

14 January 2026

To: Denver City Council South Platte River Subcommittee

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Subjects: (1) Denver Parkland and Open Space Deficit
(2) South Platte River Corridor – Challenges and Opportunities

At Issue

The City and County of Denver has a deficit of parkland and open space – especially when compared to other cities in the US. Nationally, the average of *all* cities is 13 acres per 1000 people. Denver has fallen to an average of 9 acres per 1000 people (see Trust for Public Land, *Game Plan for a Healthy City*). Denver falls below other US cities, including Austin, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New York, Phoenix, Portland, Raleigh, San Diego, Seattle, and Washington DC.

The South Platte River Corridor also faces a number of challenges, such as e. coli contaminates well above federal safety standards, compromised and damaged embankments and vegetation, and incompatible land uses and infrastructure adjacent to the river. New city restrictions on gas stations could result in further incompatible uses in industrial areas along the river.

Recommendation

The South Platte River Subcommittee consider working with agencies, park and waterway experts, interest groups, and the public to (1) identify opportunities for addressing the city's parkland and open space deficit, and (2) develop strategies for improving water quality and waterway functions of the South Platte River Corridor. Such strategies should advance river-supportive land uses, including opportunities for increasing open space. Strategies could include, but not be limited to, district-wide rezoning along the river, a vision and action plan for new parklands, and/or an overlay district with river-supportive standards for development and infrastructure.

Background

There are three criteria for assessing the health and viability of adequate urban parkland: (1) amount of parkland (acres per population), (2) accessibility (e.g., 10-minute walk/roll distance), and (3) quality of parks (i.e., condition and upkeep). Only one council district - District 8 in northeast Denver – meets or exceeds the national average, with 18 acres of parkland for every 1000 people.

There are examples around the US of success stories of cities rezoning and/or redevelopment river corridors to improve the riverine character and function of their waterways. Examples in the Mountain West include Littleton, just south of Denver, and Albuquerque's Bosque (forest along the embankments) of the Rio Grande River.

Next Steps

The research and evaluation completed to date on Denver's parkland deficiencies and evolving sustainability river corridor treatments for the South Platte River now resides with the Denver Park Trust and with CU-Denver's Department of Urban and Regional Planning. Both of these are willing to continue work to further refine the research to date and to partner in development tools and best practices (1) to erase the city's parkland deficiency and (2) further enhance the Platte River throughout the city. In addition, engagement with other groups, such as the River Sisters Congreso, can broaden participation and authentic engagement.

For questions or further information, please contact Rocky Piro, Ph.D., FAICP at docroc93@gmail.com or Frank Rowe with the Denver Park Trust at frankrowe@denverparktrust.org