

A Plan to Make Downtown Denver More Livable, For Its Residents and the Planet

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Denver is known for a lot of things that make it a desirable place to live, like striking views of the Rockies and 300 days of sunshine, but innovative transportation and street design is likely not the first thing people think of. In 2017, the city earned the infamous title of "[Parking Madness Champion](#)" in *Streetsblog's* annual challenge to find the worst parking "crater" in the nation. But the area that won Denver that dubious honor is now being reimagined in a visionary new plan that, if realized, could set Denver up as a national leader in livable, climate-friendly redevelopment.

An [amendment to Denver's Downtown Area Plan](#) is being discussed among city decisionmakers that has the potential to transform downtown Denver, while setting an example for other cities for how to repurpose space in a way that prioritizes residents and the climate over cars.



The city of Denver is finalizing a plan to redevelop this area of downtown, which is dominated by 60 acres of sprawling surface parking lots (left). The draft plan includes images that illustrate how the space may be better utilized (right). Credit: screenshot from Google Maps; City of Denver.

The plan seeks to address an area of downtown that is now largely underutilized, including 60 acres of surface parking lots. With that much undeveloped land, Denver has an historic opportunity – one that few cities have. It is encouraging that the city recognizes the potential of the area and has articulated a bold vision for a multi-use, compact neighborhood with a multimodal transportation network and access to parks. In particular, the city proposes redeveloping the parking lot wasteland by:

- Building out a connected, multimodal transportation system that prioritizes pedestrians and people on bikes,

- Promoting mixed-use land development that maximizes street-level space,
- Imposing parking maximums instead of minimums,
- Prohibiting car-focused amenities like car washes and drive-throughs,
- Establishing small blocks and human-scale development to encourage walking,
- Expanding existing light rail stations into mobility hubs with links to other modes of transportation, including biking and walking, bike- and carsharing, and connecting bus routes,
- Integrating parks and public spaces, particularly along the river that runs through the area.

These policies would not only transform the area in question into a dynamic neighborhood, providing housing and amenities to a rapidly growing population, but they could also set a standard for redevelopment in other Western cities. Many cities, particularly in the West, have a legacy of sprawling land development, overly abundant parking and an increasing demand for smart urban development coupled with efficient transportation. This plan can provide an example for how cities can start to combat challenges like congestion and pollution while embracing opportunities for transformative change.

Rethinking Denver's auto-centric policies and outdated street design are critical to achieving the city's bold climate goals, since transportation accounts for [27 percent](#) of the city's greenhouse gas emissions. It is also critical to keep Denver competitive with other cities and remaining an attractive place for people to live. As evidenced by Amazon's search for a location for its second headquarters, companies are increasingly prioritizing walkability and transit access in their decision-making. Amazon reports that [55 percent](#) of its Seattle employees walk, bike or take transit to work and the company wanted similar opportunities in its second location.

Here's hoping the city of Denver follows through on this bold vision and embraces a similar approach elsewhere in the city. Maybe one day the Mile High City can be as famous for walkable neighborhoods and abundant transportation options as it is for mountain views.