

# Community Engagement Summary Report



**TAB**  
Technical Assistance  
to Brownfields

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## Project Background

The Thornton Shopping Center (TSC) is a 15.6-acre property located at the intersection of 88th Avenue and Washington St. in Thornton, Colorado. The center opened in 1955 as Thornton's first "ultra-modern shopping center". Over the years, the shopping center fell into disrepair, and former dry-cleaning businesses have left a substantial plume of perchloroethylene (PCE) that is impacting the property and dozens of residences to the southeast of the site. Over the years, CDPHE efforts to force a cleanup of the site have been unsuccessful. Additionally, many of the existing buildings contain asbestos, another impediment to redevelopment.

The property has long been an eyesore in one of Thornton's oldest neighborhoods, and there are strong sentiments within the community about the type of redevelopment they would like to see. The city is requesting Kansas State University Technical Assistance to Brownfields (KSU TAB) services to help involve the community in reuse visioning and to build consensus about feasible redevelopment scenarios, as well as determine market feasibility for the most supported reuse alternatives. This memo summarizes the input received during a reuse visioning meeting held on April 18th, 2024, as well as the results of an online survey issued after the meeting.

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## Meeting Summary

In partnership with the City of Thornton, the KSU TAB and Adaapta team led a community meeting for the residents of Thornton to envision a reuse for the former Thornton Shopping Center on Thursday, April 18th, 2024. The meeting was at the Community Connections Center, less than a mile north of the site.

After a brief introduction to brownfields and an overview of the site's history, participants were asked to begin a two-step visioning process. The first activity was a Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis. Group members wrote characteristics of the Thornton Shopping Center site that fit into each category on sticky notes and placed them on boards in the meeting room. Once all groups had placed their SWOT sticky notes, the facilitation team led a group discussion to obtain additional context for comments.

After discussing the SWOT analysis, participants began the second portion of the reuse visioning process, brainstorming reuse options. Each participant was given a numbered sheet and was asked to list as many reuse options as possible within a 5-minute time frame. The intent of this exercise was to encourage community members to identify creative options for reuse. Next, they were given three minutes to select their three favorite reuse options from their list. Finally, each member discussed their top three ideas with their group and each of the groups came to a consensus on their top five reuse ideas. Each group then wrote their top five reuse ideas on an easel-sized pad on the wall. Once all the groups added their top five reuse ideas to the board, participants were each given

two green dots and one red dot. They were asked to place the green dots on the reuse ideas that they supported and the red dots on ideas that they opposed. A comprehensive list of input received from the SWOT analysis and reuse visioning has been included as Attachment A and is analyzed below.

## SWOT Results

### *Strengths*

- Participants most consistently identified the site's location as its top strength, particularly its proximity to I-25 and its location at the intersection of two main thoroughfares.
- Participants frequently mentioned the site's size as an asset.
- Participants also thought that the site's location in the oldest part of Thornton was an asset, particularly its history as Thornton's first "downtown" commercial district.
- Participants also identified the site's proximity to public transit and bike infrastructure as strengths.

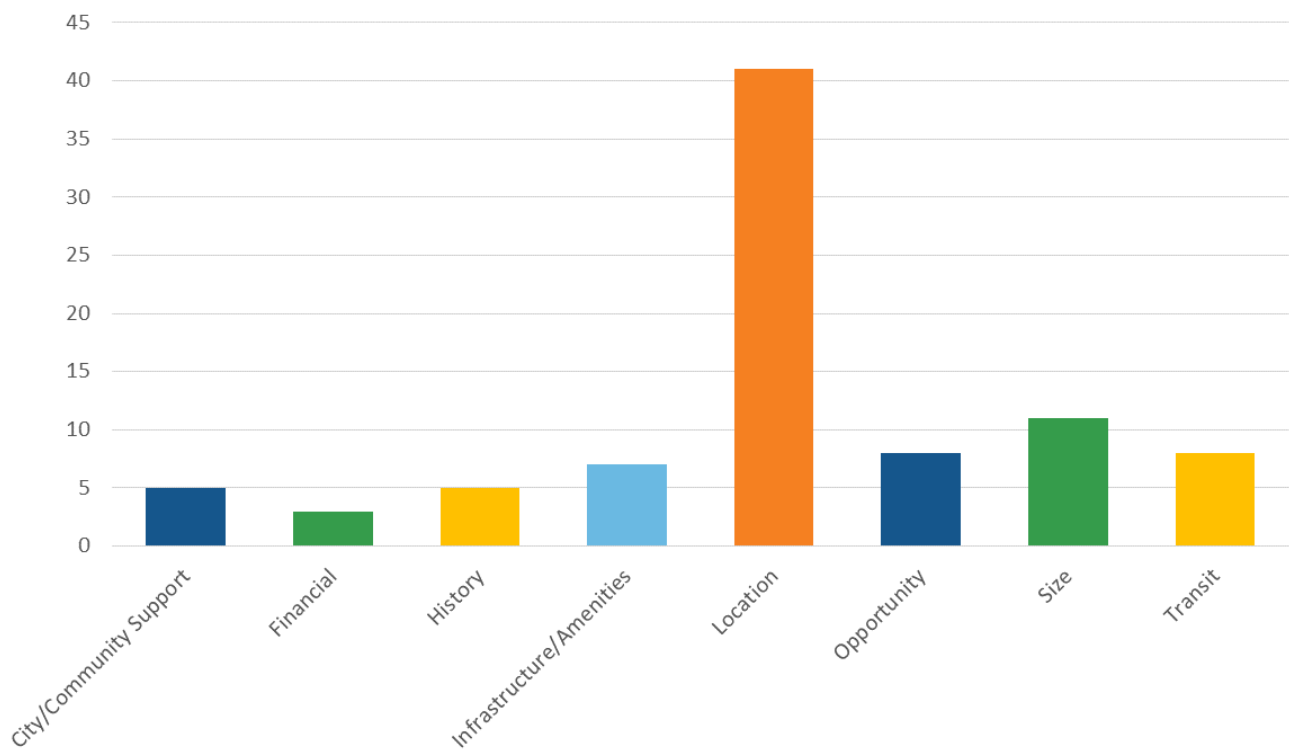


Figure 1: Strengths (In-Person Input)

### *Weaknesses*

- The most commonly identified weakness was crime and safety. The site has been derelict and underutilized for years, and vandalism, graffiti, and litter exacerbate the site's condition.
- Participants also frequently identified the environmental conditions of the site as

a weakness, including groundwater contamination from a former dry cleaner and asbestos in the buildings.

- Participants noted that the lot's size and location could be a challenge. While fairly large and accessible, the shape of the lot is unusual and could present challenges for development.
- Participants also noted that old infrastructure and disinvestment in the surrounding area may present a challenge to redevelopment.

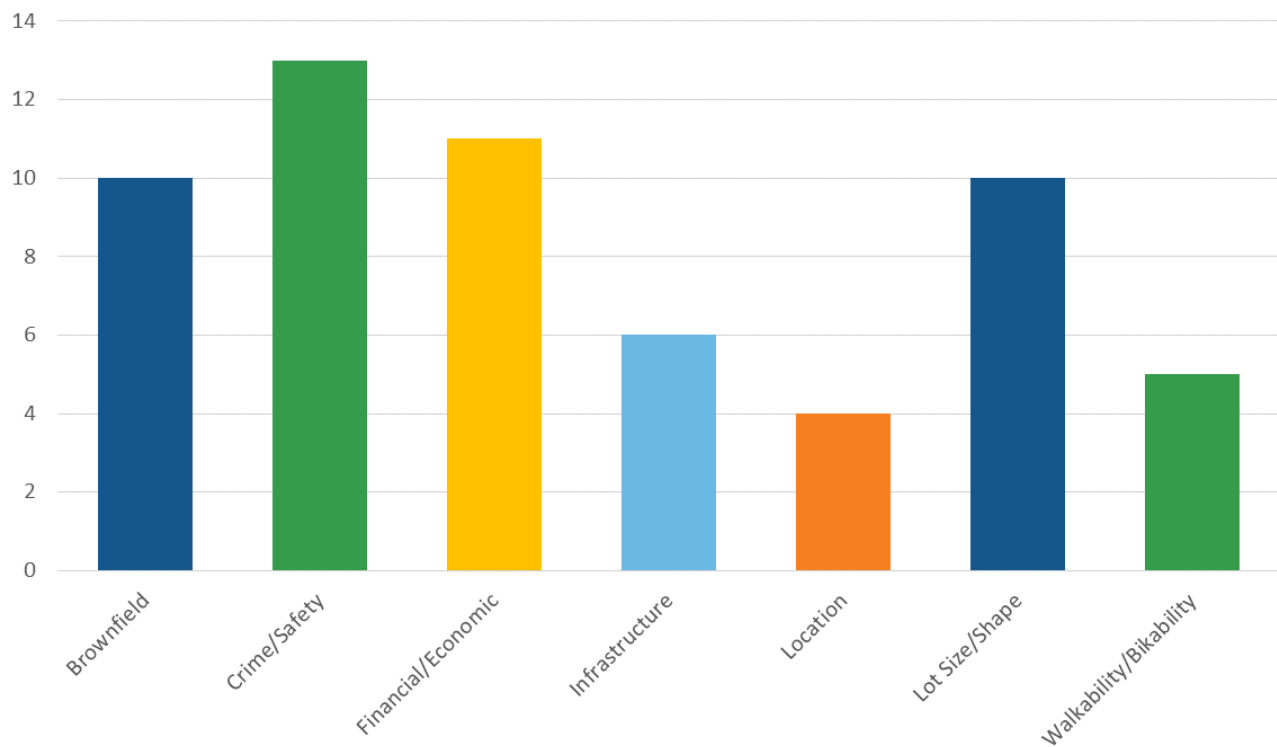


Figure 2: Weaknesses (In-Person Input)

### Opportunities

- Many participants identified potential reuse options in the “Opportunities” section, which are discussed in additional detail below. Overall, participants expressed a desire to see the site redeveloped as a “destination” where community members could gather.
- Participants also expressed a desire for open space/recreational spaces, along with food options and local businesses.
- Participants expressed a desire for well-considered and inclusive design elements, including ADA accessibility, sustainable finishes, and walkable design.

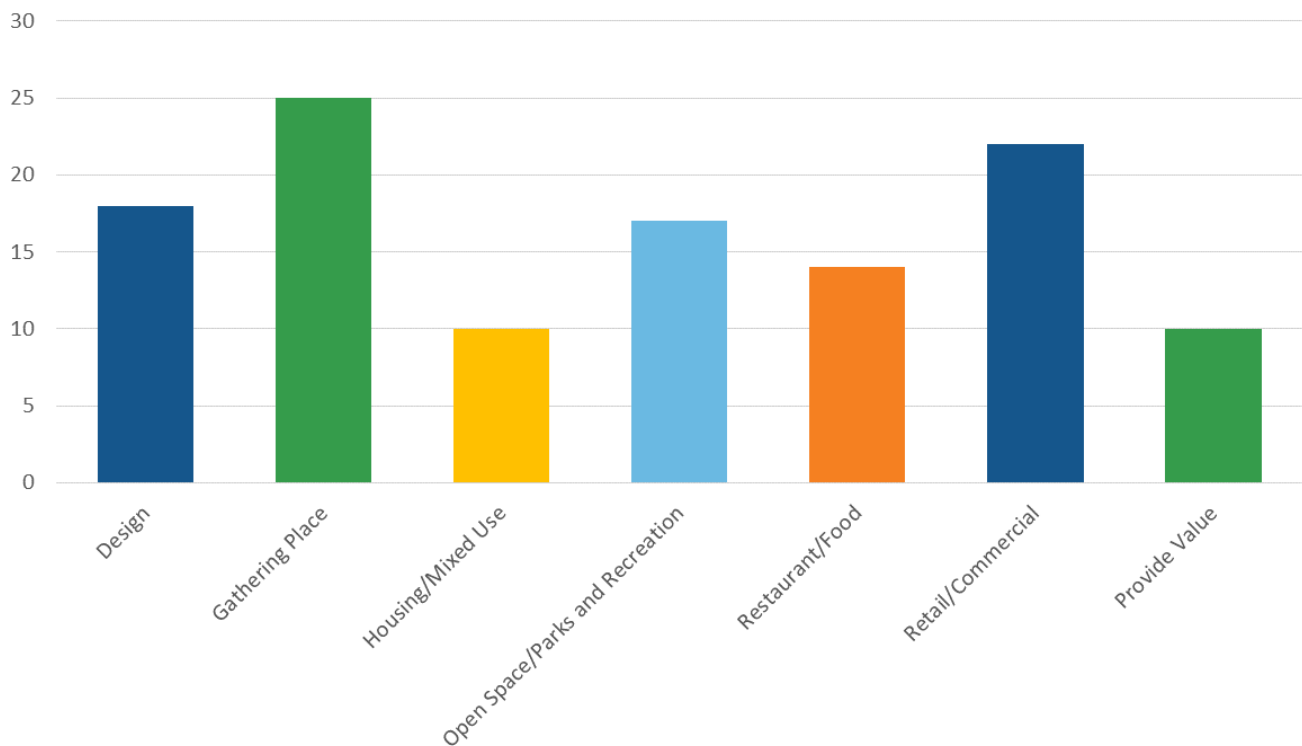


Figure 3: Opportunities (In-Person Input)

### Threats

- As with the Weaknesses section, participants most consistently identified crime and safety as a threat to the successful redevelopment of the site.
- Participants also expressed concern that economic conditions would inhibit development, including the high cost of construction and the threat of higher taxes for the neighborhood.
- Participants expressed distrust in the redevelopment process and voiced concerns that the community's vision would be ignored.

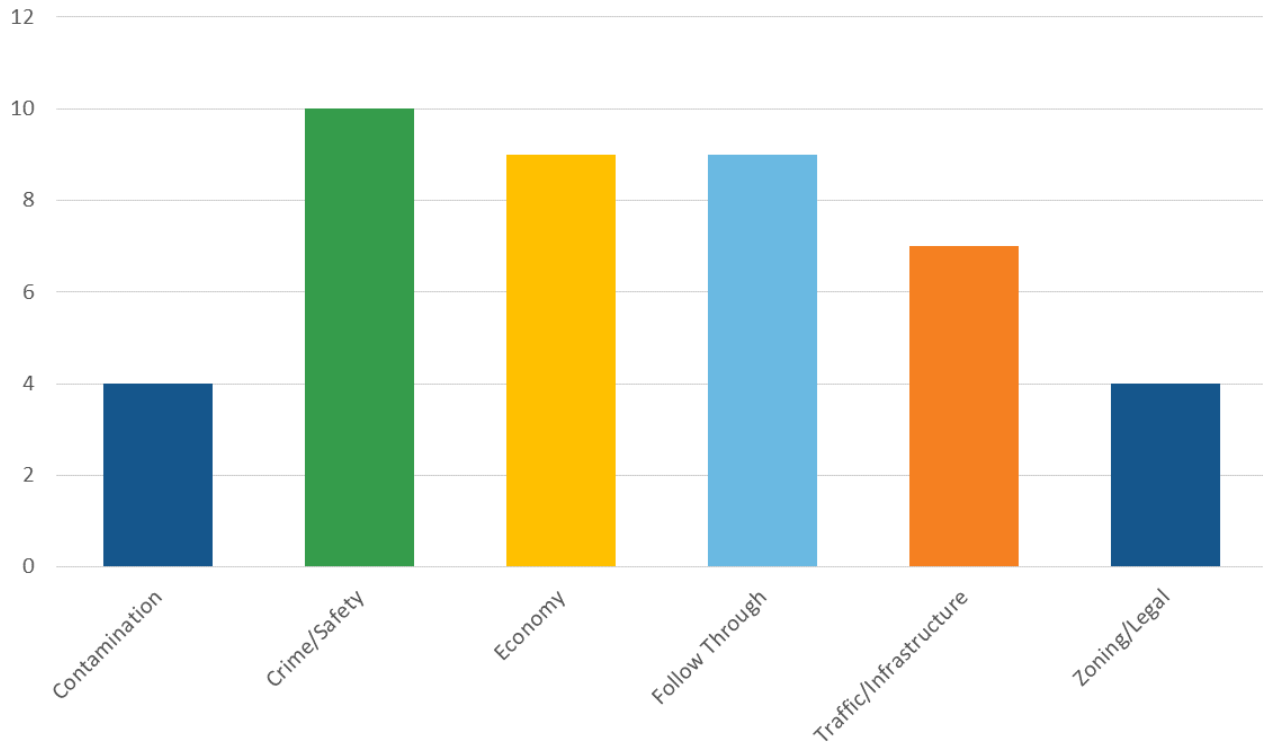
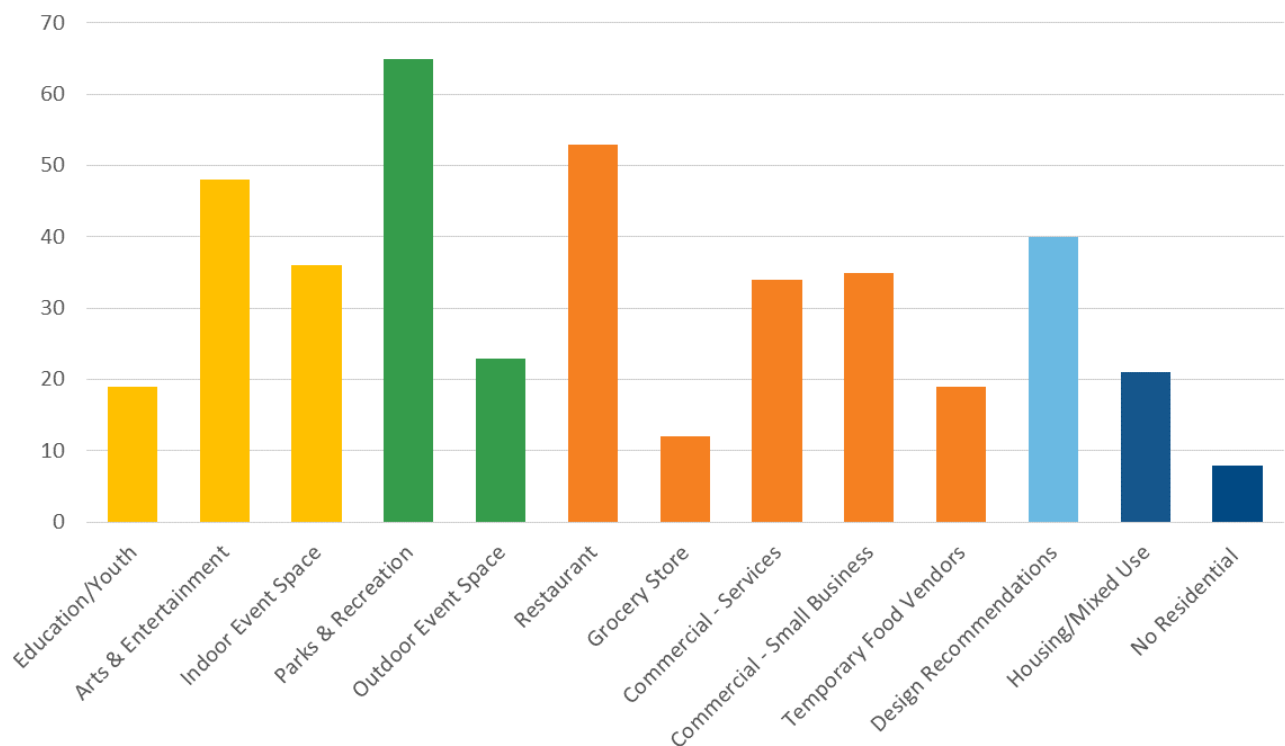


Figure 4: Threats (In-Person Input)

## Reuse Visioning Results

- Participants made numerous references to Stanley Marketplace in Aurora and McGregor Square in Denver as inspiration for the type of development they would like to see. Old Town Arvada, Belmar, and Lowry Beer Garden were also mentioned.
- Participants placed a strong emphasis on uses that would provide indoor or outdoor community gathering spaces, like events centers, arts centers, community centers, amphitheaters, and courtyards.
- Participants also frequently mentioned food, including specialty grocery stores like Trader Joe's, co-ops, farmer's markets, and restaurants, particularly sit-down and/or family restaurants.
- Many participants emphasized the multi-cultural identity of the neighborhood and expressed support for reuse ideas that would celebrate the diverse population, including a multicultural center and multicultural food options.
- Participants frequently identified green space, including parks, playgrounds, nice landscaping, community gardens, botanical gardens, and low-water/native/pollinator-friendly landscaping as a desired element of the TSC redevelopment.
- Participants frequently identified retail and commercial uses as a preferred redevelopment alternative, with a strong emphasis on small, local businesses, particularly those that provide shopping opportunities and/or services.
- Participants frequently mentioned the fact that the post office had stopped operating on the TSC site and expressed strong support for the return of the post office.

- Participants placed a strong emphasis on safety and inclusivity from a design perspective and also frequently suggested limiting or disguising parking and emphasizing walkability.
- The incorporation of housing into the redevelopment plan was controversial – while several residents explicitly stated that they did not support residential uses on the site, many residents indicated support for vertically integrated mixed use. A particular emphasis was placed on providing senior housing to allow existing residents to age in place.
- Participants expressed support for reuse options that would provide activities for children and families, including offering educational programming for youth and adult residents.
- Several participants stated that they did not want gas stations or fast-food restaurants included in redevelopment plans.



*Figure 5: All Reuse Ideas (In-Person Input)*

Note: Reuse options shown in Figure 5 have been grouped into categories based on the type of use – while participants specifically expressed support for uses like grocery stores and locally owned shops and restaurants, all of these uses fall into a “commercial/retail” category, and have been color-coded and grouped together. Likewise, the “Education/Youth”, “Arts & Entertainment”, and “Indoor Event Space” have all been grouped together as cultural institutions. Overall, commercial/retail uses were identified the most frequently, followed by cultural institutions and recreation opportunities.



## Reuse Option Ranking

Use	Votes For	Votes Against
Community/arts/multicultural center	15	1
Entertainment venue/event center, carnival, circus	12	3
Education center for all ages, potentially Boys and Girls club/jobs for youth	4	2
Multi-use outdoor community open space (amphitheater, historical/cultural/arts/gardens/playground)	25	0
Community Garden	8	0
Pollinator space and dog space	4	0
Splash pad and zip line	1	0
Community gathering for food (co-op, farmer's market), arts, music events, brewery, distillery (like Stanley Marketplace)	41	2
Small shops and restaurants, possibly with incubator space	18	0
Post Office	18	1
Restaurant (multi-cultural, sit-down, or food hall), pub, brewery, or other entertainment	12	0
Food truck parking lot - movie theater - commercial kitchen	3	6
Small scale market or Trader Joe's	0	0
Shopping center	0	3
Sustainable facilities	5	0
Accessibility for all (ADA, sensory)	1	0
Transit hub - covered to limit vehicle traffic	1	5
No residential	5	4
Mixed use - commercial and residential combination	2	37

Table 1: Ranked Reuse Ideas

Table 1 shows the results of the reuse visioning exercise after participants voted for their preferred redevelopment scenarios. Note that several of the final reuse options were suggested by multiple teams, including a post office and community garden. When applicable, similar reuse ideas were combined to present a more accurate assessment of support.

Of the proposed reuse options, the community gathering and commercial/restaurant hub idea (similar to Stanley Marketplace, McGregor Square, or Lowry Beer Garden) received the broadest support, with 41 votes “for” and only two votes “against”. Participants were also very supportive of a multi-use outdoor community open space, which received 25 votes “for” and no votes “against”. Other highly supported uses include small shops and restaurants, a post office, and a community/arts center.

The most controversial option is housing or residential/commercial mixed-use. One group identified mixed-use as one of their top five reuse ideas, which received only 2 votes “for” and 37 votes “against”. Another group identified “No Residential” as one of their top five reuse ideas, which received 5 votes “for” and 4 votes “against”.\*

## Online Engagement

Following the community meeting, the KSU TAB team developed an online survey to allow community members who were not able to attend the in-person meeting to provide feedback. The online survey was posted on several City of Thornton websites and social media pages, and was published in both English and Spanish. The English version of the survey received 71 total responses; the Spanish language survey received 2 responses, which were translated and incorporated into the results below. Overall, online survey input was consistent with input received during the in-person community meeting – respondents generally viewed the site in the same way and identified very similar reuse options, often mentioning the same “inspiration” developments that they would like the future Thornton Shopping Center site to resemble. A full list of input received is included as Attachment B to this report.

## SWOT Results

### Strengths

Similar to the in-person meeting, online survey respondents identified the site’s location as its biggest asset. Respondents also showed appreciation for the site’s history as Thornton’s first shopping district and felt positively about the opportunity that a large, vacant site presented.

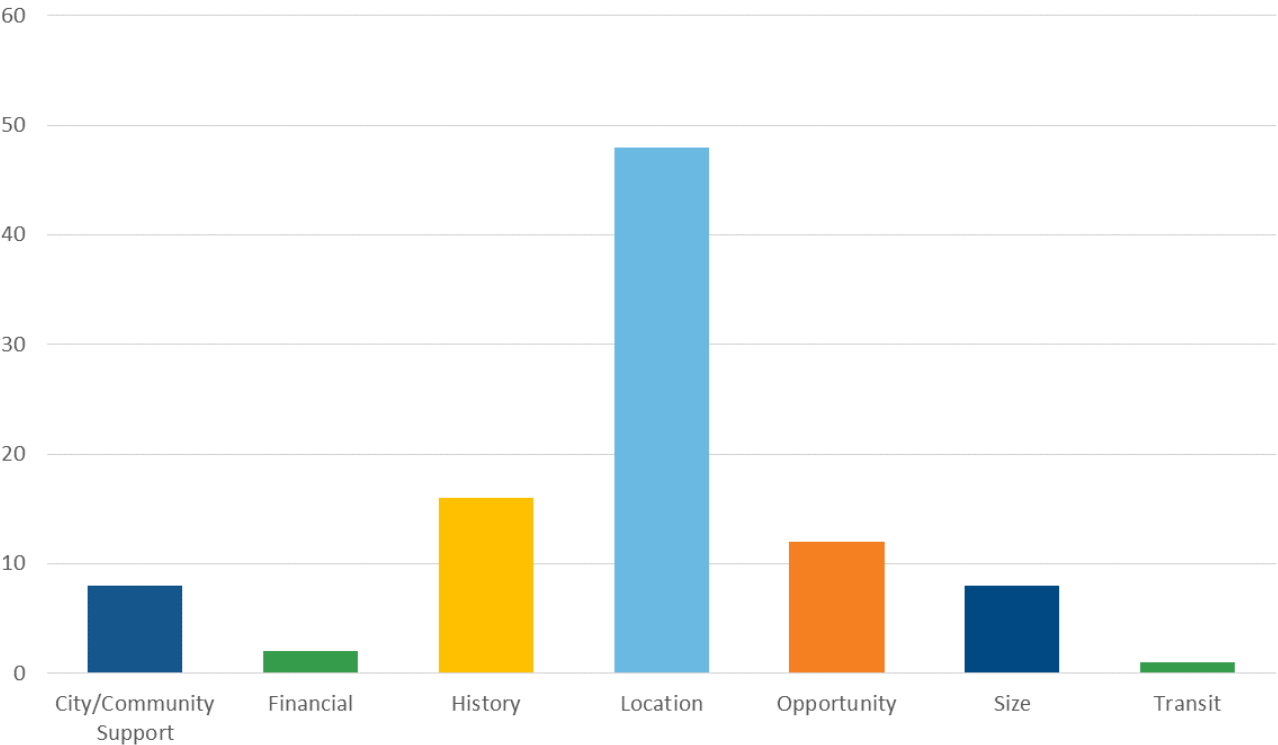


Figure 6: Strengths (Online Input)

\*Note that voting results were not monitored, so results may not be 100% accurate.

## Weaknesses

Online survey respondents most commonly identified the site's brownfield issues as its biggest weakness, followed by concern about the financial feasibility of redevelopment. Respondents expressed concern about the cost of remediation, demolition, and construction, the ability of the surrounding neighborhoods to support the future development, and concerns about gentrification. As with the in-person feedback, respondents also frequently identified crime and safety as a barrier to redevelopment, although to a slightly lesser extent.

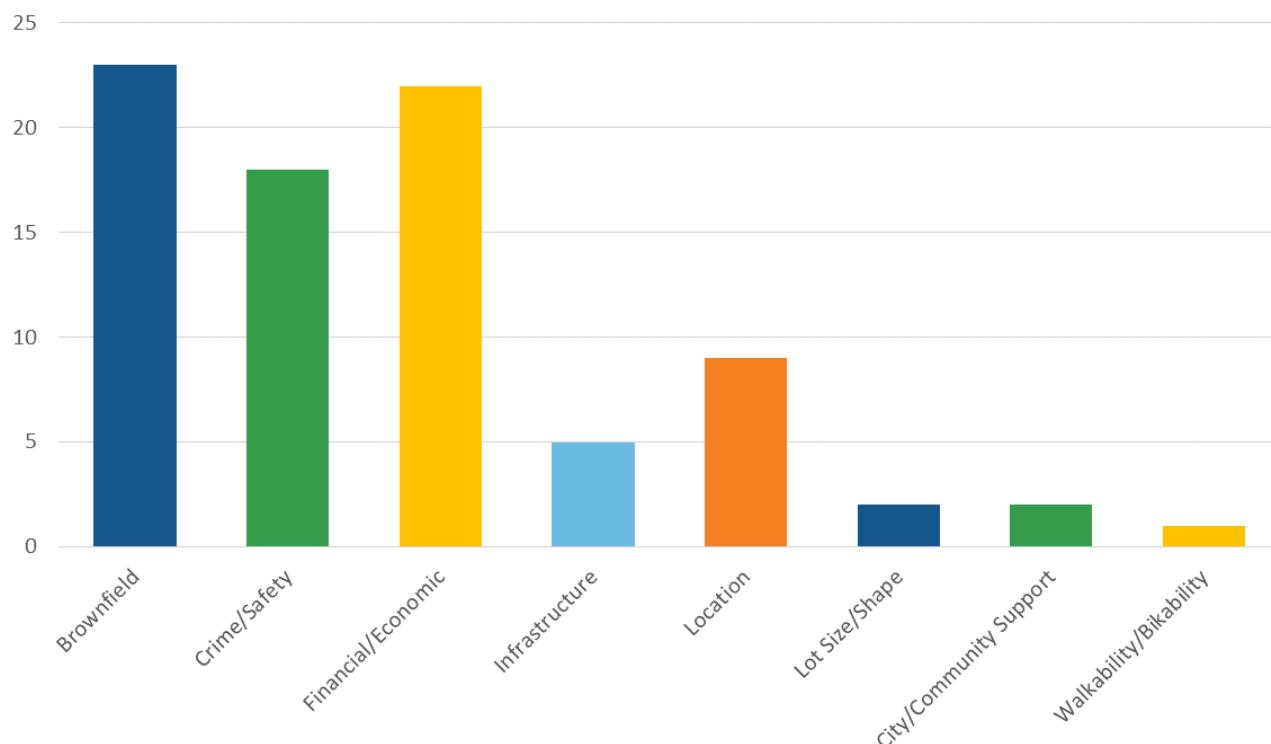


Figure 7: Weaknesses (Online Input)

## Opportunities

Similar to in-person participants, online respondents also frequently used this question to list their desired reuse alternatives. Overall, they expressed the most support for an end use that would provide a community gathering space, usually centered around food, outdoor recreation, or arts and cultural experiences. Compared to in-person participants, online respondents emphasized the opportunity for the redevelopment of the Thornton Shopping Center to provide value to the residents of historic Thornton, particularly by removing a long-standing eyesore, addressing contamination, and reinvesting municipal funds into an underserved neighborhood.

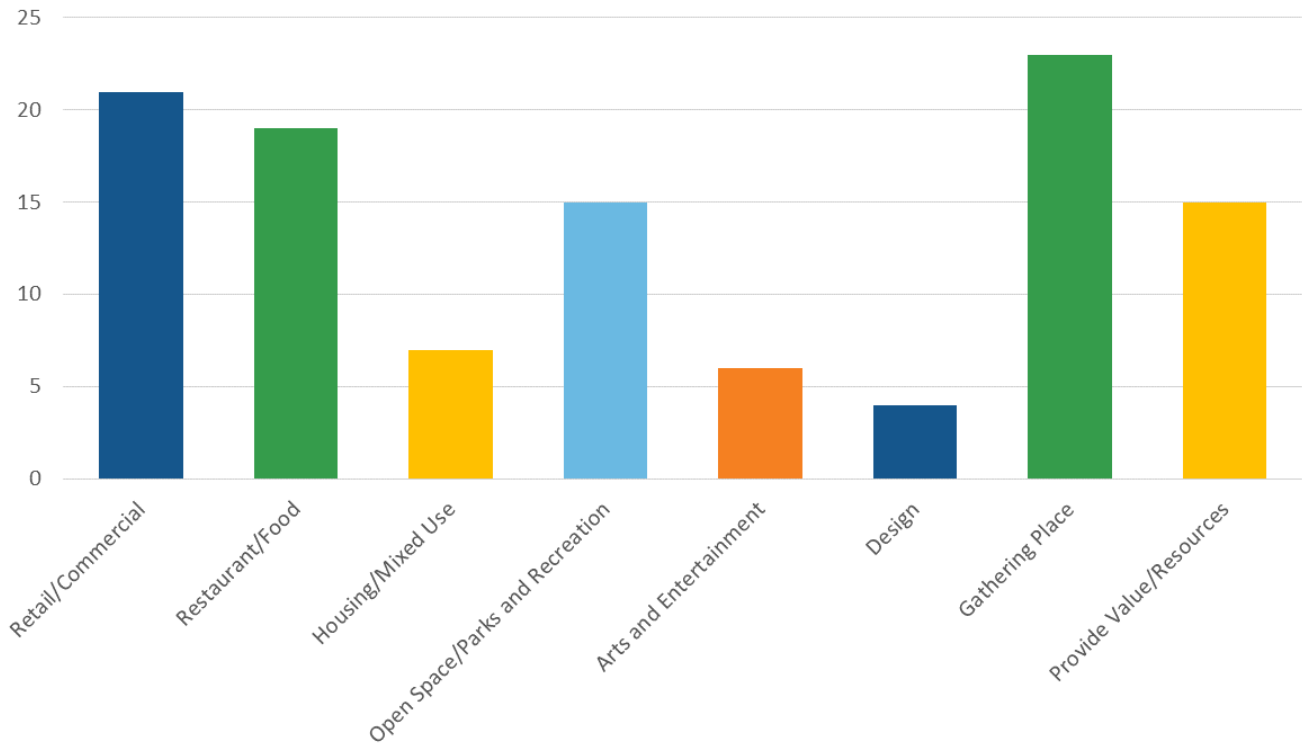


Figure 8: Opportunities (Online Input)

### Threats

Online respondents overwhelmingly identified financial factors as the most significant threat to redevelopment, including the rising cost of materials and labor and the overarching economic trends in this neighborhood. Respondents also expressed concern about the City's ability to move forward with redevelopment, particularly as envisioned by the community.

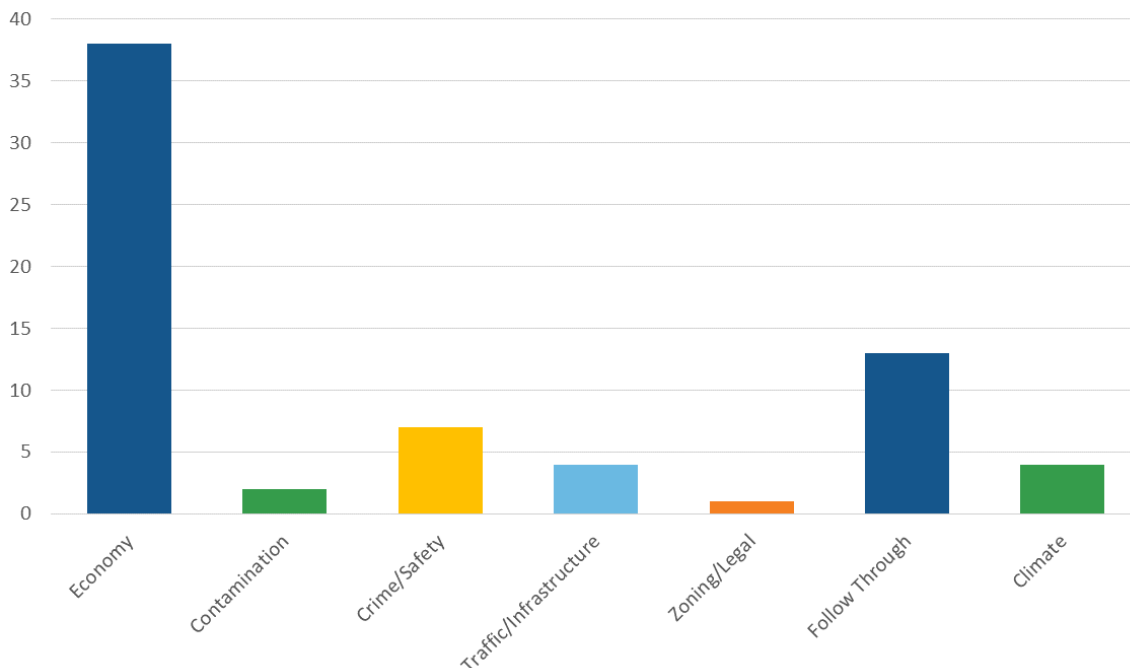


Figure 9: Threats (Online Input)

## Reuse Ideas

Feedback from online survey respondents was very similar to the opinions expressed in the in-person meeting – respondents were overwhelmingly in favor of a pedestrian-oriented development featuring small-format and/or locally owned retail businesses, services such as the post office, sit-down restaurants, and outdoor gathering space. Housing was a less controversial topic among online survey respondents: only three respondents mentioned being opposed to residential uses on the site, while 11 respondents expressed support for housing, generally as part of mixed-use development, with condos or apartments above ground-floor retail. Respondents emphasized a need for more diverse restaurant options, and frequently mentioned breweries and locally-owned coffee shops as desired alternatives.

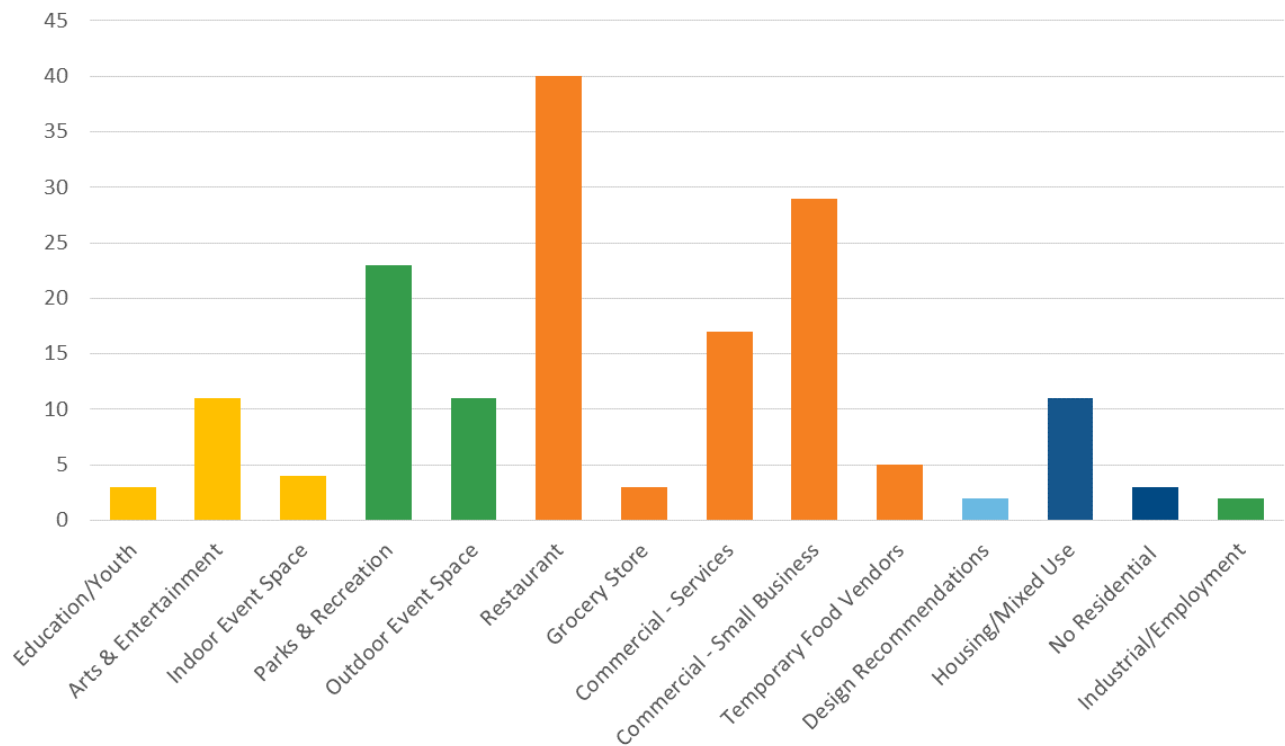


Figure 10: All Reuse Ideas (Online Input)

### Other Feedback

At the end of the online survey, respondents were given the opportunity to share any other relevant information. Overall, respondents expressed a desire for a development that was a destination for both neighborhood residents and visitors from elsewhere in the Denver metro area. They emphasized a need for a safe and enjoyable design that prioritized the pedestrian experience. Respondents were generally hopeful about the future potential of the site, and viewed the TSC redevelopment as an opportunity for real change in the neighborhood. However, respondents also expressed reservation about the ability of the City to follow through on the vision expressed by the community.

## Other Input

Several residents reached out directly to the City of Thornton to provide input on the redevelopment of the Thornton Shopping Center. As with the in-person and online avenues, input generally reflected the same vision for redevelopment. Residents expressed support for a “lifestyle”-type center with pedestrian amenities, shops, restaurants, a playground, and outdoor gathering space. They also expressed distaste for big-box stores, gas stations, liquor stores, and fast-food restaurants. Specialty grocery stores, such as Aldi’s or Trader Joe’s, were mentioned, along with a need for recreation options, particularly for young people, including arcades and recreation centers.



*Figure 11: Inspirational Image Provided by Resident*

## Conclusion

The Thornton Shopping Center presents an opportunity to turn a long-standing eyesore into a valuable community asset. While residents were split on the topic of housing, there was broad consensus on creating a pedestrian-oriented community gathering space with diverse restaurant, retail, and recreational opportunities. Residents wanted to see the multi-cultural character of the neighborhood reflected in the design of the redevelopment, as well as nod to the original TSC’s mid-century design. Based on an analysis of the input received through numerous avenues, the following reuse alternatives are recommended for additional economic analysis:

- Grocery Store (specifically Trader Joe’s or Aldi’s)
- Small-format commercial/retail
- Restaurants (sit-down or family-style, not fast-food)
- Brewery
- Movie theater or traditional theater
- Other entertainment (axe-throwing, bowling alley, arcade, etc.)
- Housing (lower-density [2-5 story] multi-family, for rent or for-sale, preferably with ground-floor commercial); recommended to comprise no more than 50% of total development
- Event hall

Additionally, the following municipally operated uses are recommended for inclusion in the redevelopment plans:

- Outdoor gathering space with amenities such as fountains, seating, attractive lighting, and native landscaping, with space for events such as farmer's markets and concerts.
- Recreation center, library, or community center

*This project has been funded wholly or in part by the United States Environmental Protection Agency under assistance agreement (TR-84027001) to Kansas State University. The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the Environmental Protection Agency, nor does the EPA endorse trade names or recommend the use of commercial products mentioned in this document.*