

West Side: Still room for families?

Density is not just a square-foot and traffic matter

By CHRIS LEPPEK

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Is growth causing problems in Denver?

That's a bit like asking whether Godzilla disturbed the peace in Tokyo.

The answer is yes, most definitely.

Virtually every neighborhood in Denver itself and in many of its surrounding suburbs is dealing with the social and economic effects of the area's burgeoning growth and

cultural heritage remains an integral chapter in the history and current reality of Denver Jewry.

As many of these Jews and their descendants gradually moved to other sections of the city, other ethnic groups, particularly Hispanics, took their place. But a determined core of Jews has remained on the West Side to this day and remains a vital population in the area.

This community is solidly Ortho-

You have a community very concerned about its future in its traditional and much-loved home

demand for space — a potent brew that includes escalating property costs, population density, traffic congestion and the preservation of historic buildings.

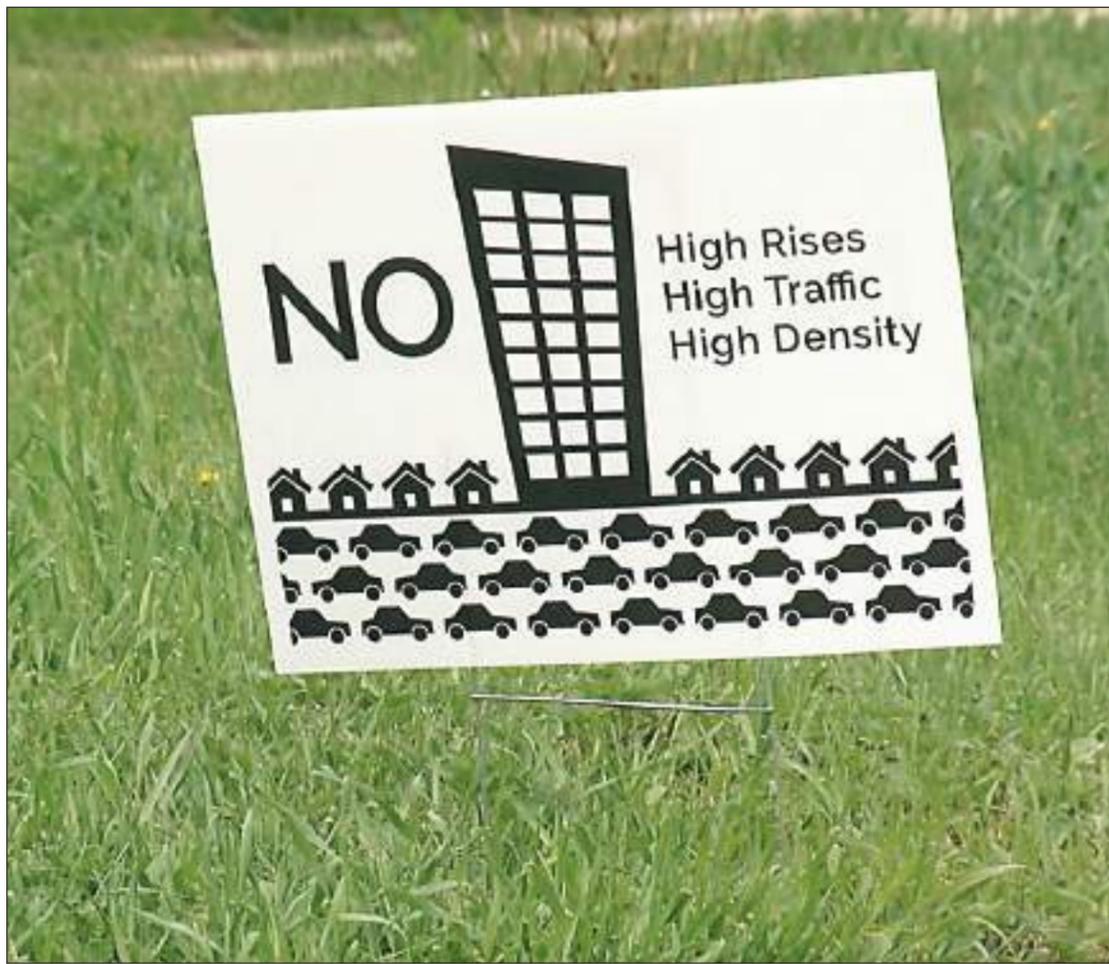
One of the city's most identifiable Jewish neighborhoods, the West Side, is far from immune to these dynamics. In fact, since it has recently become a fashionable destination for many, the once-but-no-longer humble area might be seen as a microcosm of the many impacts — good as well as bad — that are affecting the entire metroplex.

Jews began settling on the West Side — or West Colfax, as the neighborhood is officially named on the city's index — in the late 19th century. Most of the original residents were immigrants from Eastern Europe, many of them religiously observant, and their distinctive

dox, even *haredi*, or “ultra-Orthodox,” in vernacular parlance, distinct from their neighbors in their religious tradition, attire and lifestyle. A network of institutions — Yeshiva Toras Chaim, Beth Jacob High School, Denver Community Kollel, a *mikveh* and Congregation Zera Abraham, the West Side's last remaining synagogue — serves as the community's infrastructure.

While these people are facing many of the same growth-related issues that residents in Five Points, Washington Park or Crestmoor are dealing with, their situation remains unique. Defying national trends, West Side Jews are highly family-oriented — usually with large families — which limits their options in terms of housing.

They are also very synagogue-oriented, and in an Orthodox way, which



A yard sign on the West Side states quite clearly what many long-term residents of the neighborhood do not desire as new development continues unabated.

means that on the Sabbath — the religious apex of their week — they do not drive or take public transportation. Getting to the synagogue means that it must be located

within walking distance of their homes.

Add these pressures to those faced by residents in dozens of other neighborhoods in Denver and you have a community very concerned about its future in its traditional and much-loved home.

As spiritual leader of Zera Abraham, Rabbi Tzvi Steinberg has been compelled to become a spokesman for the area's Jewish community on the subject of urban growth.

As a leader who views his rabbinical role holistically — not limited strictly to religious matters — he has also done much of the math when it comes to the economic challenges his congregants are facing.

“The continued trend of single family homes being demolished on a regular basis and being replaced with townhomes and one or two bedroom studio apartments threatens the makeup of the community as we know it and how it has been for over 130 years,” he told the *Intermountain*

of location, ironically, the traditional talisman of the real estate profession.

“A basic characteristic of an Orthodox Jewish community is that the house of worship, the shul, is the central point. Come Shabbos, everybody has to walk so they must be within walking distance of the synagogue.”

While halachic rules prohibiting driving on the Sabbath tend to foster a warm and close-knit communal structure, it also imposes limitations on where Orthodox Jews can reside.

“It's different than a community which would allow for driving on their day of worship, Saturday or Sunday, depending on the respective religion,” Rabbi Steinberg says, “because the congregants don't need to live in the same place.”

Like virtually any congregation, Zera Abraham would love to grow its membership and community but prospective newcomers — and there certainly are observant Jews from elsewhere who would like to move to Denver, the rabbi says — are

Our community is not in danger, the current structure of our community is in danger

tain Jewish News earlier this month.

“Our community makeup is indeed family centered and we have a high population of young people with nice size families who need a place to live.”

While not an existential threat to the West Side *haredim*, he adds, growth remains a serious challenge.

“Our community is not in danger; the current structure of our community is in danger,” he says.

That structure, the rabbi elaborates, is uniquely tied to the concept

discouraged when they see the small inventory of available single family homes on the West Side.

The steep prices for such homes — often approaching a million dollars — aren't helping at all, he adds.

“Larger families have a hard time finding housing,” the rabbi says. “Although we have a strong network to help identify housing and we can generally meet the need, there are times when for some families we can't.”

“There's not a general attrition in the sense that our numbers are



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shrinking, it's just that the demographic is changing. That basic core which has been our success in remaining vibrant over all this time — namely that family structure

The demographic is changing, becoming singles and young couples

which has been passed on in our community for over a century — has become harder and harder to preserve. We are preserving it, but it's taking a lot more effort."

Zera Abraham's traditional large family-oriented membership may gradually evolve into one focused on smaller families, childless couples and retirees.

"I don't think that will make the community die," the rabbi says, "but it will have to change."

Rabbi Steinberg is seeing some encouraging signs. This month, the Volunteers of America opened its waiting list for a new apartment building in the area that will include a number of three-bedroom and lower-income units, just the sort of domiciles many Zera Abraham families need.

And last September, the Denver City Council rejected a rezoning request that would have allowed construction of another apartment complex abutting Sloan's Lake. The complex probably would have included at least 100 units, all of them small with one or two bedrooms.

"The applicants were offered a fair compromise, which was to build the building with three-bedroom apartments," Rabbi Steinberg says. "This way we could allow for families to live there. Would it be as profitable as studio and one-bedroom apartments? Probably not, but I know there's a building on Sheridan near 44th Ave. which has multi-bedroom apartments and to my knowledge there's no vacancy there. They're all bought."

In a real estate market seemingly glued to the idea of smaller apartment and condominium units — and to the profits they generate — a



High-rise, multi-story apartments and condos have become increasingly common sights in the West Side of the 21st century.

well as the general population in this neighborhood is not forced into something meant for a different demographic.

"Simply to inundate a neighborhood which previously has been strongly family-oriented and to, by design, change that neighborhood to be one which is singularly a non-family demographic, I don't think is in line with the city's plan, which is to preserve the neighborhood and the spirit of the neighborhood."

The plan to which the rabbi refers is officially called the Neighborhood Planning Initiative, a city-wide effort to chart Denver's future as it copes with the unprecedented growth it currently faces. Actively seeking residents' input, the initiative is divided into regional sections.

The portion covering the Jewish West Side is called the West Planning Area and includes the neighborhoods of Barnum, Barnum West, Sun Valley, Valverde, Villa Park and West Colfax.

Rabbi Steinberg is on the steering committee for the West Side Planning Area and Zera Abraham hosted the first of its planning meetings.

While he feels that the planning process should do a better job of formally documenting neighbors' concerns and ideas, the rabbi says he is encouraged so far by what appears to be the city's receptivity to what Jews and other West Side residents have to say. In particular, he praises the work of District

We have some very good councilpeople who have an understanding of a community such as ours

primary challenge is ensuring that families with multiple children are also offered housing options.

The rabbi again stresses the value of compromise between developers and citizens.

"It's not a matter of we can't have one or two-bedroom apartments, but if you crunch the numbers of what's going on in our community, we're inundated with one or two-bedroom apartments. We have more than enough, so let's achieve balance of availability so that the synagogue community as

1 City Councilwoman Amanda Sandoval, elected to her first term last June.

"I believe we have some very good councilpeople who have an understanding of a community such as ours," the rabbi says.

"I firmly believe that they're listening. It's hard to know what will actually be taken into account when final decisions happen, but there's discussion, there's dialogue, there's

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WEST SIDE

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Old Jewish neighborhood is now hip

It's not all negative: More people means more safety



Increasing population influx means increased density, resulting in any number of changes to a traditional neighborhood's character and quality of life.

WEST SIDE

From Page 7

interaction.”

The councilwoman in question — Amanda Sandoval — confirms that she is indeed listening, to Jews and everyone else who resides in her West Denver district.

“There has been unprecedented growth in Denver and in Colorado,” she told the **IJN**. “That’s what people are reacting to and there is justification for how the Jewish community feels.”

Sandoval provides some background and context to the concerns. A building code adopted by the city in 2010 “pushed more density” into the West Side, setting the stage for the demolition of single family homes and encouraging the construction of townhomes and multi-story residential structures.

A decade later, the result is a rapidly changing environment in many of the city’s neighborhoods.

“What I would like to see is making sure that we are preserving the character of those neighborhoods. People want to see single family housing zoning kept, making sure that we’re smart about where those single family houses are, making sure that we have good buffers between industrial and residential districts.”

She is aware of the familial character of the Orthodox Jewish community, stressing that the Hispanic community — another traditional component of the West Side — has a similar orientation.

“But it’s not just the Jewish or Hispanic communities,” Sandoval says. “I think that all those who live within the boundaries of the planning initiative people should want to participate in this process, whether you walk to church, ride your bike or drive to church, or walk



RESIDENT

Chaim Abrams

to the park.

“The Sabbath is unique to the Jewish community specifically, but I think that overall you’re hearing concerns about growth on all aspects.”

She cautions, however, that City



CITY COUNCILPERSON

Amanda Sandoval

fall’s Sloan’s Lake development, in which property owners wanted to rezone the area from single-family homes to multi-story residences.

“Everything has to do with property rights,” she says. “You can’t be that proscriptive in a neighbor-



RABBI

Tzvi Steinberg

Sandoval expects the Neighborhood Planning Initiative to come up for a final City Council vote in about a year.

She stresses that she has no personal bottom lines for what the plan should include, for the West Side

While acknowledging the limitations of the City Council’s power and the undeniable clout of developers, Sandoval says that the in-progress planning initiative is the most effective means for residents to make their voices heard.

When finally adopted by the City Council, the initiative will implement a master plan that will have a significant impact on how the city charts its future.

“That plan will set the guidance for the next 20 to 40 years,” Sandoval says. “Right now is the time for the west neighborhood, and the Jewish community in West Colfax, to participate in that planning process and to voice their opinions. Time is of the essence.”

Chaim Abrams has lived in West Colfax for most of his life — “for over 40 years,” he says — and he seems honestly surprised that the modest and *heimische* neighborhood he grew up in has become a destination of choice for the cool and well-heeled.

“The rebuilding of Sloan’s Lake and the West Side becoming the hip neighborhood in Denver has created a lot of positive things, but what it has hurt is parking and affordable housing, which has become a real issue,” he says, including both minor and major complaints in the same sentence.

While parking might seem minor at face value, it is nonetheless a component of that elusive formula known as the “quality of life.”

“When they allow buildings over three stories, they don’t require parking for them,” he says. “People who live in those buildings have nowhere to park so they park all around the neighborhood. I know that if I go out in the evenings, when I come back generally I can’t park in front of my house, especially in the summer-

That West Denver Planning Initiative will set the guidance for the next 20 to 40 years

Council is far from omnipotent when it comes to the city’s approach to growth and planning for it.

Denver’s zoning code is implemented and enforced by the city’s Community Planning and Development Department, which governs everything from a building’s use, size and purpose to parking rules.

Decisions on such matters as requiring developers to include a certain number of family-appropriate units in new projects are up to Community Planning, not City Council, Sandoval says.

The council only gets involved in rezoning applications, such as last

hood plan to require what type of units are going to be built. Even when we’re changing a zone district . . . we’re not allowed to talk about unit count or how many bedrooms the unit would have. We can ask them to provide that information and we can suggest different outcomes, but we cannot require it.”

Similarly, the council has no power to stop or prevent the demolition of single-family houses.

“The only way that you’re able to stop demolitions is by the creation of a historic district,” she says, adding that West Colfax has no such districts.

or any other part of the city. Those provisions ultimately should be left up to the citizens of Denver to decide.

“I’m not the type of leader who feels like it’s my document. I feel like it’s the people’s document. It’s early, this just kicked off in October, and there have only been two public meetings, so I haven’t gathered enough information from the constituents in the area.

“Once I hear that, I will definitely advocate for those items. That’s my job — to advocate for what the people want, not necessarily what I think is best.”

Once humble, now well-heeled

Whether renting or buying, it will be costly

time. The spaces are taken up by people who don't live on the block."

That problem and others, Abrams feels, are direct results of the kind of housing being built on the West Side.

"There should be a value placed on single family housing and not just to allow developers to squeeze the maximum amount of units in their buildings to maximize their profits."

The compact and high-density

\$399,000, sold two months ago for \$750,000 — a nearly 90% increase.

He understands why people facing such prices find it difficult to resist selling.

"Both of those are single family homes," Abrams says, "and what you see is that people are buying them and scraping them and putting up townhouses."

Such dynamics are having a direct impact on the West Side's Jewish institutions, including Zera Abra-

When people look at the price of housing it makes it very difficult

development inevitably means more people moving into the neighborhood, increasingly singles and young couples, he says.

Not all of that is negative. The influx of new residents actually makes the neighborhood feel safer in terms of crime.

"There are more people out walking around," Abrams says, "which helps people feel more comfortable."

But more people also means more demand for parking and more traffic, which can be a safety hazard for pedestrians and drivers alike. Because of the competition for parking spaces, people park all the way to the end of intersections, ignoring signs that tell them otherwise, which makes it difficult for drivers to see around corners.

"I've been begging different people in the city to put in four-way stop signs at intersections which are very hard to cross, like Wolf and 16th," Abrams says. "If you want to go walk by Sloan's Lake in the afternoon sometimes you can wait five minutes before you can cross 17th."

He is also concerned with how new development is affecting the neighborhood's family character.

"The whole concept now that you don't have front yards or back yards, since all of the space is used for the house, has a negative impact. People just hang out in their house and you don't have that neighborhood feel."

"On my block we have quite a

ham, of which Abrams is president.

"All of the different institutions in the community would like to bring in young couples to move in, and we've tried," he says. "But when people look at the price of housing it makes it very difficult."

"The price of renting is probably somewhere between two and three thousand dollars a month, and to be able to afford a mortgage on a house that costs \$750,000, and putting down 20% for a down payment, is a big challenge."

Orthodox Jews from the East Coast, Israel and elsewhere are being discouraged from considering Denver in general, or the West Side specifically, Abrams says, "since the starting wages in Denver are not equal to the cost of living anymore."

Those who decide to come out West anyway will "turn to different parts of Denver or choose to move somewhere else in the Midwest," Abrams says. "There are Jewish communities in the Midwest besides Denver that people are looking at."

While Abrams says he's not yet seeing any actual attrition from the West Side — that is, people choosing to sell their homes and then moving somewhere else — "what you do see more of is young couples who are ready to buy houses and they try their best, but the houses on the West Side are older and smaller and for what they cost they can

One single family home that was bought for about \$300,000 a few years ago is probably worth about a million dollars now

few Jewish families and in the summer all the kids hang out together outside and play. But when you put up all these units with no yards it takes that away."

The dwindling supply of affordable housing, Abrams says, is even more daunting a challenge.

"Next door to me, one single family home that was bought for about \$300,000 a few years ago is probably worth about a million dollars now."

And it isn't a glamour home, he adds — "more like a shack that needs to be torn down."

Another nearby house, that sold some seven years ago for close to

move to other parts of town and get much more value for their dollar."

In an effort to resist these forces, Zera Abraham recently gave serious consideration to becoming a developer itself.

"We actually drew up plans to build on the synagogue's lot that we have next door," Abrams says.

"That lot could hold probably four or five units, but the cost of building in Denver has also gotten very expensive. By the time we looked at the building cost per square foot, the rent would have been prohibitive for young families. Unless we could find someone who could help defray the cost of the building, when you crunch the num-



This early 20th century photo shows what much of the West Side looked like a century ago — humble, single-family dwellings and small businesses. Those days are gone.

bers, it's not feasible."

Despite such obstacles, Abrams insists that the Jewish West Side is not in a state of despair over growth issues. The religious institutions that reside there are healthy and growing. Indeed, somewhat ironically, both the Kollel and Yeshiva Toras Chaim have been purchasing land and developing it for their

own expansion projects, suggesting that they are contributing to the growth themselves.

Overall, Abrams says he trusts the neighborhood's Jewish leaders to come up with solutions to help their members find places to live and to preserve the unique cultural character of their neighborhood.

But he echoes his rabbi and coun-

cilwoman in encouraging West Side Jews to get actively involved in the city's planning process. Abrams has been active in the process himself and feels confident that Jewish concerns are being heard and considered.

"I'm generally optimistic," he says.

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