

### **We Can Do Better on Colfax**

*By Hilarie Portell, Executive Director, Colfax Mayfair Business Improvement District*

“We cannot solve our problems,” Albert Einstein once said, “with the same thinking we used when we created them.”

During the East Area planning process, many people have asked why we can’t just keep things the same on Colfax and see what happens. Some have even suggested we go back to zoning and parking rules from the 1990s, the lowest ebb in Colfax’s long history.

Here’s the problem: the status quo on Colfax today is not sustainable—economically, socially or environmentally. In fact, the status quo has created many things that are not wanted—national chain stores, loss of local character, traffic congestion, air pollution, and economic suffering.

#### **Our community-serving businesses are under extreme stress.**

- Commercial property taxes are increasing about 20 percent each year; this means higher rents too.
- Business operating costs are also increasing, with higher wages, sales taxes and fees.
- Colfax service workers earn in the \$20,000s or less; they cannot afford to live in the East Area. This means long commutes, traffic congestion and air pollution.
- Most of our business and property owners are local residents. Colfax’s economy is not about corporate profits. It’s about household bills, college tuition, retirement savings, and financing start-ups for entrepreneurs, many of whom are new to our country.

#### **People are suffering.**

- Neighbors along Colfax and in the East Area are experiencing homelessness, hunger and displacement--now. This is not a long-term planning exercise for them.

#### **City one-size-fits-all rules do not support the Main Street vision for Colfax.**

- Main streets, with their smaller and shallower lots, need different regulations than suburban corridors or former industrial areas.
- Under current zoning, 93% of new development in the past 10 years on Colfax has been single-story, national chains and drive-throughs.
- Yet the urgent need is for homes, jobs and services near transit stations to reduce traffic, improve air quality and equity, and support Colfax businesses.
- Under current city regulations, renovating older buildings is extremely time consuming and cost prohibitive. It’s easier and cheaper to demolish an old building and build a new one.
- This doesn’t allow for incremental improvements, business expansions, small-scale development, and transit-oriented development—a balanced way for a main street to evolve.

**The auto-dependent layout of the Colfax corridor is contributing to air pollution and climate change.**

- Vehicle emissions are a top cause of greenhouse gases and Denver’s poor air quality, now ranked among the 10 worst in the US.
- People are driving in, out, through and around Colfax to get to jobs, homes, services and businesses. All of these destinations are too spread out.
- The Route 15 is the busiest bus line in the city, more heavily used than any light rail line—but it is not supported by safe, comfortable sidewalks, crosswalks, bus shelters and tree cover
- Enhanced transit in Denver is essential. It’s the “big move” Denver needs to address congestion, air pollution, equity and climate change. Let’s demand it sooner rather than later on Colfax, along with the voter-approved streetscape and pedestrian improvements.

**That’s why we’re working to change the paradigm.**

The East Area Plan process has given us the opportunity to analyze the status quo and address these negative trends. We can make building renovations more feasible and small commercial spaces more affordable. We can have a small-scale development approach to make 3 and 5-story buildings on smaller lots more feasible. We must make room for neighbors who desperately need secure housing. We can work with business owners and developers to help them operate in a multimodal environment. And we can get 50,000 cars off the street each day by implementing Bus Rapid Transit.

We can make Colfax an amazing Main Street. To get there, we must make the long overdue changes now recommended in the East Area Plan.

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