's ideal timing in that both (the Auraria and downtown) plans will have much the same vision," Wolf said.

Arapahoe Square

The area northeast of downtown, dubbed Arapahoe Square, has been identified as a district with tremendous opportunity for development.

It is bounded by Park Avenue West, 20th Street, Tremont Place and the alley between Larimer and Lawrence streets. It serves as a congregating point for the homeless population and is covered by parking lots and low-rise buildings.

"This is an opportunity to create a 21st century neighborhood where newer elements would dictate the character," said John Desmond, vice president of urban planning and environment for the Downtown Denver Partnership.

The area has potential for more dense, affordable housing or a center for small and newer businesses and an incubator.

"It's an area that has a lot of potential, more so than some of the other places downtown because it's so open," Basey said. "But we're all sensitive to private people who own those properties."

It comes down to how to deal with downtown parking lots. Enforcing existing ordinances that require certain levels of beautification is one solution.

"Maybe it's time to put a little bit more heat on parking lot owners," Basey said. "Is that what we want ringing our city, a vast wasteland of open parking lots? At some point you have to have a financial incentive for the private owner to take the next step."

14th Street

The plan can't be implemented until the City Council approves it in July, but two things can't wait until then - sprucing up 14th Street and revitalizing the city's core. The Democratic National Convention is the catalyst to accomplishing both of those short-term objectives.

With thousands of visitors pouring out of the Colorado Convention Center and wandering down 14th Street to Larimer Square and down California Street to the 16th Street Mall, spiffing up the seedy side streets has taken on new urgency.

And with private-development projects totaling \$786 million along 14th Street in the works, the hope is that at least some of the plan's vision will be implemented as those projects are built.

"We're also talking about forming a special district that would have all the property owners along 14th Street participate in some fashion in financing that part of the plan," Desmond said. "It's a large street with both public and private structures."

A six-month study sponsored by the partnership and the Downtown Denver Business Improvement District, among others, determined the price tag for transforming 14th Street to be more than \$10 million. The 14th Street project is in its second phase of detailed design and now is considered a city project.

California Street

Tidying California Street is another issue.

"Our first choice would be that someone step up and redevelop the Republic Hotel and the old bank, but even if that started today I doubt it would be done by the convention," Basey said.

The city, the BID and the partnership have already discussed improvements to the streetscape, he added. "We can probably get it funded a little easier because the money is less."

A task force was recently formed to address quality-of-life issues in the core city, among them safety concerns and vacant buildings. The group is considering condemnation as a way to handle some of the most problematic properties - the rundown Fontius building on the 16th Street Mall and the old Republic Hotel across from the Hyatt Regency Denver at Colorado Convention Center.

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What's next for the downtown plan

Thursday, 2-4 p.m.: Steering committee receives draft of plan, Colorado History Museum, 1300 Broadway

Thursday, 5:30-8 p.m.: Community forum, Colorado History Museum, 1300 Broadway

June 6: Planning board holds public hearing, Webb Municipal Office Building, 201 W. Colfax Ave.

June 25: First reading at City Council, 1437 Bannock St.

July 9: Second reading at City Council, 1437 Bannock St.

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