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# Carrying Colfax Forward: Change Coming to 'Denver's Main Street'

Keeping the Quirk While Upping the Ante



Credit: City of Denver

On a hot summer day, it's easy to find Denver locals at Nuggs Ice Cream, a thriving scoop shop opened by Denver business owner Chris O'Sullivan five years ago on Colfax Avenue and Fairfax Street in the center of the city.

At times, Nuggs trades customers with Marczyk's Fine Foods, a local Denver grocer known for holding cookouts in its parking lot that has a location just across street. The summer synergy between burgers hot off the grill and ice cream cones leads to a lot of customers who want to go back and forth.

The street doubles as Highway 40, and the juncture with Fairfax is one of its widest points, with two extra wide lanes in each direction, plus a turn lane -- and wide streets embolden drivers to go fast.

It can be "kind of like Frogger," O'Sullivan said.

That's why O'Sullivan supports a set of plans that promise to increase walkability and calm traffic on Colfax as part of a larger revitalization effort that could benefit shoppers and businesses alike.

Officials from four different business improvement districts have banded together to form an entity called the Colfax Collaborative with plans to make sure the storied road, sometimes

referred to as Denver's Main Street, continues to draw attention for years to come.

By implementing transit and road upgrades, improving safety and signage and promoting economic development, Colfax advocates plan to make the street more pedestrian- and cyclist-friendly, bring more businesses and shoppers to the area and improve the overall atmosphere of the street.

Many businesses on the street are family-owned and "keep the spirit of Colfax alive," as O'Sullivan points out. So preserving the quintessential quiriness on the street that has been name-dropped in pop culture ranging from television's "South Park" to Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" is also foremost on the minds of Colfax's champions.

They're not trying to turn the street into a densified residential mecca or Denver's next retail corridor. Instead, the plan is to make the street a better version of its current self.

### **Bus-Rapid Transit**

The most anticipated change coming to Colfax is a major bus-rapid transit project, which would begin roughly where Colfax intersects with Broadway and run east into Aurora. The \$110 million project is slated to convert the center two lanes of Colfax into dedicated bus lanes with stops every half-mile, according to Hilarie Portell, executive director of the Colfax Mayfair Business Improvement District, the eastern-most Colfax BID in Denver.

About half of the estimated necessary funding was secured in a 2017 vote, in which Denver residents approved of \$75 million in general obligation bond funding for Colfax improvements. Of that, \$55 million is earmarked to transit improvements.

Officials plan to request the remaining funds from state and federal governments, Portell said. Designs and implementation plans are underway now, with construction estimated to begin in 2020. Once construction begins, it should take roughly a year to complete.

The addition of dedicated bus lanes is a long-sought change for one of the city's busiest transit corridors. Dubbed "Colfax Corridor Connections," the project aims to more than double the number of bus riders traveling the given stretch of road, from 22,000 in 2017 to 35,000 in 2035.

While drivers will likely miss the lane of car traffic in either direction, Portell hopes that whittling the space that cars have will create a more peaceful street where pedestrians feel safer crossing and can linger more -- making them more likely to spend money at the various businesses on Colfax.

Likewise, on the west end of Colfax, from Federal to Sheridan Boulevards, the West Colfax Business Improvement District, which is left out of the bus rapid transit plan by virtue of its geography, is planning its own upgrades aimed at making things more pedestrian-friendly.

The Colfax and Federal interchange is a cloverleaf, merging two different arterial roads together and making crossings difficult, said Dan Shah, director at the West Colfax BID.

Shah's organization is busy designing a new configuration for the interchange that would allow pedestrians to move more safely through the area, as part of its "Over the Colfax Clover" project. The group is still finalizing designs and funding sources, but hopes to have commitments from developers by early 2020.

### **Colfax Quirk**

Improving safety on Colfax, though, is about more than just slowing down cars. Districts up and down the street are working on adding lighting and wayfinding signs and collaborating with the Denver Police Department.

They're working on brightening the overall atmosphere of the street, adding landscaping and art installations.

But all of these developments come at a time when Denver's oldest neighborhoods, some of which border east Colfax, are changing rapidly as the city grows. Many have decried gentrification and commercialization as moneyed investors sweep through, scraping some properties to build new in some cases and redeveloping old properties into pricey retail or multifamily projects in others.

On Colfax, people like Portell are trying to avoid a repeat of this refrain.

"We have to maintain the quirkiness on Colfax," she said. Most of the parcels in her district, which extends from Monaco Boulevard west to Eudora Street, are small, shallow and zoned for no more than five stories of development. Most of them only allow three stories.

And although the Colfax Mayfair BID has gotten involved in the economic development game -- helping attract eight new businesses in recent years -- it has no plans to force a complete makeover of "Denver's Main Street."

"Our plan is not to redevelop from end to end," she said.

Her organization wants to keep in close contact with business owners about what kind of rents

they can afford and how they feel about the changes coming to their neighborhood.

She's not looking for mega-development, but rather mid-sized companies that know the Denver market to build medium-sized projects of varying types that will suit the diverse population for which Colfax is known.

To the west, Shah is in the midst of an already fast-changing neighborhood. Denver's Sloan Lake sits just two blocks north of Colfax in his district. The lake and the nearby redevelopment of a former St. Anthony's Hospital campus into a mixed-use residential and retail destination has attracted new development of all kinds, including some high-priced homes.

He, too, hopes that his organization can keep the old neighborhood in mind as changes come to the area. He points to his West Colfax BID's partnership with Del Norte Neighborhood Development Corp., a nonprofit established in 1978 to address low-income housing needs in north Denver.

Del Norte now partners on workforce housing projects throughout the city, including Avondale Apartments, an 80-unit project completed in 2014 that also houses the offices of both Del Norte and West Colfax BID.

"Historically we anticipated that his kind of change would happen," Shah said. "Maybe not this fast, but we certainly worked to add affordable housing into the neighborhood before the market heated up."

As his organization continues to implement its plans, Shah hopes that it can also add more options for income-restricted housing and improve infrastructure in ways that will benefit people a diverse array of people well into the future.

Molly Armbrister, Denver Market Reporter **CoStar Group**

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