

Golden Conversations - A Context and Outline for Several On-going Conversations in our Community

I. Introduction: The period beginning in 2007 and 2008 in Golden, Colorado can be characterized by a significant effort on the part of the community to recognize and find ways to benefit from significant change in society. As a result, several different groups are actively talking about the future of the community, and several complementary initiatives have been started or are underway. The Golden Conversations Program has been developed to help increase communication among these groups and efforts, and potentially to improve coordination and effectiveness, as well. For more information about this paper or the Golden Conversations idea, contact the City of Golden Planning Department at 303-384-8097 or planningcommission@cityofgolden.net.

II. Background: The Golden community is a vital and informed assemblage of interests, opinions, individuals and organizations. To a larger degree, however, the entire community is affected by a consistent set of forces and trends. Some of these factors affecting the community at the start of 2009, include the following:

A. Comprehensive Plan. Although Golden's Comprehensive Plan is due for a periodic review and update due to its age and changed conditions, the general vision of the community in the current plan, adopted in 2003, remains valid in many ways. The community vision in the comprehensive plan recommends a community characterized by a few distinct factors:

- An involved and engaged citizenry, active in discussing and shaping community decisions and future directions.
- A pattern of land use development that respects the geography of the Golden valley, preserves our peripheral and internal open space systems, and maintains a relatively compact urban form.
- A recognition that neighborhoods are the most important building blocks of the community, and that the enhancement of stable vital neighborhoods and the careful management or neighborhood redevelopment and change is crucial to community character.
- Care and support for the downtown core of the community and its role as the image and to a great extent the iconic identity of the community's history and social center.
- A strong economic base tied to the scientific and technological efforts of the local university, and major public and private employers, as well as a strong visitor draw that has existed since the early days of the community.
- A strong influence by and on regional transportation patterns and routes that have defined the region for generations.

This comprehensive plan, as it evolves and changes over time, should always play a relevant part in the direction and choices of the community. However, there are many other factors currently affecting Golden that have and are leading to community conversations.

B. Community Participation and Engagement. In the past few decades, there has been a growing disconnect between residents and the very community organizations that most need local input and participation. Family and work demands leave little time for community participation until there is a major threat that forces an organized response, typically long after policy decisions have been made that make significant changes difficult or impossible. In response to this concern, the Golden City Council, beginning with the grass-roots Sustainability Initiative in 2007, has made a strong commitment to exploring new ways to engage the community and to tie local public policy more directly to a broader segment of the community than achievable in recent years. City Council has experimented with different input structures, using short term ad-hoc task forces, as well as traditional citizen boards to broaden this participation. The next step is an attempt to explore innovative methods to increase communication directly with the community and to effectively document the values and vision of the community as the base of future policy decisions.

C. Sustainability. No matter what one believes about the larger issues of climate change and resource depletion, there is a significant consensus, in Golden and most everywhere else, that a business as usual approach to community life is not a viable option. The community is demanding opportunities and support for more efficient land use patterns, efficient use of resources, reduced waste stream, and effective business practices that will allow Golden to remain a vital and desirable community into the future. This community demand is beginning to evidence itself in many separate arenas and proposals. Because it is such a broad topic, it will take time for existing community organizations and agencies to determine how to coordinate efforts and projects.

D. Transportation Opportunities. Throughout much of the past few generations, the Golden community has not enjoyed any effective alternatives to auto dominated transportation systems. While systems for pedestrian and bicycle networks have improved, the biggest transportation factors for future community changes will likely be the two proposed light rail corridors that will serve the greater Golden area within the next 5 to 10 years, and the potential for a regional high speed rail line into the mountains that could impact Golden as the interface between the metro area and the I-70 corridor.

E. World Economics. As significant as any of the above factors, economic forces at a national and worldwide scale hold significant influence on local community decisions. Everything from the price and availability of gas and its effects on land use patterns, to the statewide push to capitalize on changes in the energy industry and the potential economic impacts of partnerships among the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) and a consortium of Colorado and national universities will impact both opportunities and limitations on community decisions.

III. Prior Individual City Responses to Community Needs and Desires: Over the past few years, the City of Golden has begun to study and implement a few separate but related initiatives to begin to address the above factors and forces. It is recommended that these efforts be coordinated as part of the long term comprehensive set of Golden Conversations described in the next section.

A. Regulations for Infill Development Activities. For the past several years, the primary style of land development activity in the community has been characterized by what is called “infill” development. Infill development includes construction on vacant or lesser utilized parcels within the community as well as the redevelopment of existing buildings through alteration, expansion, or removal and replacement (scrape-offs). Infill development often also includes development at the edges of a community that impact adjacent developed areas. Infill development is recommended as an appropriate way to accommodate change and investment in the community, and to encourage development that supports goals of walkability, smart sustainable growth, anti-sprawl efforts, supporting transit alternatives and enhancing the downtown area. At the same time, infill development and redevelopment has the potential to significantly alter neighborhood or community character, and is often substantially different in scale than adjacent and nearby uses. These differences in character and scale almost always become a point of contention with existing residents who may support the concepts of efficient land use patterns, but not in their specific neighborhood when it means a larger or different looking structure. In response to this dichotomy between the benefits of infill development and redevelopment and the opposition to substantial changes in character and scale in existing neighborhoods, the Golden Planning Commission has been investigating the option of recommending certain changes in regulations to limit the size and bulk of residential infill construction. To date, there has been a relatively small amount of community discussion about this type of approach, however, the arguments voiced to date center on the fact that community policies in general would support slight increases in neighborhood density to help with sustainability, resource efficiency, and smart growth type concepts, while at the same time, neighborhood vitality goals warn against wholesale changes that threaten the stability and character that make our neighborhoods the cornerstone of the community. Planning Commission continues to discuss this approach, but will likely tie the discussion to the overall Golden Conversations.

B. Neighborhood Planning/ Downtown Character Plan. The process to develop specific neighborhood plans began in 2006, in part as a reaction to neighborhood concerns about land use changes, and a lack of fine grained and targeted policies to address land use decisions, design, and public investment in Golden’s neighborhoods. Within each of the areas included in the effort to date, there is significant consistency with the ideas of the various task forces described below, but also with the land use, character, and scale issues involved with infill discussions. The neighborhood planning effort and approach will be an important aspect and forum for Golden Conversations. The Downtown Character Plan was in some ways broader than a neighborhood plan, and made specific recommendations for strategic decisions by the City.

C. Sustainability Goals and the Citizens Sustainability Advisory Board (CSAB). As a follow-up to the grass roots Sustainability Initiative and City Council's 10 year sustainability goals detailed in Council Resolution 1793, City Council appointed the Citizen Sustainability Advisory Board (CSAB) in 2008. This appointed board has the task of both advising City Council on sustainability policy issues, but also working with other appointed boards, City departments, and community groups that may have legal responsibility or specific expertise for policy development, Council recommendations, and implementation of projects and programs that affect or are affected by sustainability goals. The methods and roles by which these various groups coordinate will likely be worked out in coming months.

D. Walkability, Housing Affordability, and Bike Master Plan Update Task Forces. In 2008, City Council effectively enlisted the assistance of three groups of citizens and experts to make policy and capital investment recommendations for three community priorities that Council had previously identified, but had not received sufficient community policy focus in prior years. Each of the three groups met a substantial number of times and presented a final report to City Council in fall 2008. These three reports included short term recommendations for potential capital investment, longer term lists of potential community investments, and policy issues for City Council to consider. Following the fall 2008 presentations, the capital investment recommendations were included in Council's discussion of the 2009 -2010 budget and ten year Capital Improvement Program, and the policy issues have all been scheduled for City Council consideration by the middle of 2009. As noted above, there is a good amount of duplication between the task force recommendations and the neighborhood plan recommendations. This consistency is a positive reinforcement of the two separate efforts, but will require that implementation efforts and reporting be closely coordinated.

E. Parks and Recreation Master Plan. The Parks and Recreation Master Plan, prepared in 2007 and 2008, was also very closely coordinated with neighborhood planning and the concepts of walkability and bike friendly facilities. The biggest policy recommendation of this plan is a joint recommendation with the Downtown Character Plan for a strategic master plan for the Clear Creek corridor in Golden. Implementation of the Parks and recreation Master Plan will be an on-going effort for many years.

E. Local Transit "Circulator" Feasibility Study. In 2007, while the citizen input part of the Sustainability Initiative was underway, the City took advantage of a possible grant funding opportunity and applied for funds to conduct a feasibility study regarding a local transit system to serve the community, the Colorado School of Mines, and to provide convenient connections to proposed light rail lines. This study, which started at the end of 2008, is totally consistent with the comprehensive plan direction, sustainability goals, and the neighborhood planning and task force efforts. However, due to timing of the funding opportunity and details of the grant contract, it has its own schedule.

IV. 2009 – 2010 Co-Ordinated Golden Conversations: Given all of the positive and generally consistent efforts described above (and underway elsewhere in the community), City staff recommends that the outline of continued efforts and community conversations in Golden be generally structured as follows:

A. Golden Vision 2030 Project. City Council announced in mid-2008 that the most comprehensive community planning and participation effort in 2009 and 2010 will be the Golden Vision 2030 Project. This project will be an innovative and comprehensive effort to engage the community in more depth, and more effectively than any prior effort. The project is being undertaken as a partnership with the Orton Family Foundation, which is providing substantial funding to help Golden discover ways to capture and articulate the core “heart and soul” values of the community, and to use these heart and soul community values to guide future policy and strategic efforts of the community. The project will be ramping up in early 2009, and will incorporate efforts to depict and discuss many future community alternatives related to the issues detailed in Section II above, and the on-going efforts in Section III above. It is anticipated that the Golden Vision 2030 Project will result in at least the following future products:

1. An update to the City Comprehensive Plan
2. The expansion and completion of the neighborhood planning program.
3. Potential updates or revisions of the Parks and Recreation Master Plan and the Downtown Character Plan.
4. An updated strategic plan for City actions and investments in the short term period to work toward the 2030 Vision.
5. Municipal Code updates necessary to align City codes with the 2030 Vision.

The Golden Vision 2030 Project may consolidate certain current or on-going efforts in order to more effectively seek definition of the heart and soul community values, and also to better discuss the alternative vision and policies the community may choose. Some of the efforts that will be closely linked or incorporated into to the project include:

- Neighborhood Planning Definition of neighborhood boundaries and the discussion of heart and soul values at both the neighborhood and community level will be used to initiate the Vision 2030 effort.
- Infill and Sustainable Land Use Patterns. Concepts related to potentially significant changes in regulation either increasing potential intensity of land uses, or limiting the use of land will be incorporated into the alternatives visualization and values exploration part of the project. Some of the previously discussed items that will likely be evaluated in this context include infill bulk limits (floor area ratio and coverage limits for residential), accessory dwelling units, potential changes for smaller R-3 zoned lots, introducing mixed uses into residential neighborhoods, and land uses changes in the vicinity of transit corridors.
- Transportation and Land Use. A more comprehensive consideration of the impacts of light rail or the potential I-70 high speed rail line on future land use changes could be significant and should be based upon heart and soul values.

While these larger issues will be included in the Vision 2030 project and process, many other efforts and community conversations will continue in a separate but coordinated context. Some of these other efforts will include:

B. Sustainability Strategic Plan and Implementation Efforts. The community goals contained in City Council Resolution 1793 require aggressive action on the part of the City organization and the community. These efforts will continue based upon Council's direction to CSAB, and CSAB's strategic plan, including close coordination with city staff, Planning Commission, the City Economic Development Commission, and other community groups. The only items delayed by being incorporated into the Vision 2030 Project effort would be significant policy issues, especially related to land use or regulating actions or behaviors of residents and property owners.

C. Task Force, Neighborhood Plan, and Parks Master Plan Implementation. The City will continue to implement and report to the community regarding the recommendations of the various plans and task force reports of recent years. Unless there are conflicting goals or recommendations, these implementation efforts will be determined by funding availability and source and staff resource allocation demands.

D. Transportation Planning. While crucial to the future of the community, the various regional transportation projects and planning efforts, as well as the local circulator feasibility study each have their own schedule and forum. While coordinating with other efforts and the Golden Vision 2030 Project, the City will continue to work to forward the City's interests in discussions related to the "beltway" and any other major highway projects, RTD's Fastracks Program, and the I-70 high speed rail feasibility study (and next steps). In addition, the local transit feasibility study should be complete by fall 2009.

E. Inclusiveness. City Council has also adopted a policy of inclusiveness, and will potentially begin broader community discussions related to assuring that diverse members of the community have a part in civic and community activities.

V. Summary: The above descriptions and summaries are intended to help communicate the close coordination among a substantial number of community projects and efforts. City Council and staff encourages all Golden residents, property owners, and interested individuals to become knowledgeable about and involved in as many of the above projects and programs as possible.