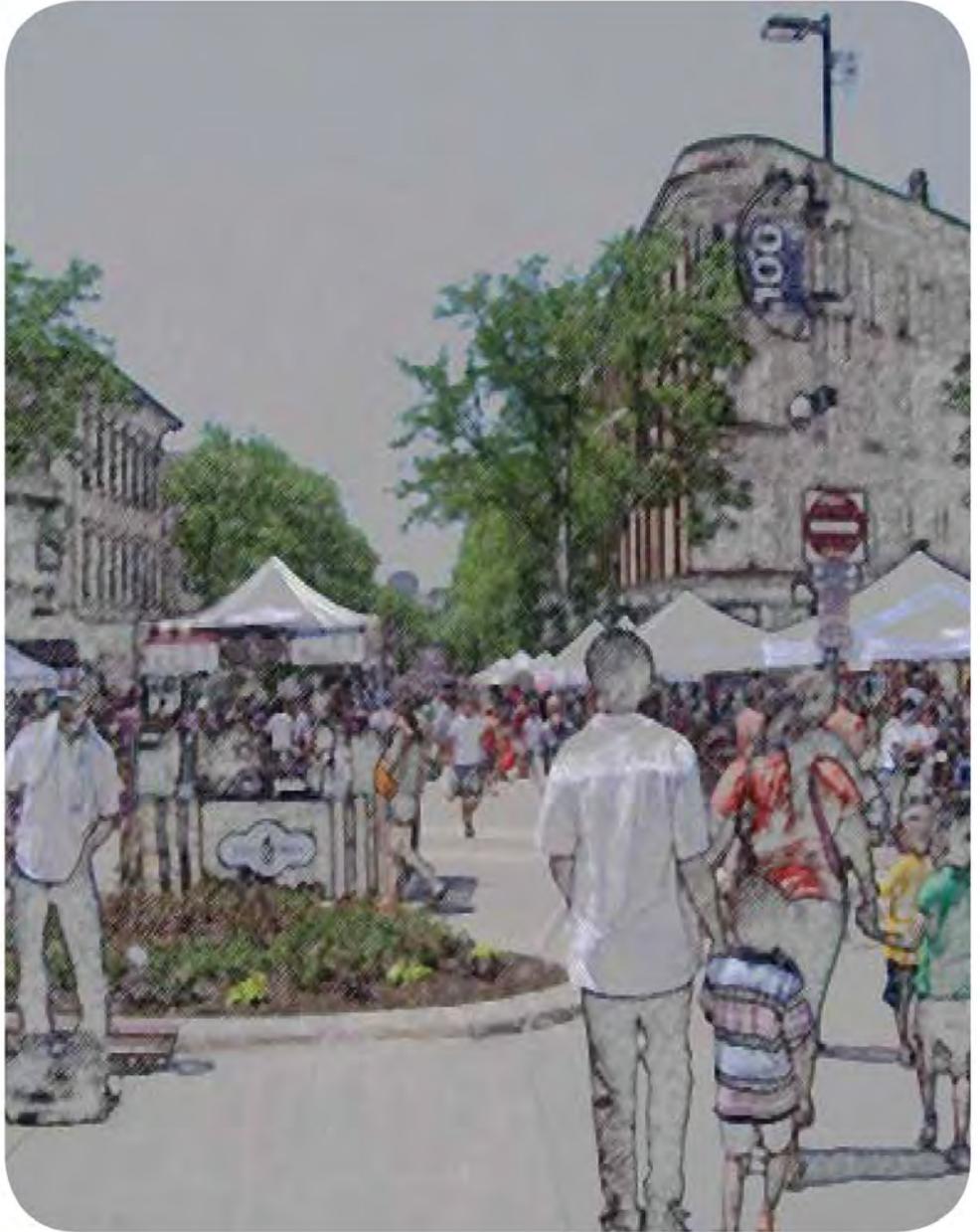


# Thornton Urban Center Study



ACCEPTED  
27 August 2013



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Regional Transportation District

Denver Regional Council of Governments

Mapleton Public Schools

Adams 12 Five Star Schools

Adams County

Tri-County Health Department

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

LiveWell Colorado / South Adams County

Adams County Housing Authority

Adams County Economic Development

Rangeview Library District

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RESOLUTION

A RESOLUTION ACCEPTING THE THORNTON URBAN CENTER STUDY.

WHEREAS, the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) has identified more than 100 urban centers throughout the Denver metro area; and

WHEREAS, DRCOG's MetroVision 2035 Plan provides the vision, goals, and policies pertaining to urban centers; and

WHEREAS, the City of Thornton has taken an active role in determining how the vision, goals, and policies of the MetroVision 2035 Plan would best be applied within the Thornton Urban Center; and

WHEREAS, the TUC Study will provide guidance to the City in determining which public infrastructure improvements to make and how to regulate the nature and scope of future private developments within the study area; and

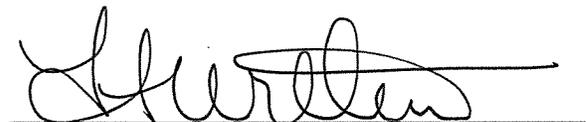
WHEREAS, the TUC Study will guide the South Thornton Redevelopment Implementation Study.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF THORNTON, COLORADO, AS FOLLOWS:

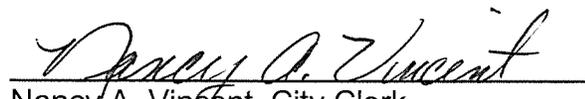
The Thornton Urban Center Study, attached as Exhibit "A" to this Resolution, is hereby accepted.

PASSED AND ADOPTED at a regular meeting of the City Council of the City of Thornton, Colorado, on August 27, 2013.

CITY OF THORNTON, COLORADO

  
Heidi K. Williams, Mayor

ATTEST:

  
Nancy A. Vincent, City Clerk

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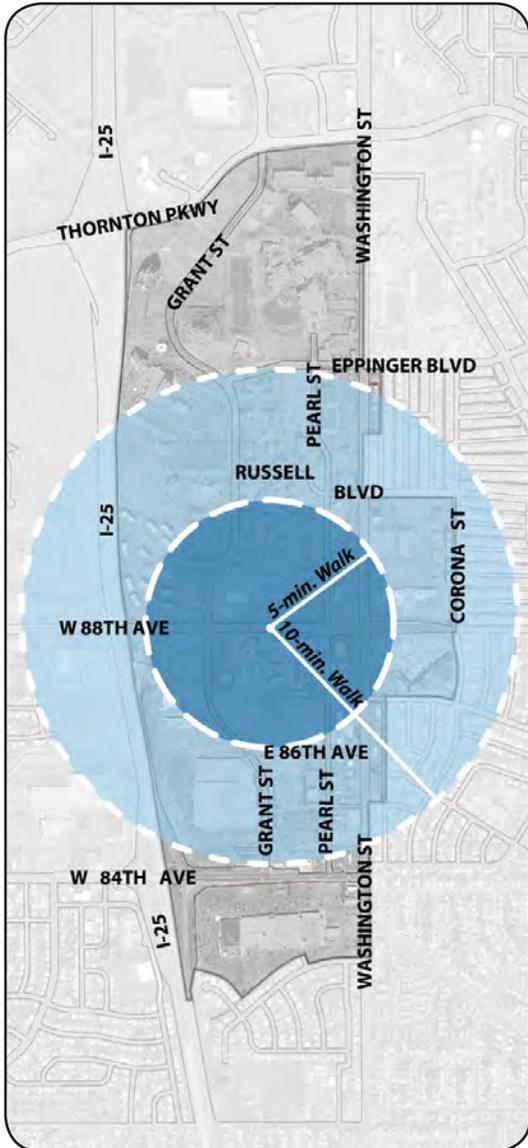
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Existing: TUC Study Area boundary with walking radii

## THE PROJECT

The Thornton Urban Center (TUC) Study is a jointly funded effort by the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) and the City of Thornton. The City of Thornton undertook this Study to develop physical design recommendations and an implementation strategy to spur reinvestment in the area and create a viable Urban Center in south Thornton. This Study builds upon the South Thornton Revitalization Subarea (STaR) Plan, proposing mobility recommendations for the entire TUC Area, as well as high-level framework plans for five development nodes. Detailed development strategies in the TUC Area, and beyond, are anticipated to be included in the South Thornton Urban Renewal Implementation Plan, which started in the summer of 2013.

Located in south Thornton, the Study Area is bounded by Thornton Pkwy. on the north and the City boundary, which roughly parallels E. 83rd Dr., on the south. I-25 represents the western limits of the Study Area, while Washington, Clarkson and Corona streets represent the eastern limits. The Study Area is 0.5 miles wide and over 1.5 miles long. It includes 535 acres.

The process involved a Technical Advisory Committee representing various City of Thornton departments, as well as two community meetings, a visual preference exercise, and meetings with various local, county and state agencies as well as City of Thornton Boards and Commissions. The project began in August 2012 and finished July 2013.

*This area of Thornton has significant potential. Substantial land areas are ripe for development / redevelopment, which, under the right leadership and regulatory framework, can provide a significant case study for regeneration of suburban environments.*



## ANALYSIS OF PLACE

The 535-acre Study Area, its context and market sub-areas were evaluated from existing regulatory, market, physical, and mobility perspectives, providing an in depth understanding of existing conditions.

### Market

Some of the key demographic indicators for the TUC Area include:

- The City’s population in 2010 was estimated at 118,000 persons and is currently estimated (2012) at 121,211 persons. The TUC population (2012) is approximately 3,800 persons in 1,620 households.
- There are an estimated 6,920 jobs in the TUC Area. The current jobs for the City range from approximately 21,000 to 25,000 jobs.
- Between 2000 and 2010, the population per square mile has decreased in the areas surrounding the TUC. Parts of the TUC have seen a general increase in population per square mile.
- TUC median household incomes are an estimated \$36,900 compared to the City of Thornton as a whole at \$62,100.
- There is a predominance of rental housing in the TUC.
- TUC household sizes tend to be smaller at 2.7 persons per household versus the City at 2.9 persons because of the concentration of multifamily in the TUC.
- The TUC is more heavily Hispanic at 69% of the population vs. the City of Thornton as a whole at 34%.
- Top resident psychographics in the TUC Area (80229 zip code) are: Aspiring Young Families, Industrious Urban Fringe (suburban neighborhoods with good access to downtown employment and entertainment), and Crossroads (retirees who like a small town type of lifestyle). They are characterized by young starter households, retirees, single

person households, and families. Psychographics are characteristics of people and neighborhoods reflecting attitudes, interests and lifestyles.

- Affordability is important.

The table below shows the overall planning recommendations for the project. The middle column shows market supportability through 2035 without any focused regeneration effort for this area of Thornton. Basically this represents ‘status quo.’ However, if the City focuses efforts to brand and promote this area as a key Urban Center and focused redevelopment area of the City in support of the recently established Urban Renewal Area and previous planning efforts’ established vision and goals, a much higher development program could be realized. The DRCOG TUC goal is potentially attainable with significant thought, investment and political will on the part of the City of Thornton.

The DRCOG TUC Goal identified in the table below simply represents equal allocation of future projected growth in Thornton across each of four identified Urban Centers in the City. As some Urban Centers may have higher or lower propensity for change, these numbers may need to be adjusted. For planning, equal allocation of the growth projections and goal capture of 50% new residences and 75% of new jobs was calculated.

In regenerating areas like the TUC, it is critical to realize that a market must be infused. This occurs through political will, clear direction and ‘due-diligence’ in making this a priority investment area through: updating zoning and other regulatory and policy frameworks, identifying a strong brand and providing focused marketing.

	Existing	Market	DRCOG TUC Goal [1]
Residential Units	1,662	400-600	1,900-2,000
Office SF	1,029,786	50,000-170,000	500,000-600,000
Retail SF	796,092	10,000-20,000	90,000-100,000[2]

Source: ArLand

[1] assumes that 50% of new residences and 75% of new jobs in 4 Urban Centers in Thornton based on DRCOG growth numbers. TUC goals result of even allocation of residents/jobs in 4 urban centers.

[2] assumes 20 sf per capita

Overall Planning Recommendations for the Project



### Conditions at a glance - the TUC Area has:

- Significant land areas that have never been developed, often clustered and many under City ownership.
- Two large (over 20 acres) significantly economically underperforming mall sites and other older, tired retail centers of varying sizes.
- Older housing stock, primarily rental.
- A superblock development pattern that precludes good urbanism and connectivity.
- A major RTD Park-n-Ride and transfer facility with planned expansion and planned new HOT lane along I-25 serving this station.
- Good service by local transit.
- Topography that is a tremendous asset, particularly Brittany Hill as a landmark for the community and utilizing topography as an asset to provide a critical concentration of residents and jobs.
- A north Denver metro area location that is well positioned, being a 15-minute drive or 15- to 23-minute express bus ride to / from the two downtown Denver transfer stations; relatively easy access to / from northern communities given adjacency to I-25, and a 30- to 45-minute travel time to / from Denver International Airport along 104th Ave. or 88th Ave. eventually connecting to C-470.
- A great opportunity to capture new north metro Denver growth, particularly in creating a substantial office cluster and substantial new housing that appeals to Gen Y and Empty Nester clusters.
- A unique opportunity to provide a regional example of a non-rail transit Urban Center transformation and reinvestment into a vibrant mixed use environment.

### Physical

Much of this area of Thornton was developed between the mid 1950's and the 2000's. A significant amount of building stock is older, with over 70 buildings greater than 40 years old. This often results in obsolete environments for all uses - office, retail and residential - found in the TUC Area, as well as lower rents, higher vacancies, lower maintenance, and aging landscaping. Site development patterns preclude good urbanism and resulting connectivity. Larger institutional uses in campus settings such as Thornton High School and North Suburban Medical Center support the existing superblock environment with difficult localized connectivity and wayfinding.

Office, including medical office, and health care uses are found primarily along I-25 and the Grant St. corridor. These buildings are upwards of seven stories. Retail is generally bordered by Washington Ave., and housing, including primarily apartments and some townhomes, is located centrally in the TUC Area. These structures are typically two to four stories in height. Nearly every site is developed with surface parking between the street and building, again inhibiting good urbanism.



Village Center on Washington St.



Thornton High School



## Mobility

Key mobility issues and opportunities identified include:

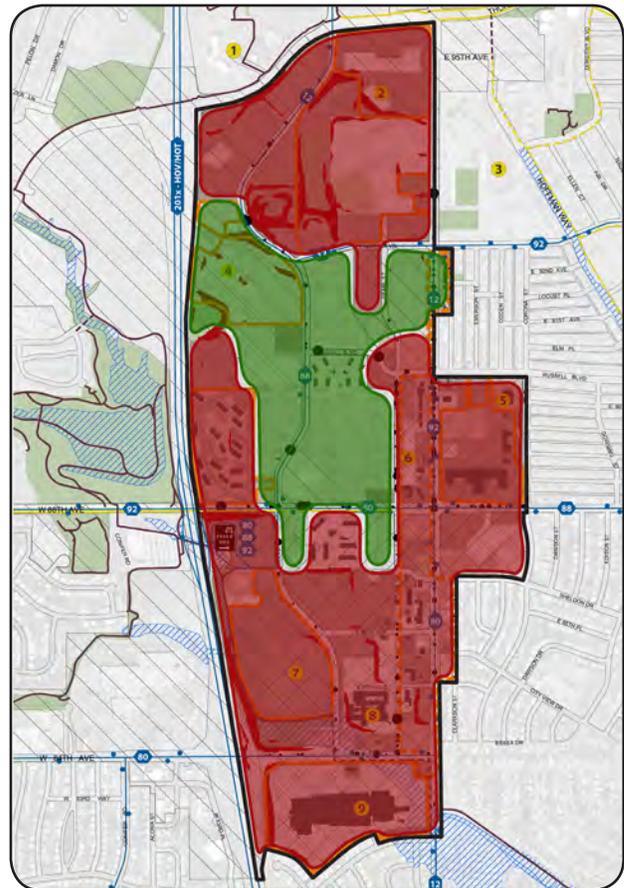
- Collector streets offer easy access to I-25 and the region.
- Proximity to regional transit routes and future commuter rail is a tremendous asset.
- Collector street volume could be accommodated by fewer travel lanes, based on rule-of-thumb lane capacity of 10,000 vehicles/lane.
- Extensive reservoirs of underutilized off-street parking can be converted to other uses relatively easily.
- Local street width within the Study Area is generous and could potentially accommodate on-street parking and / or bicycle and pedestrian facilities through road diets / restriping.
- Minimal on-street pedestrian amenities exist.
- Infrequent arterial crossings result in lack of connectivity.
- Superblocks with few local streets impede mobility.
- Almost no bicycle facilities exist.
- High traffic speeds and volumes in places discourages alternate modes.
- Pedestrian and bicycle access to / from RTD Park-n-Ride should be maximized.
- Few passenger waiting area amenities exist at transit stops.



Existing: Washington St. streetscape

## Areas of Stability & Areas for Change

When overlaying a series of approximately 15 categories of opportunities and constraints, two zones were identified within the 535 acres. An Area of Stability of approximately 185 acres was identified generally north of 88th Ave. in the central portion of the Study Area. Here the uses are relatively stable, and / or building infrastructure is newer. Conversely, approximately 350 acres or 65% of the Study Area was identified as the Area for Change. This Area for Change, which covers the remaining portion of the TUC Area, illustrates a land area where, for instance, low improvement to land values exist, buildings 40 years old or older exist, and current economic development tools such as being in an Urban Renewal or Enterprise Zone exist. These areas have the highest propensity for focused investment / reinvestment over the 20-year planning horizon, and therefore form the basis for more detailed recommendations in the private realm. Public realm recommendations address the entire TUC Area as this is critical for connectivity within an Urban Center.



Areas of stability (green) and areas for change (red)



## RECOMMENDATIONS: MOBILITY

For the City of Thornton to achieve its revitalization goals for the TUC, and for this area to truly become the “Heart of Thornton” for local residents and an attractive regional destination that draws employers and visitors from throughout Denver metro, it will be necessary to completely rethink the transportation system for the area.

The current transportation infrastructure of the TUC Area is primarily auto-oriented. Going forward, the City must prioritize a broad array of multimodal improvements in the TUC.

Designated Urban Centers must help achieve DRCOG regional targets for reduced ‘vehicle miles traveled’ (VMT) and greenhouse gas emissions (GHGe). As a result, the TUC’s transportation policies and investments should lead to a meaningful reduction in auto trips and associated greenhouse gas emission.

### Pedestrians

Every trip—whether by transit, automobile, or by bike—begins and ends on foot. To begin reorienting the Study Area toward the pedestrian, several strategies create a more inviting pedestrian realm and bridge the superblocks. Pedestrian improvements include: providing / maintaining striped crosswalks at all intersections, providing ADA ramps at crosswalks, providing detached sidewalks with any new street reconstruction, providing pedestrian amenities along streetscapes, focus on improving key intersections and routes initially.

### Bicycles

As almost no bicycle facilities exist, numerous facility improvements have been identified, including restriping existing wide streets with bike lanes (a road diet), adding sharrows and routes in key locations, and closing the Niver Creek Trail gap across the North Valley Tech Center property.

### Transit

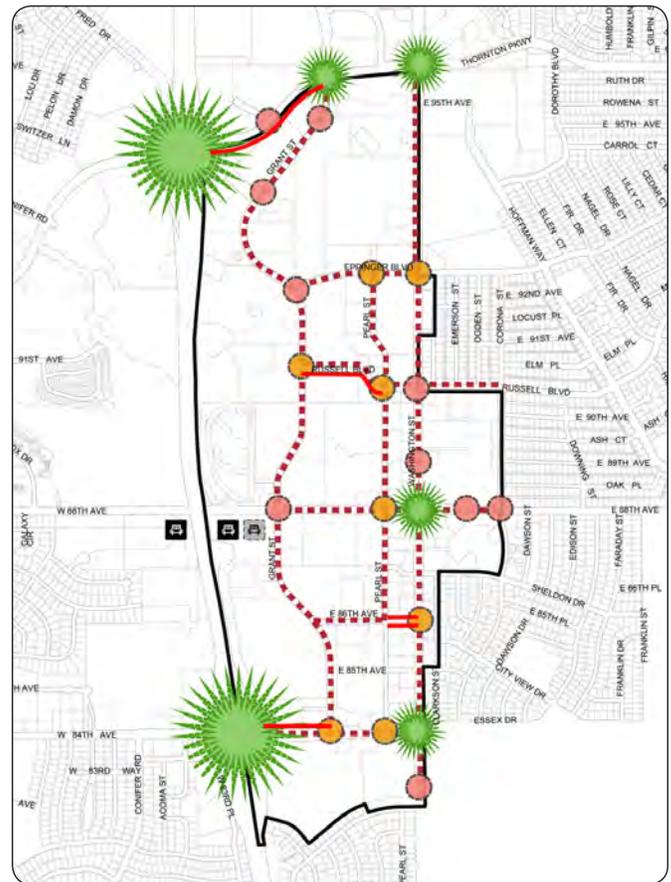
A significant transit ridership base already exists for trips to and from the TUC. Twenty-year strategies to improve transit service to and through the Study Area are modest and include modifying routes to support the Park-n-

Ride and future development, adding a new route along Thornton Pkwy. as development warrants, and considering a circulator for the area.

### Vehicular

Improvements to the traffic, parking, and circulation issues include:

- Modify current parking standards to allow for reduction in requirements, allowances for shared parking, and facilitation of shared parking agreements.
- Look for opportunities to add on-street parking and provide for on-street parking in new development / new roadway standards.
- Road diets will help minimize excess speeds and reduce accidents on excessively wide streets.



One of three maps supporting the mobility recommendations



## RECOMMENDATIONS: NODES

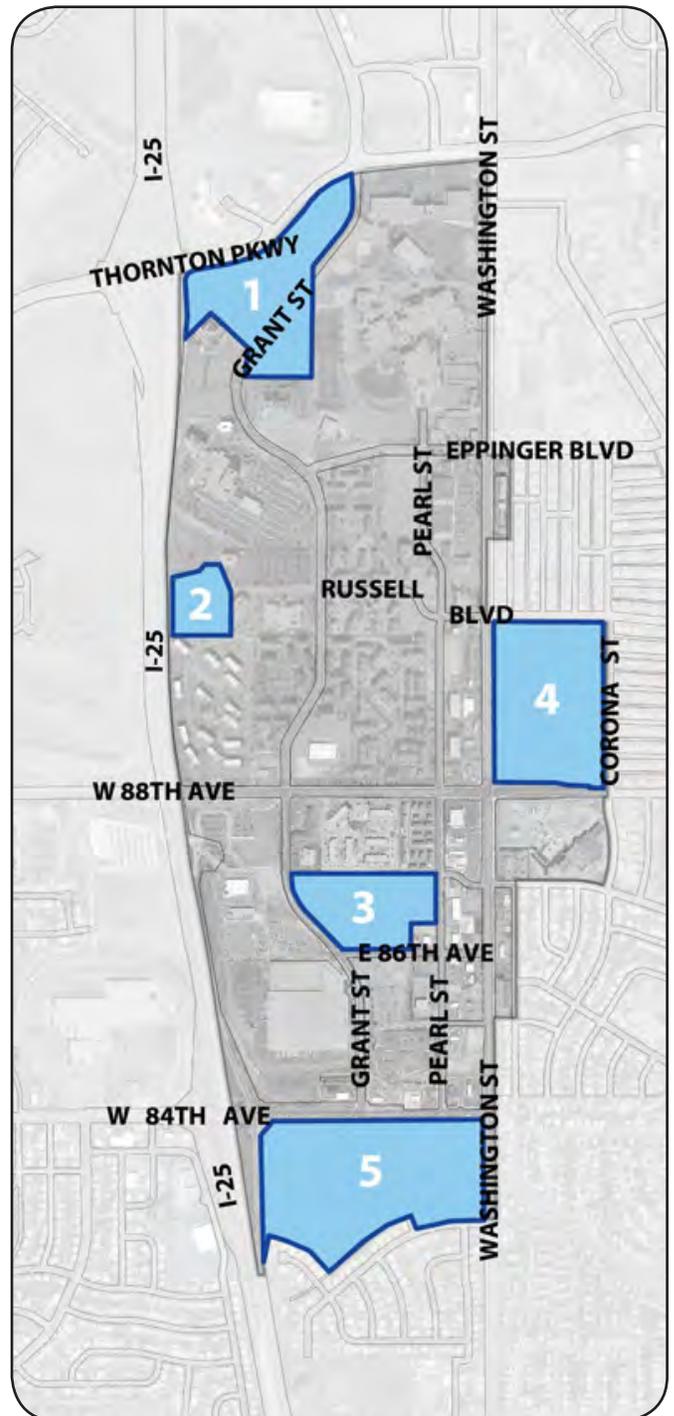
Through the course of the project, five development nodes were identified for further concentration that fit within the Areas For Change as identified in the analysis phase of the process. These five nodes were selected because they also fall within the current South Thornton Urban Renewal Boundary. Three of them are also located within the Enterprise Zone. Three of the nodes are on primarily vacant land that has never been built upon (the first three listed below), and two focus on redevelopment opportunities within south Thornton (the final two). Each of these nodes is referred to as a 'Site,' meaning the collective parcels that comprise the geographic outline of the node. The nodes range from under seven acres to over 37 acres in size and have anywhere from one to six owners.

The nodes include:

1. Grant St. / Thornton Pkwy. Vacant Land
2. Russell St. / I-25 Vacant Land
3. 86th Ave. Primarily Vacant Land
4. Thornton Shopping Center
5. North Valley Tech Center

Each node is described as follows:

- Basic Statistics: Acreage, location, current zoning and current number of owners.
- Overview of the node including unique features and general layout.
- Development Framework: Assets, potential development challenges, and overview of probable infrastructure to support development.
- Physical Framework: This category discusses both suggested mobility improvements and use, form and scale of development to support good urban development patterns, support DRCOG Urban Center goals, and to provide certainty for the City and potential developers in working with the nodes. Many of the improvements here speak to new streets with detached sidewalks and on-street parking, buildings that face the street with parking behind, and general range of heights of buildings envisioned for the area.



Five development nodes in the TUC



## IMPLEMENTATION

Implementing holistic, long-term strategies for an area of a community that is within a state of transition is paramount. Project based development - or site-by-site development - can only take place after the vision and goals have been established; and specific policies and regulations in support of the desired future are updated. It is now time for the City to update various policies and the regulatory framework from which successful Urban Center development patterns can occur into the future. Thornton - the “City of Planned Progress” - has a significant opportunity here to establish a new legacy not only for the City, but for the larger Denver metropolitan region - a strategy for planned change for older areas of suburban communities, and for non rail transit Urban Centers. Updating regulations, branding the area, planning for enhancements, and systematically scheduling and constructing improvements will signal the commitment of the City to the development community of the importance of this area.

Ideally, the implementation strategy for the TUC Study involves:

- Identifying the champions.
- Creating a brand / identity for this area.
- Marketing and promoting the area.
- Updating / preparing the regulatory framework.
- Completing mobility improvements.
- Growing public / private partnerships to implement social, placemaking, mobility, and development change.

Transformative strategies for neighborhoods and districts do not happen in one or even in five years. While the early phase actions are critical, a 20-year timeframe can establish a framework from which methodical and planned change is recommended over four phases. Phase I is meant to be the ‘immediate’ timeframe, or that which critical staff resources and funding can be planned for and allocated in both the 2014, 2015 and 2016 annual budgeting processes in order to keep the momentum moving and implement critical path actions.

The top seven items recommended for Phase I include:

1. Updating the regulatory framework: planned development plan requirements, zoning, parking, signage, street standards.
2. Completing a branding study.
3. Implementing ‘low hanging fruit’ or regulatory compliance mobility improvements: restriping streets with bike lanes, painting / maintaining key pedestrian crosswalk striping, providing ADA compliant crosswalks and ramps at key intersections.
4. Completing an updated and relevant Planned Development Plan for the Grant St. / Thornton Pkwy. node.
5. Completing the Urban Renewal Implementation Plan.
6. Completing Urban Center base growth assumptions for the four within Thornton.
7. Working with property owners / potential developers on the Thornton Shopping Center Site.

## FISCALLY CONSTRAINED RECOMMENDATIONS

The objective of the TUC Study was to survey the project area and provide recommendations whereby this part of southern Thornton can grow and become an Urban Center. The recommendations provided in the previous chapter are not restricted by resource considerations. These recommendations outlined above and in Chapter 5 are useful in that they provide a list of desirable items that can be used if additional resources are available. An example of such funds would be a grant or a successful TIP funding application.

City staff has translated these fiscally unconstrained recommendations into items that can be accomplished using the resources the City currently has at its disposal. Also provided is a menu of strategies that can be used as a starting point for the Urban Renewal Implementation Plan. These are identified in Chapter 6 of this document and are summarized on the next page.



### **Short Term 1–2 Years 2013-2014**

- Provide feedback to DRCOG regarding the ways that urban center qualities can most effectively be implemented in Thornton.
- Begin installing missing sidewalk links along undeveloped parcels.
- Begin providing additional bicycle lanes along key roadways such as Eppinger, Russell, Pearl, and Corona.

### **Medium Term - Up to 4 Years**

- Designate the Thornton Urban Center area in the 2017 Thornton Comprehensive Plan update.
- Complete installing missing sidewalk links and additional bicycle lanes.
- Complete the construction of a curb extension on Pearl Street at 86th Avenue and a traffic circle at Eppinger and Pearl, if programmed.

### **Long Term 5+ Years**

- Review/revise parking standards to reduce excessively large parking areas and increase walkability.
- Review/revise sign code regulations for the area to promote signage that supports a walkable development pattern.
- Work toward the completion of the Niver Creek Trail in the area of the North Valley Tech Center.

### **Ideas for the South Thornton Redevelopment Implementation Plan:**

- Consider new facilities in the area to encourage private investment and attract visitors.
- Encourage the development of Business Improvement Districts and other financing mechanisms.
- Use information about the nodes to help prioritize future redevelopment activities.