

To: Land Use, Transportation, and Infrastructure Committee of Denver City Council
From: Jenny Buddenborg, Senior City Planner, Community Planning & Development (CPD)
Date: May 30, 2019
RE: Landmark Designation for River Drive Historic District, #2019L-002

Staff Recommendation:

Based on ordinance designation criteria, the findings of the Landmark Preservation Commission (LPC) that the application meets the criteria for designation of a district, and the recommendation of approval by the Denver Planning Board, staff recommends approval of the application.

Request to Designate a District:

Application:	#2019L-002
Addresses:	Multiple on West River Drive
Zoning:	U-TU-B, UO-3
Council:	District 1, Councilman Rafael Espinoza
Blueprint Denver:	Urban Neighborhood Context / Low Residential Area
Applicant(s):	Councilman Rafael Espinoza

Case Summary:

Councilman Rafael Espinoza and three property owners submitted to CPD a Landmark designation application for the River Drive Historic District on April 12, 2019. Staff performed an investigation and found the application to be complete and to meet Denver landmark designation criteria. As such, staff set the Landmark Preservation Commission (LPC) public hearing for May 21, 2019.

At the LPC public hearing, LPC recommended landmark designation of a district for application for the River Drive Historic District, application #2019L-002, based on History Criterion 1a, Architecture Criterion 2a, and Geography Criterion 3b, citing as findings of fact for this recommendation the application form, public testimony, and the May 21, 2019 staff report. Vote 8-0-0.

At the Denver Planning Board meeting on May 29, 2019, the board voted 9-0-0 to recommend to City Council the approval of the proposed district with respect to conformance with the Comprehensive Plan, effect upon the surrounding neighborhood, and other planning considerations.

Designation Criteria and Evaluation, Chapter 30, Denver Revised Municipal Code:

To meet landmark designation criteria, in accordance with Chapter 30-4, Denver Revised Municipal Code, a property must meet the following:

1. Meet one designation criterion in two or more of the following categories:
 - History
 - Architecture
 - Geography

2. Maintain physical and historical integrity
3. Be considered by LPC for its relation to a historic context or theme

Criteria Evaluation:

Landmark staff found that the application meets History Criterion 1a, Architecture Criterion 2a, and Geography Criterion 3b.

1. Historical Significance

To have historical significance, the structure or district shall be thirty (30) or more years old or have extraordinary importance to the historical development of Denver, and shall:

a) Have direct association with the historical development of the city, state, or nation;

River Drive Historic District is directly associated with the historical development of the city as one of the oldest established residential areas of Denver in what was the Town of Highlands.

Established by General William Larimer, Jr. in 1858 and incorporated in 1875, the Town of Highlands was annexed by the city of Denver in 1896. The 17 extant properties within the historic district were part of the 1881 River Front Addition in the Town of Highlands and its continued growth as part of what would become the Jefferson Park neighborhood, named after nearby Jefferson Park that was established in 1899. Many of the houses were built in the 1880s and represent some of the city's oldest building stock that contributed to the early growth of Denver.

The Gurley Brothers, a real estate investment company active in the area at the time, began developing the River Front Addition in 1881. Set on a bluff overlooking the South Platte River and downtown Denver, the district was originally home to working-class residents, many of whom were employed by some of the city's earliest and most influential industries within walking distance or a short streetcar ride away. The first- and second-generation immigrants who resided in the houses represented the social dynamic within Denver during the district's period of significance (1885 – 1923) and illustrate the diversity of those who played a significant role in building the city. Scottish, English, German, Welsh and Cornish immigrants who lived in the district played a large role in helping companies like the nearby Zang Brewery, Colorado & Southern Railway and Denver & Rio Grande Railroad thrive.

2. Architectural Significance

To have architectural importance, the structure or district shall have design quality and integrity, and shall:

a) Embody distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or type;

River Drive Historic District exemplifies several architectural styles and building types representing the Victorian and Arts & Crafts eras. Each is indicative of the time and location in which it was built. Collectively, they illustrate architectural trends over 38 years in Denver's early history. Some forms are relatively unique to Colorado like the Terrace Type. Other forms and styles related to early Denver development include Queen Anne, Gable Front, Dutch Colonial Revival and Foursquare.

Overall, the use of similar materials such as brick and stone, and design elements like arched window openings, brick belt courses and front porches, create cohesion among the properties.

Each structure remains in good condition with impressive retention of character-defining features. The Queen Anne houses retain their symmetrical massing and porches, multiple gables and decorative wood shingles. The Terrace Type buildings are constructed of brick and exhibit flat roofs and corbeled cornices. The one remaining Dutch Colonial Revival house retains its gambrel roof, front porch and dormers and one Foursquare its square plan, hipped roof, broad eaves and full-width front porch.

Minor alterations include porch and window replacements as well as rear additions and new garages that are not visible from the street. These changes do not negatively affect the character-defining features of the district. The district provides an excellent snapshot of architectural styles and forms found in Denver in the late 1800s and early 1900s.



Figure 1 (l-r) 2568 W River Dr (Terrace Type) and 2572 W River Dr (Queen Anne/Gable Front)

3. Geographic Significance

To have geographic importance, the structure or district shall have design quality and integrity, and shall:

- b) *Promote understanding and appreciation of the urban environment by means of distinctive physical characteristics or rarity;*

River Drive Historic District is a rare, intact portion of the 1881 River Front Addition in the Town of Highlands. The structures and setting represent the most complete portion of the Gurley Brothers original development in a neighborhood that has lost much of its physical integrity due to demolition and construction of residential infill in sharp contrast to the district's historic character. Today, River Drive Historic District includes a fraction of the original River Front Addition, amounting to 2.5 acres, and is considered a part of the residential core of the Jefferson Park neighborhood.

Jefferson Park neighborhood plans dating to 1976 encouraged local designation of the structures along West River Drive due, in part, to their distinctive physical characteristics. The district has two unique attributes that lend to its unique character, related to the natural topography in its proximity to the South Platte River. The first is the curving layout of parcels and street as opposed to the grid system commonly found in the neighborhood and throughout much of Denver. The second is the above grade (and with later modifications below grade) front entrances on several of the homes on the north side of the street, designed to accommodate the slope of the street and surrounding topography. When the houses were built, the road was narrower and higher in elevation than it is today; a 1950s regrading of the street developed a configuration closer to its current state. It is these distinctive features and the rare, intact nature of the River Drive Historic District within the larger Jefferson Park neighborhood that meet geographic significance.



Figure 2 2617 W River Dr in 1894 and 2019 with modifications to original above grade front entry

Integrity:

Chapter 30, DRMC requires that a landmark designated property maintain its historic and physical integrity, defined as “the ability of a structure or district to convey its historic and architectural significance...recognized as belonging to its particular time and place in Denver’s history.” The seven qualities that define integrity are location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling and association.

The 16 primary structures that contribute to the River Drive Historic District retain a high level of physical integrity related to the district’s period of significance (1885-1923). Due to their cohesive appearance, they are recognizable as belonging to that specific time and place in Denver’s history. Each of the contributing properties retain their original residential dwelling in the location of construction and all 17 properties with existing built forms continue to serve in a residential capacity. There are two empty lots within the historic district, the result of demolition, that are non-contributing. One of the houses, located at 2606 ½ W River Drive, is also non-contributing due to extensive alterations that compromised the structure’s integrity of design, materials and workmanship. The form, plan, space, structure and style of the 16 contributing properties are largely unchanged.

When combined with original key exterior materials, such as brick and stone, and the scale of each property, the district conveys a direct association with its period of significance and appears in stark contrast to much of its surroundings. The setting within the district boundary today is like what existed between 1885 and 1923; however, the surrounding area has several multi-family dwellings that are larger in scale than the properties originally built in the neighborhood. Each end of the district is anchored with new, multi-story residential properties.

Relate to a Historic Context/Theme and Period of Significance:

The period of significance for the River Drive Historic District is 1885 to 1923. This captures the span of time during which most parcels were developed, and the city of Denver experienced its initial growth. As part of the Town of Highlands prior to its annexation by the city of Denver in 1896, the district is an important representation of the city’s earliest development and architecture. It is particularly significant given its connection to the immigrant working class who resided within it and supported the growth of the city’s earliest and most influential industries.

Boundary:

The designation application proposes to designate the following legal description:

The district includes part of Lots 9 through 19 south of the alley, Lots 19 through 21 west of the alley, and a portion of Lot 22, all in Block 2 of the River Front Addition in the Town of Highlands, as well as a portion of Lot 8 along with Lots 9 through the east 12.5 feet of Lot 21 all in Block 3 of the River Front Addition in the Town of Highlands, in addition thereto, those portions of all abutting public rights-of-way, but only to the centerline thereof, which are immediately adjacent to the aforesaid specifically described area. Located in the NE 1/4 of Section 32, Township 3 South, Range 68 West of the 6th P.M., City and County of Denver, State of Colorado.

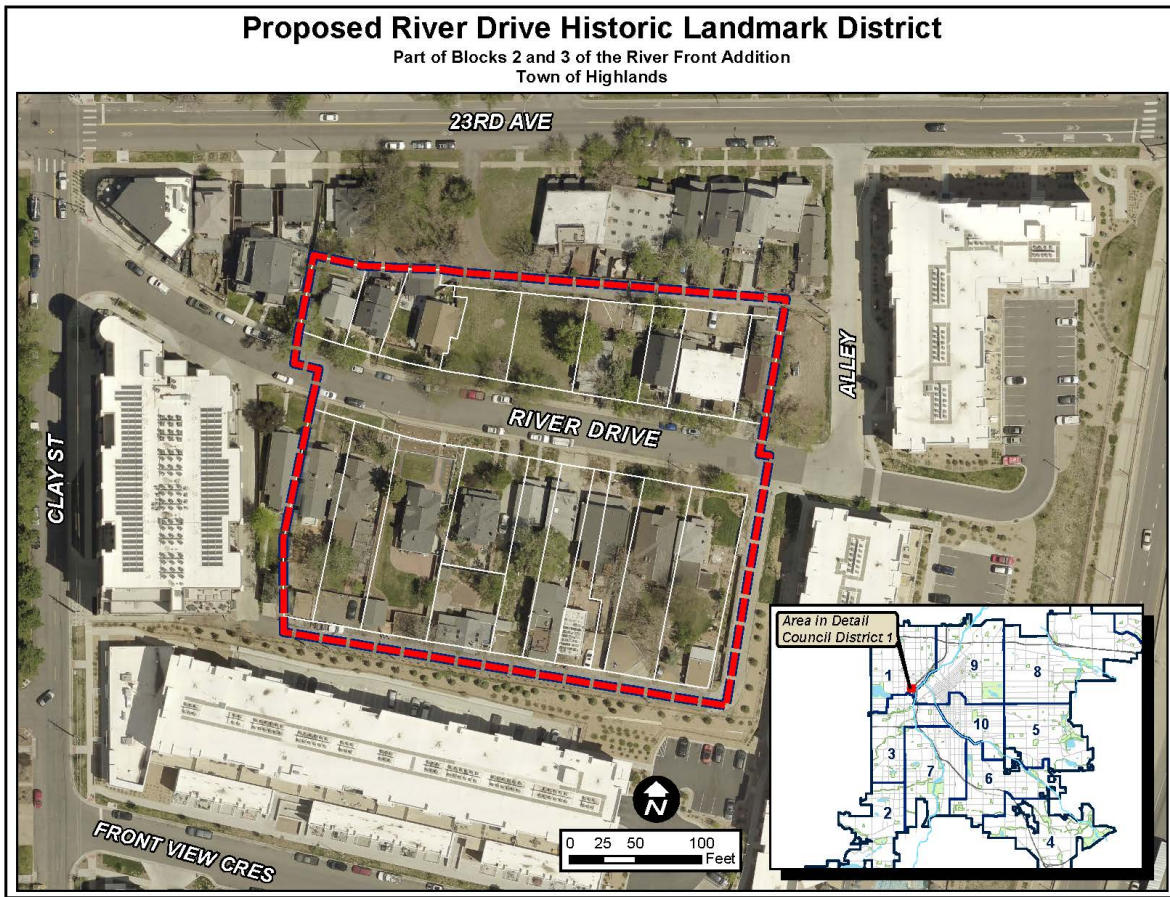


Figure 3 Proposed River Drive Historic Landmark District boundary

Criteria for Planning Board Review/Staff Evaluation

Planning Board Considerations, per Chapter 30-4.6, DRMC:

The Landmark ordinance provides the opportunity for the Planning Board to make a recommendation to City Council regarding designation of districts. The ordinance specifically directs the Planning Board to consider a proposed designation with respect to:

1. Its relationship to the Denver Comprehensive Plan;
2. The effect of the designation upon the surrounding neighborhood; and
3. Such other planning considerations as may be relevant to the proposed designation or amendments.

Zoning Context:

The District is zoned U-TU-B, UO-3.

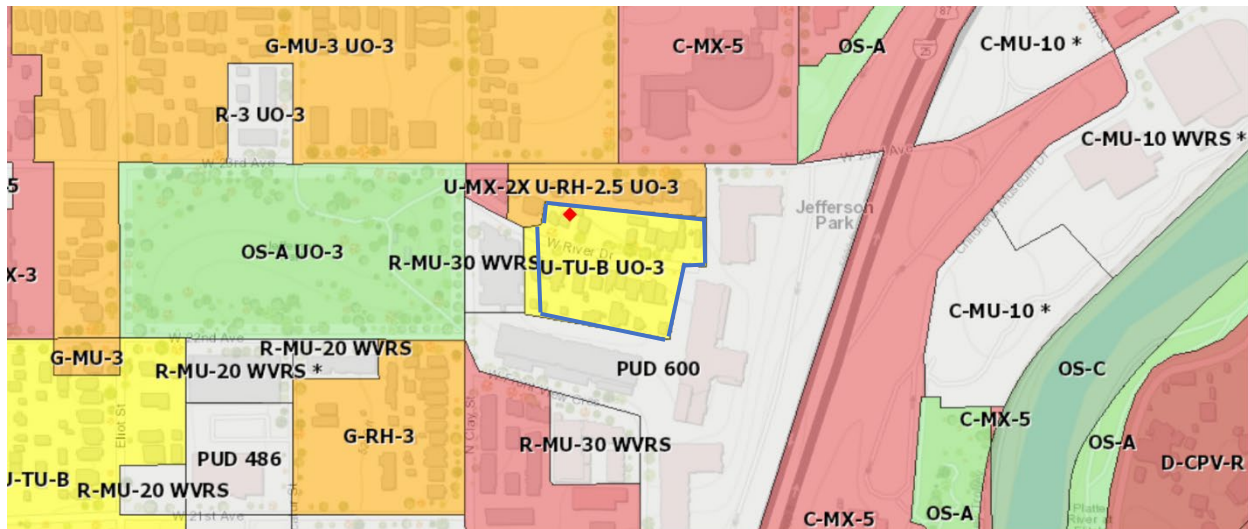


Figure 4 Zoning (proposed district boundary noted in blue)

Relationship to Denver Comprehensive Plan 2040 and Supplemental Plans:

The proposed district is consistent with Comprehensive Plan 2040 and supplemental plans including Blueprint Denver, the Jefferson Park Neighborhood Plan (2005) and South Platte River Corridor Study (2013).

It is consistent with several Comprehensive Plan 2040 vision elements, most directly with the Strong and Authentic Neighborhoods vision element, which includes the goal to “preserve the authenticity of Denver’s neighborhoods and celebrate our history, architecture and culture.” The proposed River Drive Historic District designation reinforces the vision of the plan through the preservation of a community cultural asset in the Jefferson Park neighborhood. It preserves the city’s authentic historic character, enhances design excellence, contributes to a strong sense of community identity, and supports environmental conservation. Designation of the River Drive Historic District advances these attributes in various ways, including reduction of building demolition and resulting landfill waste, and increased quality design through design review of new infill and alterations to properties.

The proposed designation also meets Implementation Strategy 2 by building partnerships with the community and nonprofits to help promote and implement the plan. The city’s nonprofit partner Historic Denver awarded River Drive property owners a grant to hire a consultant to develop the designation application for the River Drive Historic District. The implementation of the grant and resulting application were completed in partnership with Landmark Preservation staff.

Blueprint Denver (2019):

According to Blueprint Denver, the district’s neighborhood context is Urban and the future place is Low Residential. The plan states that the urban neighborhood context is found broadly throughout the city and any development within it should be sensitive to the existing neighborhood character.

Low residential areas include predominately single- and two-unit uses on smaller lots with buildings generally up to 2.5 stories in height and compatible integration of accessory dwelling units and duplexes.

The primary character of the River Drive Historic District is one- and two-unit residential buildings up to 2.5 stories in height. The proposed designation will help preserve the character of the block and allow for infill that is compatible with the existing historic character per the *Design Guidelines for Denver Landmark Structures & Districts*. This meets Strategy 2A within Blueprint Denver under Land Use & Built Form that recommends using historic designation to ensure residential neighborhoods retain their unique character as infill development occurs (p. 99). It also helps meet the intent of Policy 3A under Housing to provide affordable housing through the preservation and reuse of existing smaller and affordable homes (p. 83). Finally, designation of the River Drive Historic District is also consistent with Blueprint's vision to improve quality of design that preserves and creates authentic places (p. 94).

The proposed designation is consistent with Blueprint Denver recommendations and reinforces the plan's policies. It also helps advance the Blueprint Denver metric related to increasing the percent of the city subject to design-focused standards through application of the *Design Guidelines for Denver Landmark Structures & Districts*. Lastly, this designation resulted in part from the block's inclusion in the Jefferson Park neighborhood building survey via Discover Denver, and thus also contributes to measuring the success of the total percentage of surveyed areas within the city, the target of which is to reach 100% by 2040.

Jefferson Park Neighborhood Plan (2005):

The neighborhood plan adopted in 2005 emphasizes through its recommendations the need to protect and enhance the existing character of the neighborhood. It specifically identifies River Drive as a subarea with a vision to enhance it as an important and unique part of the residential core of Jefferson Park. The plan calls for the preservation of River Drive's historic character through appropriate building and site alteration and compatible new development. Specific recommendations include potential designation of River Drive as a Denver Landmark District, maintenance of single-family character, and encouraging new development that is compatible with the historic character. The designation of the River Drive Historic District will implement these plan recommendations.

South Platte Corridor Study (2013):

A portion of the proposed River Drive Historic District falls within the western edge of the South Platte Corridor Study planning area. The district most closely relates to the Water Street opportunity area identified in the study, which falls within the Jefferson Park neighborhood. Water Street is identified in the plan as a gateway to downtown and the Central Platte Valley and, when heading west, turns into 23rd Avenue which runs a half block north of the proposed district.

Water Street was the site of early residential and commercial development, including the Zang Brewery, and is now the location of the Downtown Aquarium. The plan recommends residential

and retail infill development in the underutilized parking lot on the north side of Water Street. The plan notes that surrounding neighborhoods and areas like the River Drive Historic District could be well served by any revitalization of the Water Street area through potential greater connectivity and economic impacts. Better connectivity between the district and Water Street would restore the historic linkage between the two areas that was severed when the Valley Highway (I-25) was constructed. The designation of the River Drive Historic District helps retain the residential character of the block and reinforces the potential benefits of safer and better connectivity to the South Platte River and a revitalized Water Street.

Effect on Surrounding Neighborhoods:

The River Drive Historic District designation ordinance will help preserve the character defining features of the district and will have little impact on the surrounding neighborhoods. LPC only has purview for the area located within the designation boundary. The intent of the designation is to recognize this unique district, the buildings that define it, and their contribution to the historic fabric of the city. This will allow for the area to meet the goals within Blueprint Denver as well as the goals found in the Comprehensive Plan.

Public Review Process:

Community Planning & Development has met or exceeded all posting and notification requirements delineated in Chapter 12 (Article III, Section 12-96) and Chapter 30 of the DRMC.

Notifications:

- Owner notification letters regarding the LPC public hearing, Planning Board meeting, and City Council meetings
- City Council, Planning Board, and Building Inspection email notifications
- Registered Neighborhood Organization and courtesy email notifications
 - Jefferson Park United Neighbors
 - Frontview 40 Condominium Association
 - Federal Boulevard Corridor Improvement Partnership
 - Center City Denver Residents Organization
 - Inter-Neighborhood Cooperation (INC)
 - Historic Denver, Inc.
 - Colorado Preservation, Inc.
 - National Trust for Historic Preservation
 - State of Colorado Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation
- Posted signage for Landmark Preservation Commission public hearing

Public Comment:

As of the date of this staff report, CPD has received 2 e-mails from community members and 4 responses to the City's online comment platform (3 from property owners within the district and 1 from an unknown person who did not indicate their name and address to verify place of residence) in support of the designation.

- RNO comment
 - None
- Public comments from individuals
 - 6 in support
 - 0 in opposition
- At the LPC public hearing, two property owners within the proposed district and one member of the public commented
 - 3 in support
 - 0 in opposition
- At the Planning Board meeting no members of the public commented
 - None

Attachments Provided by CPD:

- Designation Application
- Map of proposed district
- Draft LPC Public Hearing meeting record
- Public comments received by 5:00 p.m., May 29, 2019