

**Thornton, CO - Historic Context, Presentation Summary Report**  
**Created January 2014**

**Slide 1: Introduction Slide**

- Photos

**Slide 2: Table of Contents**

1. Project Background
  - Thornton Historic Recognition Ordinance
  - Purpose of Historic Context Report
2. Historic Context Findings
  - Study methods
  - Eras of Thornton History
3. Prospects for Historic Recognition
  - Individual resources
  - Regional examples

**Slide 3: Project Background (Introduction to section, no content):**

**Slide 4: Importance of Thornton's History**

References in existing city plans

- Thornton Comprehensive Plan
- Eastlake Subarea Plan
- Eastlake TOD Plan
- Housing Master Plan
- Parks & Open Space Master Plan
- South Thornton Revitalization Plan
  
- Historic recognition has already been discussed as a consideration in each of these city plans
- Plans' focuses range between realms of neighborhood housing, the environment, and economic conditions

Key statements from plans:

- Thornton Comprehensive Plan
  - "Community recognition of Thornton's history and heritage creates a sense of belonging, pride, and identity. Identification and preservation of buildings and structures from the city's history help make a place special."

## -Ch.7 Healthy City with Great Amenities

- Eastlake Subarea Plan
  - “...Eastlake as a historical enclave – an oasis of authenticity, intimacy and agricultural heritage in the City of Thornton”  
-Ch.8 Economic Development
- Eastlake TOD Plan
  - “...one of the few truly unique stops along the entire network of FasTracks’ stations.”  
-Section 4 Project Principles
- Housing Master Plan
  - “Historic preservation is an important aspect of stabilization.”  
-Ch. 3:Revitalization and Preservation of Existing Housing Stock
- Parks & Open Space Master Plan
  - “Goal 15: Preserve historical and cultural sites in their traditional condition for the benefit of future generations.”  
-Executive Summary
- South Thornton Revitalization Plan
  - “The history of south Thornton could be used as part of a program to create a stronger sense of identity and place.”  
-Section 2: Goal D

### **Slide 5: Thornton Historic recognition ordinance, City Code Chapter 19**

- Recognizes places important to Thornton’s history
- Establishes a process to designate historic resources
- Recognition can increase civic pride and economic prosperity
  
- Ordinance adopted in December of 2012
- Ordinance suggests a minimum age of 50 years
- Recognition process and designation requires owner consent and carries no additional restrictions for what owner may choose to do with property regarding alterations, demolition, etc.
- Anyone may nominate an historic resource, but owner consent is required to move process forward
- Recognitions will be reviewed by city staff, ratified by City Council, and will include documentation and potentially a commemoration plaque
  
- Excerpts from code:
  - “WHERE AS, the recognition of structures, sites and districts of cultural, historical and architectural significance is in the interest of the prosperity, civic pride, economic development and general welfare of the people of the City of Thornton”

- “WHERE AS, basic criteria for the historic designation of sites, structures or districts, definitions, and procedures for historic designation are necessary to establish a historic recognition process in the City;”
- Adopted December 12, 2012.

**Slide 6: What is an Historic Context Study?**

- Support City’s historic recognition ordinance
- Provide background for a formal historic survey
- Encourage further investigation
- Help to guide historic resource application process
  
- This context can serve as a starting point for a wider survey that collects and assesses a more official inventory of historic resources within the city
- Provides general knowledge for city staff and residents alike
- Citations from “Writing Historical Contexts” by Marie Nelson, California Office of Historic Preservation

**Slide 7: Why Write an Historic context report?**

- Broad scope of this report will identify ages and volumes of properties within the city
- Will provide context of larger topical themes which individual resources can be organized under
- Will identify characteristics common for an era, thereby making it easy to spot non-conforming characteristics or alterations
- As an organization tool because eras, themes, and context may overlap in time

**Slide 8: Historic Context Findings (Introduction to section, no content):**

**Slide 9: Study method and resources**

1. Review historic context literature
  2. GIS Analysis
  3. Conduct cultural research
  4. Field visits and background experience
- 
- Review of academic discussions on what qualifies as historic, specifically in suburban contexts
  - More than just aesthetic qualities, but whether a resource or neighborhood demonstrates a particular and significant aspect of themes identified in the historic context survey
  - Thornton Cultural research – what has already been collected?
    - Photographs, memorabilia, documented oral histories
    - Items on display in city hall, images saved in electronic files, histories written and city, county, and regional level
  - Field Work
  - Site visits and photographs

- GIS Analysis – Present findings geographically, quantitatively
  - County Assessor data, City GIS Department
  - Parcel level data utilized heavily

**Slide 10: Eligibility for national historic recognition**

- The number of parcels does not mean exactly number of structures. Single parcels may have multiple structures. Simply used as a proxy to get a sense of spatial change and area densities over time
- Resources 50+ years of age eligible for national historic status
- Thornton’s recognition ordinance has no age minimum
- Nominated resources may have to meet additional criteria
- Starting point: GIS inventory of the city to get general idea of how many resources may be historic
- Isolate areas developed 50+ years ago
- Parcels may have multiple structures or resources, or may be vacant. A more in depth inventory needed to get a more accurate count
- To assess number of potential resources, count parcels currently eligible, and also look to future by collecting data on number of potential resources in the next 10 years, then 20 years

**Slide 11: The Four Stages of Suburban Development – National Register Bulletin**

1. Railroad (1830-1890)
  2. Streetcar (1890-1908)
  3. Automobile (1908-1945)
  4. Freeway (1945-1960? 1975? Present?)
- Railroad (1830-1890)
    - “...railroad companies started to build passenger stations along their routes...These stations became to focal points of villages that developed in nodes along railroad lines.”
    - Emergence of Eastlake
  - Streetcar (1890-1908)
    - “...formed the skeleton of the emerging metropolis and influenced the initial pattern of suburban development
    - Denver grows outward
  - Automobile (1908-1945)
    - “The rapid adoption of the mass produced automobile by Americans led to the creation of the automobile oriented suburb of single family houses on large lots that has become the quintessential American landscape of the twentieth century”
    - Present suburban characteristics begin to form

- Freeway (1945-1960?)
  - Fueled by automobile ownership, the Baby Boom, critical shortage of housing, and availability of low cost mortgages especially available to veterans.
  - Thornton is born!
- Question marks indicate uncertainty. Article ends period at 1960, not quite as applicable to Thornton. A later year such as 1975, 1990, or even beyond may be a more appropriate cutoff year.
- What period, if any, would come next?
- Citation from “National Register Bulletin: Historic Residential Suburbs”

#### **Slide 12: Growth Since Incorporation**

- Graph highlighting spikes in parcel growth since 1953.
- County parcel data used. GIS files include information on “year built” which shows when the parcel was created and filed with the county
- Graph used to identify eras in Thornton History, as in high growth periods

#### **Slide 13: Thornton Historic context outline**

1. Pre-Historic Era
  - Until first exploration and settlement by Europeans
2. Railroad/Agricultural Era
  - Scattered farms and construction of railroads. Eastlake
3. Original Thornton
  - First Hoffman homes built 1953
4. Annexation Era
  - Rapid growth mid-70s to mid-80s
  - Thornton encircles Northglenn
5. Northward Expansion
  - Rapid growth mid-90s to late 2000s
  - Aided by regional infrastructure investments

#### **Slide 14: Pre-Historic Activity**

- Fossil sites
- Discovery during North Metro EIS evaluation
- Archaeological sites
- Collection of animal bones and charcoal indicate an ancient campsite
- Native Americans
  - 12 tribal nations contacted for inclusion in North Metro EIS process as possibly affecting ancestral homelands
  - Much of this information draws from RTD’s North Metro EIS document
- Fossil Sites

- A “reptile” from the late cretaceous period was found in the North Metro EIS, but its location remains confidential.
- Archaeological Sites
  - A pre-historic site was identified in the North Metro EIS as a likely campsite. Presence of animal bones and charcoal near North End Station
  - Eligible for National Register of Historic Places
- Native Americans
  - The North Metro EIS reached out to 12 tribal nations to invite for inclusion in the EIS process as possibly affecting their ancestral lands. The Apache Tribe of Oklahoma responded indicating a desire to be consulted

**Slide 15: Railroad/Agricultural era, Pre-1953**

- Parcel data from Adams County Assessor
- Note that only parcels remaining today available in GIS.
- Parcels shown are registered with the Adams County assessor as being built upon prior to 1953
- Should be noted this map does not show parcels that once existed but have been replaced by newer structures and subdivisions

**Slide 16: Agricultural era, Pre-1953**

- Importance of water
  - Area’s association with irrigation works. Structures such as head gates, bridges, siphons, and culverts may be present
  - Canals and ditches in Thornton
    - German Ditch, Signal Ditch, Lee Lateral Ditch, Union Ditch, Colorado AG Ditch Farmers High Line Canal
  - Streams and rivers
    - South Platte River, Niver Creek, Grange Hall Creek, Brantner Gulch, and Todd Creek
- Railroads in Thornton
  - Union Pacific-Boulder Branch, completed 1909
  - Associated with expansion of railroad into northern Colorado, development of beet growing communities and expansion of coal mining industry
  - Number of bridges, some of which are wood, and culverts associated with railroad
  - Borrow pits to construct berms also potentially historic due to example of engineering practices
- Farmhouses and related structures
  - Lambertson Farm
  - Farmstead Eastlake
  - A working farm, historically farms like this played an important role in regional economy
  - Eastlake Grain Elevators
- Railroads and associated towns
  - Darlow (E-470 & Colorado)
  - Eastlake (124th & York)
  - In addition to the collection of pre-Thornton buildings, the North Metro Rail may affect a concentration of foundation remnants and possible subsurface features

- Artifacts date from 1950s and earlier, also railroad equipment
- Quimby (100th & Colorado)
- RTD EIS (Environmental Impact Statement) identified 3 concentrations of artifacts east of the tracks and a subsurface vault that will be affected
- Date from 1930s-50s, likely consist of railroad operation equipment

**Slide 17: Original Thornton 1953-1956**

- Constructed in geographically isolated area and in short time period

**Slide 18: Original Thornton 1953-1956**

- Post-WWII Context
- Federal Housing Policy
- Interstate Highway Construction
  
- Post WWII Context
- Federal Housing Policy
  - Legislation in 1930s created a system of home banking, led to low interest, long-term mortgages from the FHA
  - Especially favorable lending to veterans following WWII
- Interstate Highway Construction
  - Federal Aid Highway Act of 1944 authorized construction, Act refunded in 1956 to accelerate construction
  - Supported suburban commuting into core cities
  - Automobile registrations more than tripled between 1940-1970
  - I-25 completed through Adams County by 1963

**Slide 19: Original Thornton: 1953-1956**

- Types of Home Models
- Evolving Street Patterns
- Types of Homes
  - The “Arden”, “Ashley”, and “Clayton”
  - 2-3 Bedrooms, 1.5 bath, 850-1170 Sq.Ft.
  - 1 story ranch style, brick, frame siding, & frame vinyl
- Street Pattern
  - Increasingly curvilinear, but mostly connected. Represents a transition between urban grids and later suburban cul-de-sac pattern
  - Larger block sizes
- Alleys in initial construction phases, but quickly abandoned in later development

**Slide 20: The “merchant developer”**

- Subdivision Developers

- Sold homes and marketed a lifestyle
- Mass production of homes
- Sam Hoffman – Developer of Thornton
  - 640 acre farm site purchased
  - Built and promoted Thornton
- Subdivision Developers
- The “Merchant Developer”
  - Merchant builders acquired large tracts of land, designed and installed streets and infrastructure, designed and built houses, and sold the finished houses as part of a new community. These builders dominated the postwar housing industry by building large numbers of homes at a fast rate “and achieving economies of scale not previously seen in housing construction.”
  - From “Evaluating the Significance of Post WWII Housing”
  - Hoffman had previously built Hoffman Heights in Aurora. Between 6th-Colfax, Peoria and I-225

#### **Slide 21: The Annexation Era: 1972 – 1986**

- Competition with Northglenn
- Proposals to consolidate area cities

#### **Slide 22: The Annexation Era: 1972 – 1986**

- Regional Context: The Annexation Wars
- Competition with Northglenn
  - Proposals to consolidate area cities, quickly broke down
  - Regional Context: The “Annexation Wars”
  - Northglenn first built in 1959, incorporated in 1969
  - In 1970 city officials from Northglenn, Thornton, Federal Heights and Westminster met following a conference on small city consolidation.
  - Thornton Mayor Russell J. Hostel proposed creation of one large city bounded by the South Platte, Boulder Turnpike, Sheridan Blvd., and Weld County line, but cooperation never materialized
    - Citation from “Adams County Crossroads of the West Volume II”
- Regional Context: The “Annexation Wars”
  - In 1970, Western Electric announced plans to build electronics assembly plant at W. 120th Ave. and Huron St.
  - Shortly after, developers revealed a major business park called "Front Range-Denver" was planned for area
  - The two planned developments sparked a flurry of annexations and land fights between the surrounding cities, even though the park never was built
  - In 1971, Thornton annexed four tracts of land contested with Northglenn, extending Thornton's boundaries to the north and eventually encircling both Northglenn and the older community of Eastlake.

- Citation from “Adams County Crossroads of the West Volume II”

### **Slide 23: Northward Expansion Era: 1994 – 2007**

- Northern expansion, but also notice new development to the south
- Compared to Original Thornton, home sizes larger
- Influenced by low fuel costs, growing national and regional economy and regional infrastructure investments

### **Slide 24: Northward Expansion: Mid 1990s-Mid 2000s**

- Sustained Housing Growth
  - Regional Infrastructure Investments
  - Further sustained housing growth until Great Recession (2009)
  - Regional Infrastructure investments
  - E-470
  - Denver International Airport
- 
- Will construction of the North Metro Rail usher in a new period in Thornton growth?

### **Slide 25: Prospects for Future Recognition (Introduction to section, no content)**

### **Slide 26: Moving Forward**

- Recognize unique history of post-WWII suburban development
  - Preserve most pristine examples
  - Review historic resources as components of an historic district
  - Challenges to recognizing post WWII suburban residential development as historic since so much exists
  - Certain resources may be more well preserved to original design than others
- 
- Overall, Thornton may have two distinct districts, Eastlake and Original Thornton
  - Original Thornton displays nearly all aspects of Post – WWII suburban development
    - Sparked by I-25 freeway to Denver
    - Built and marketed by a merchant developer
    - High number of homes built in a short period of time, makes for a cohesive neighborhood

### **Slide 27: Historic Recognition – Preserve the Past, Thrive in the Future**

- Englewood – Arapahoe Acres
- Boulder – Mapleton Historic District
- Arvada – Olde Town

- Wheat Ridge – 38th Avenue Corridor
- Discussions will need to be made regarding preservation vs economic development, but the two are not necessarily opposing
- Neighborhood branding can seek to cultivate community pride and revitalization, guide alterations to maintain a common character
- Commercial initiatives can also create a brand, maintain elements of the period such as signage styles, facades, and rooflines in both remodels and new development
- Can be integrated with modern design considerations to ensure recognition and preservation does not supersede viability of property, depending on community priorities

### **Slide 28: Possibilities for Historic Recognition**

- Parcel by Parcel inventory completed of Pre-1953 Structures
- Remaining farm or railroad structures/equipment
- Eastlake district
- Original Thornton district
- Schools, Churches, Civic buildings within district
- 1950s/1960s era commercial properties
- Landmark Water Towers
- Previous City Halls
- North Valley Mall
- Associated signage
- Other ideas?

### **Slide 29: Existing Structures**

Images:

- 1: Chapel of the Intercession Episcopal Church: 1950\_1965
2. Parlor in Eastlake
3. First Congregational Church, Eastlake
- 4: Construction on Merritt Sutton High School (later Thornton High)
5. Landmark Water Towers
6. Sal's Pizza in Washington Shopping Center. Example of 1950s-60s commercial design
7. North Valley Mall
  - Built in 1967
  - First major mall north of Denver
  - Anchors: Montgomery Ward and May D&F (May Co.)
  - Regional competition at Northglenn Mall (1969) and Westminster Mall (1976)
  - Reinvented as North Valley Tech Center in 1996

- Entire structure eligible in for Historic status in 2017, or other elements such as tall narrow 60s era sign (include photo)

## References

- Adams County, CO. GIS Data. Obtained through City of Thornton GIS Department: May, 2013.
- Ames, David L. and Linda Flint McClelland. "Historic Residential Suburbs: Guidelines for Evaluation and Documentation for the National Register of Historic Places." U.S. Department of the Interior, National Parks Service, National Register of Historic Places. September 2002.
- Arapahoe Acres Historic Preservation Network. <http://www.arapahoeacres.org/history/index.html>
- City of Thornton. Items on Display at City Hall. 2013.
- City of Thornton. Hoffman Homes Brochure. Internal City Files, 2013.
- City of Thornton. Ordinance No. 3225/ City Code Chapter 19. Adopted by Council December 18, 2012.
- City of Thornton, Electronic Photos, Drive S:/.
- Colorado Department of Transportation. "Interstate 25 History."  
<http://www.coloradodot.info/about/AboutCDOTandFacts/CDOTHistory/50th-anniversary/interstate-25>
- "Denver Area Post WWII Suburbs." Bunyak Reseach Associates. Front Range Research Associates Inc. Prepared for Colorado Department of Transportation, Applied Reseach and Innovation Branch. April, 2011.
- Colorado Historical Society. Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation. "Builders of Colorado Biographical Sketch."
- The Denver Post. "For Wheat Ridge, 38th Avenue a Corridor of Change" Oct. 6, 2013.  
[http://www.denverpost.com/business/ci\\_24243676/wheat-ridge-38th-avenue-corridor-change](http://www.denverpost.com/business/ci_24243676/wheat-ridge-38th-avenue-corridor-change)
- Fisk, Charles C., "The Metro Denver Water Story, A Memoir." Record Services, Dakota Indexing, ACE Printing, 2005.
- Historic Olde Town Arvada Association. <http://www.historicarvada.org/>
- Knapp and VerPlanck Preservation Architects. "Historic Context Statement, Marinship." Sausalito, CA: June 2011.
- La Quinta Planning Department." City of La Quinta Historic Context Statement." La Quinta, CA: April 2011.
- "NCHRP Report 723: A Model for Identifying and Evaluating the Historic Significance of Post WWII Housing." National Cooperative Highway Research Program. Transportation Research Board, 2012.
- Nelson, Marie. "Writing Historic Contexts." California Office of Historic Preservation.

“OHP Preferred Format for Historic Context Statements.” California Office of Historic Preservation.

Ridge at 38. 2013. <http://ridgeat38.com/>

Sherfry, Marcella and W. Ray Luce. “Guidelines for Evaluating & Nominating Properties That Have Achieved Significance Within the Past 50 Years.” U.S. Department of the Interior, National Parks Service, National Register of Historic Places. Originally published 1979, revised 1998.

Sielaff, Alan. Photos, 2013.

Wagner, Albin. “‘Land Rush’ in Adams County.” And “Canning Was a Major Industry for County.” From Adams County Crossroads of the West, Volume II. Adams County Colorado.