



MEMO

To: Wheat Ridge City Council and Planning Commission
Copy: Wheat Ridge City Staff
From: Charles Buki, Thomas Eddington, and Eric Ameigh
Date: March 13, 2019
RE: Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy Project Update

Introduction and Background

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide a summary of the progress made to date on the update to the Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy (NRS). A suitable opening to set the stage comes from a February 2019 Neighborhood Gazette editorial by NRS steering committee member Guy Namiach, titled “Help Steer Wheat Ridge Into The Future”:

“As we celebrate Wheat Ridge’s 50th birthday in 2019, there is no question for Wheat Ridge residents that our city is a special place with a high quality of life. Wheat Ridge has long been known for its small town feel, its agricultural heritage, and maybe the best location in the Denver metro area. We are conveniently tucked right along I-70 with only a few minutes drive into the big city for arts and culture or the mountains for outdoor play and recreation. What’s not to love?

What might be less well known around the Denver metro area are the more recent developments in Wheat Ridge that are making our community an even better place to live or open a business.

Our housing market, still offering relatively affordable housing options for renters or new buyers, has nonetheless been strengthening. During the last decade Wheat Ridge’s average single-family home price has increased by 60 percent, beating nearly all of our west metro suburban neighbors.

Wheat Ridge is experiencing an influx of new business and real estate development, providing a facelift to areas in need of investment as well as new shopping and dining options. The Corners development, anchored by Lucky’s market, is jump-starting our “new-look” Wadsworth corridor while additions like Colorado Plus, The Bardo Coffee House, and Right Coast Pizza on 38th Avenue offer a diverse set of complements to long-time community favorites like Clancy’s.

Despite the well-worn jokes about our “naturally occurring retirement community,” our median age has stopped growing. And, in fact, the number of college educated people aged 25-44 has increased faster in Wheat Ridge during this century than in nearby suburban communities. While our median household income still lags behind the competition, since 2000 Wheat Ridge has been adding households earning at least \$100,000 faster than Westminster, Golden, and Lakewood.

It was not always so. In 2005, the City of Wheat Ridge was missing out on the investment that is the lifeblood of any community and we were feeling the effects. We were at a crossroads. In a search for answers, the city commissioned a report called the Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy. The strategy described Wheat Ridge's history of failing to properly invest in itself. Maintenance of public infrastructure and public spaces had been too lackluster for too long. Homeowners and business owners had accepted a "good enough is good enough" attitude about the condition of their properties. As a result of this self-deprivation and proliferation of low standards, the outside world had received a message that Wheat Ridge was not a good investment. New potential homebuyers and business owners had heeded the warning and avoided our city.

The 2005 Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy was a wake up call, and we listened. By taking its recommendations to heart, by working hard, and by leveraging some good luck, our beloved city is on the rise. This is the new and improved context within which the City of Wheat Ridge is now updating the Revitalization Strategy."

NRS Update Process

City Council impaneled a 27-member steering committee in the summer of 2018 and charged them with guiding the NRS update. The committee kicked off its work with czb in July. The committee began by working to identify the most important issues to address in the NRS update, through both its own work as a committee, and also through public engagement activities in the fall of 2018.

czb examined and analyzed a variety of data sets to support and complement the steering committee's qualitative research with the community. Some of those findings were shared with City Council and Planning Commission on November 5, 2018.

All of the insights from the committee's own work, its engagement exercises, and czb's analysis of data and trends were blended together into an open house program for the evening of December 12, 2018 which was held at the Wheat Ridge Recreation Center. At the open house, the steering committee:

- Shared the results of their work defining key issues and sought public feedback.
- Previewed some potential policy and/or programmatic responses to key issues and sought feedback.
- Asked attendees to engage in a neighborhood mapping exercise to inform the way neighborhoods might be considered in the future.

Following the December open house, which officially marked the end of the project's first phase, czb and the committee worked together to synthesize a rich collection of comments, inputs, and other feedback from 108 attendees. The information gleaned from the public helped to confirm and validate much of what the committee had uncovered, and also provided some additional food for thought on how the committee and czb might rethink some things. The open house set up the next steps, which would come in the form of a February online survey and additional committee work on how the city could respond to the most pressing issues and opportunities.

The online survey was open from February 13, 2019 to March 1, 2019 and received just over 1,000 responses. Members of the committee met on Saturday, March 2 to debrief the survey results and share their own work on policy and programmatic responses to key issues.

The cumulative results of all of these steps, from summer of 2018 to March of 2019, begin to cement some important findings and shape an emerging NRS update.

Key Findings Informing the Emerging NRS Update

A handful of things have become clear to the committee and the consulting team during the course of the project that are important to note:

- Wheat Ridge is quite content with its quality of life and its overall position. Unlike the era that prompted the original NRS, the city does not perceive itself to be at an existential crossroads. Community sentiment about life in Wheat Ridge is positive.
- Positive community sentiment is backed up by survey results from both the 2018 Resident Survey completed by the National Research Center (NRC) and the 2019 NRS survey. It is further corroborated by independent analysis of data by the consulting team.
- In particular, Wheat Ridge values its small town character, its neighborly relationships, its parks and open space, its westward views, and its independent identity.
- It is unfair, and inaccurate, to characterize Wheat Ridge as being against change, but the community *does not fundamentally want big changes*. It is more or less happy with itself the way it is. In the collective mind of Wheat Ridge, whatever changes do occur should be incremental and well managed, and not rapidly or suddenly imposed from outside the community.
- In the category of “incremental and well managed,” there is a clear desire on the part of Wheat Ridge residents for more attractive commercial districts and for better shopping and dining options, particularly those that are not national or regional chains.
- Market analysis by czb and its partner MJB show that conditions do not yet support a significant increase in higher end non-chain retail and restaurants but positive market trends in Wheat Ridge could slowly change those circumstances over time.
- When it comes to Wheat Ridge neighborhoods, there is a meaningful portion of the city that is at least somewhat uncomfortable with changes that are perceived to be too drastic, out of character with existing conditions, or both. A desire for change to be “incremental and well managed” is stronger nearer to one’s home.

Preliminary Implications for the Updated NRS

The totality of the input—general community sentiment, recurring themes in the city around growth and governance, generally agreed upon areas for improvement, and some new opportunities—has led the committee and the consulting team to organize emerging strategy ideas. The balance of this memo presents the input received and possible next steps for the following three major issue categories:

- Corridors and nodes,
- Neighborhood planning and engagement, and
- Property conditions and code enforcement.

Several other issues have elicited a lesser response in the survey or were specifically requested to be included in this process; these are presented below, including building reinvestment, accessory dwelling units, and short-term rentals.

Input Received – Corridors and Nodes

At this time, corridors clearly identified for improvement include:

- 44th Avenue east of Wadsworth Boulevard
- 44th Avenue west of Wadsworth Boulevard (especially west of Kipling Street)
- Kipling Street north of 38th Avenue
- Youngfield Street, from 38th Avenue to 44th Avenue

Neighborhood retail nodes have garnered strong support. Where appropriate, Wheat Ridge residents want retail nodes (shopping, dining, “third places”) along main streets that are easily accessible, especially by bike or foot, to the surrounding residential neighborhoods. Some of these nodes will undoubtedly be in major corridors (Wadsworth, Kipling, 44th) but there are other streets that may offer more neighborhood scale opportunities.

Input Received – Neighborhood Planning and Engagement

The input to date has indicated a certain level of discomfort with neighborhood change that is perceptible to most everyone. At the same time, the input has also indicated a desire for positive neighborhood engagement and involvement.

Wheat Ridge residents enjoy life in their city partially because it is smaller than its neighbors; there are clear benefits to living in a smaller community, including increased opportunity for civic involvement. And yet, there is still a feeling in some quarters that local public decision making is done too far away, by “them” and not by “us.”

Input Received – Property Conditions and Code Enforcement

When asked in the NRS survey if property conditions have generally improved in Wheat Ridge over the past 5 years, 49% said yes and 28% said no.

As previously stated, Wheat Ridge wants its corridors to look better. Much of this work is likely related to infrastructure and streetscape, although the condition of buildings has been noted. Where Code Enforcement activities might have a role to play in corridor revitalization, the NRS will make comment to that effect.

Although the revitalization of residential areas was strongly supported in the 2018 NRC Resident Survey, the NRS process to date has not surfaced community complaints about property conditions in residential neighborhoods as a key issue. In fact, 79% of respondents to the NRS survey said their neighbors maintain their properties to an acceptable standard and respondents reported that commercial buildings were more of a problem than rental properties.

Input Received – Other Issues

Building Reinvestment System: Public interest in preservation and reuse of existing housing has been stronger than interest in building new housing. As a mature community, the current housing stock is also the future housing stock. Renovation and rehab is the future of the city’s housing market, and updating the structures can be difficult. The same is true of aging commercial structures.

Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs): There is nothing from the NRS process that has contradicted the 2018 Resident Survey findings, nor the staff public outreach effort and subsequent Council discussions from 2016. With 50% seemingly in favor of ADUs, 25% opposed, and the remainder on the fence, the answer is not yet clear.

Short-Term Rentals: Depending on the circumstances of any particular short-term rental, it may be a neighborhood issue or it may not. There is not clear consensus in the community as to whether they should be allowed or, if allowed, how they should be regulated or taxed. (It is also worth noting that the extent of short-term rentals in Wheat Ridge is not at the same scale as communities like Denver, Boulder or mountain resort towns. Based on available information, it appears there exist approximately 140 short-term rentals and staff has not experienced a history of code enforcement complaints associated with these units.)

Preliminary Directions – Corridors and Nodes

- The city has already allocated funds for a 44th Avenue corridor plan. The NRS will comment on which part of 44th Avenue should receive attention first, and what the major scope components ought to be for such a plan.
- Likewise, the NRS will comment on sequencing of future work for other corridors in question, and what the major scoping issues should be for those efforts.
- There are only a small number of existing or potential retail nodes that are not located on one of the city's main corridors (Wadsworth, Kipling, 44th). The NRS will identify these existing or potential locations and comment on a toolkit that could support their further development.

Preliminary Directions – Neighborhood Planning and Engagement

The City traditionally has not had a robust neighborhood planning or engagement function. This is not rare for a city the size of Wheat Ridge. But there are two particular reasons why Wheat Ridge should consider adding this capacity:

1. A strengthening real estate market is creating redevelopment pressure in some residential neighborhoods which can create anxiety for those residents. By working with affected neighborhoods on planning before changes happen, residents can have a better idea of what to expect over time, relationships can be built, communication feedback loops can be established, and the capacity to positively manage change, when it inevitably occurs, can be improved.
2. A number of policy issues facing the city may be better addressed at the neighborhood scale instead of citywide, and/or the engagement strategy to seek input may need to be executed at the neighborhood scale instead of citywide. The impacts of certain policy decisions are not abstract to many Wheat Ridge residents; they may be very real. Civically engaged residents of Wheat Ridge are not necessarily content to let the City Council and City staff figure out certain things, lest the result be negative for them, however they define it. The answers to some important Wheat Ridge policy questions today fall into the "it depends" category. Such situations require more conversation at a more intimate scale than Council chambers or the Rec Center ballroom can provide.

The NRS will comment in greater detail on the possibilities for a neighborhood planning and engagement function and its costs and benefits.

Preliminary Directions – Property Conditions and Code Enforcement

Wherever possible, czb advocates for rental inspection programs, as they can be an effective tool in managing the maintenance issues that can arise in absentee owned rental properties.

The city has explored this idea in the past and decided against it. The NRS process has not revealed a level of support that would suggest the city revisit the issue. The NRS is likely to suggest more surgical approaches representing incremental changes that would build on current Police Department capabilities and align with more specific neighborhood planning efforts.

Preliminary Directions – Other Issues

Building Reinvestment System: There are a number of barriers for homeowners and business owners taking on rehab projects in older buildings. Larger, more expensive projects are more likely to involve contractors who are sophisticated enough to navigate old buildings, new codes, and permitting and inspection processes. But for those owners who may be working on smaller projects or who do not hire a skilled contractor, there may be steps the City can take to improve the customer experience and therefore more proactively reward the investment that Wheat Ridge buildings need. The NRS will comment on this.

Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs): This is one of the aforementioned “it depends” issues, with very important nuances and different types of impacts on different properties. There are best practices for ADU regulations that address nearly all potential concerns, but a citywide policy response may not be the best way to test the suitability of ADUs in Wheat Ridge. The NRS will provide guidance on best practices for ADUs, a possible preferred citywide approach, and the pros and cons. It will also explore whether ADUs are a topic that may best be addressed on a neighborhood by neighborhood basis instead of citywide.

Short-Term Rentals: The NRS will provide guidance on best practices for short-term rentals and the pros and cons of different approaches.

Next Steps

NRS progress and emerging ideas will be presented to City Council and Planning Commission during the week of March 18. That same week, the steering committee will also hold four open houses to solicit feedback on these possible directions. Following the week of public events, czb will analyze all input and begin writing a draft strategy which will be available for review in early May.