COMMUNITY OVERVIEW

Thornton is a suburban community within the northern Denver metropolitan area and is adjacent to Westminster, Federal Heights, Broomfield, Northglenn, and unincorporated Adams County. The first construction that is now Thornton began in 1952 as a result of the need for post-war lower cost housing.

The South Platte River runs adjacent to the Thornton Planned Growth Area, from approximately 84th Avenue to E-470. It helps to define the community’s eastern boundary and irrigates significant land now dedicated to agriculture. In addition to the South Platte River, other creeks and their drainages including Big Dry Creek, Todd Creek, Brantner Gulch, Niver Creek, and Grange Hall Creek significantly contribute to Thornton’s character.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The area we know today as Thornton was part of the vast territory inhabited by nomadic Native Americans. Henderson was the first community in the area, located at the junction of Old Brighton Road and East 124th Avenue and founded by Colonel Jack Henderson. While gold may have been the initial impetus for growth around Denver, it was farming that led to settlement in the Thornton area. As a semiarid region, irrigation played a fundamental and integral role in settling the area. The first ditch in the Thornton area was the Brantner Ditch, developed in the 1860s by Samuel and Jonas Brantner. Other early ditches include the Signal Ditch, the Lee Lateral, Lower Clear Creek, Colorado Agricultural Ditch and the Farmers’ High Line Canal. Many of these ditches are recognizable today as existing trail corridors.

In addition to the ditches, many reservoirs were constructed by early settlers in the area. Seeds from the indigenous plants established themselves along the ditches, ponds, and reservoirs, and over time, magnificent stands of cottonwood trees and abundant willows took root. Today, many of these beautiful old trees and shrub masses remain and clearly mark these linear watercourses as they cross the landscape.

Another element of the early fabric of the area was farm roads. These roads connected farms in Thornton to adjacent communities such as Eastlake and Brighton and also served travelers to Denver, Windsor, and Greeley. Collectively, these elements—the open fields, farms and farm roads, irrigation ditches, ponds, and reservoirs—made up the fabric of Thornton and Adams County. This same fabric is still visible in places in Thornton’s planned growth area. Better than any other indicator, they tell us about the past and include a fortuitous opportunity for future preservation.

Thornton’s rolling topography and occasional high ground offers a rich mix of environmental resources. Deer, fox, prairie dogs, hawks, and eagles are all common visitors to Thornton and its planned growth area. As noted in the city’s Comprehensive Plan, it is the “ridgelines, waterways, and undeveloped land that give Thornton its unique and western atmosphere.” The rural feeling so often mentioned by the residents of Thornton as a reason for locating to the area will not remain unless the community takes actions that will preserve the most important lands for public use.