



West Littleton Boulevard

The Story of "Mid Mod Mile"

May 12, 2022

Capstone Project submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Urban and Regional Planning, College of Architecture and Planning, University of Colorado Denver.

Prepared by: **Reese Shaw**
reese.shaw@ucdenver.edu

Prepared for: **City of Littleton, CO**

Andrea Mimnaugh
amimnaugh@littletongov.org

Shane Roberts
sroberts@littletongov.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Purpose

This project focuses on the story of West Littleton Boulevard, also known as “Mid Mod Mile” due to its collection of commercial Mid-Century Modern buildings. The boulevard was a major economic engine in the 1960s and 1970s, but now there are perceptions that businesses are under-performing. The City of Littleton may be conducting an area plan for West Littleton Boulevard and wishes to obtain a clear picture of its social, historic, economic, and physical attributes to create a vision for the future. This report will investigate five topics related to West Littleton Blvd: community demographics, mobility, economics, land use, and culture.

Context

The boulevard has a rich history and is home to a diverse collection of people, land uses and architectural styles which constantly change as you travel from end to end. The western end is home to the stoic municipal courthouse building and the majority of the corridor's mid-century modern buildings. The eastern end has homes situated right alongside the boulevard but also intersects S. Broadway which carries twice the amount of traffic. The center of West Littleton Boulevard is the commercial hub of the corridor. This part of the city thrived in an age when automobiles were easily obtainable and a convenient way for families to realize the American Dream. Woodlawn Shopping Center, located in the center of the study area was the heart of that dream.

Goals

A story will be final outcome of this report. The story will a

written narrative combined with visualized data, infographics, research, leading theories and expert testimonies. The story will answer the following questions to reveal West Littleton Boulevard's past and present conditions: who relies on West Littleton Boulevard?, how do people travel through West Littleton Blvd?, how do land uses impact the economy of West Littleton Boulevard?, what is the state of West Littleton Boulevard's economy?, and how can Mid-Century Modern buildings enhance West Littleton Bouevard?

Background Research

An exploration into suburban development following World War II is needed to understand arterial streets in the United States. Automobile ownership became more obtainable for families, increasing access to new opportunities. Development along major corridors oriented toward serving cars in the form of large setbacks, large parking lots, frequent curb cuts, and drive-thrus which conveniently allowed customers to remain in their vehicles. Commercial corridors usually result from standard commercial zoning patterns that cause linear development. Design standards that primarily serve automobiles can be effective for access and turnover, but also have unintended consequences at the human scale. These attributes can contribute to a lack of character which reduces a community's sense of place and impact the economic value of an area. The cultural shift following WWII left a legacy that determined how suburban cities like Littleton function today.

The most important step in a corridor evaluation process is determining if there is a problem. Gathering data on assessed property values, the age of buildings, vacancy

rates, and undeveloped land can serve as indicators to measure corridor decline. Red flags of under-performing retail corridors can also be the product of a general commercial zoning framework that augments a linear retail pattern, and lower rents resulting from oversupply, turnover, and vacancy conditions. Certain land uses can be used as a starting point for identifying struggling corridors. Some of these include: Auto part stores, new and used car sales, gas stations, and fast food chains.

Approaching corridor redevelopment with a market-based focus can be an excellent complement to government enacted regulations and investments. Planners and roadway engineers need to look beyond physical strategies and think about commercial corridors as if they were economists or real estate developers. A market-based approach considers market supply and demand which provides greater accuracy at estimating future land uses. If planners understand market forces, zoning regulations can respond to identified future land uses.

Economics can also blend with demographics to predict consumer travel trends. The concept of psychographics is another method commonly used to gain a deeper understanding of why consumers make decisions depending on their psychological and demographic traits.

Corridors should be studied at multiple scales to investigate how systems operate at each scale. The City of Longmont's 2019 Main Street Corridor Plan analyzed the corridor at three different scales: corridor-wide, sub areas (character areas), and catalyst sites located within each character area (Longmont 2019). It is also beneficial to study corridors on a regional scale. Commercial corridors are

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

competing for local and regional business. Those that have higher traffic counts tend to perform better economically. Planners need to think about what makes certain corridors unique compared to others.

A look at literature and case studies that have previously dealt with the preservation and adaptive reuse of cultural resources could reveal innovative to approach the resources surrounding West Littleton Boulevard. Longmont's 2019 Main Street Corridor Plan also dealt with culturally significant resources by promoting historic district designation and associating funding accordingly.

Methodology

A specific order of operations was followed to reach the end goal. The author, Reese Shaw, began by identifying problems, then defining goals and objectives. Next, background research was conducted which helped shape the report's methodology by seeing how other corridor studies have been conducted. Following this, the author collected and analyzed data using primary and secondary sources to reveal key findings for the main report topics: community demographics, mobility, economics, land use, and culture. A toolkit was then produced that paired data attributes from the five topics with key catalyst sites in order to create a holistic summary of where development may occur, and what it would look like. Key findings were synthesized, then paired with recommendations to complete the final step.

Analysis: Demographics

A total of 33,151 residents live within the immediate demographic study area, which is almost 70% of Littleton's

entire population of 47,989. Eighty-seven percent of residents living in the study area are white and the largest age group falls within the 35 - 64 year range, with younger adults (18 - 34).

Census Tract 66.01 stands as an outlier. This area is the most racially diverse, contains the most housing units, has the lowest education levels and the lowest income levels of all nine census tracts. Thirteen percent of families here live below the poverty level, which is more than twice the average poverty level of the study area. This community should be prioritized in all future corridor planning efforts.

Analysis: Mobility

Regardless of age or destination, driving is the primary mode of travel. Seventy-eight percent of commuters drive alone or carpool, 10% work from home, and the remaining 12% use means other than vehicles if commuting along West Littleton Boulevard. Six percent of all households within the study area do not have access to a vehicle with renters overrepresented at 5% and homeowners at 1%. West Littleton Boulevard is identified to prioritize pedestrians, but currently lacks adequate pedestrian facilities. Furthermore, surface parking lots, frequent curb cuts, and large building setbacks retract from an enjoyable pedestrian experience.

West Littleton Boulevard is on DRCOG's High Injury Network and in 2019 West Littleton Boulevard saw 100 total crashes. Most of them were vehicular crashes near the intersection of S Broadway, but 6 pedestrian and 6 cyclist crashes occurred throughout the boulevard.

West Littleton Boulevard carries significantly less traffic compared to the surrounding corridors. Low volumes have

contributed to economic under-performance, but is a major opportunity to prioritize other modes. If walking, biking, and transit infrastructure is improved now, West Littleton Boulevard can avoid future traffic congestion without sacrificing existing traffic volumes.

Analysis: Economics

The economic utilization of each commercial parcel was calculated to reveal the relationship between each parcel's land value and building value. A total of 53 commercial parcels were analyzed within the corridor study area. Thirty percent have a good economic utilization, 36% have a fair utilization, and the remaining 34% have bad or poor utilization meaning their land value is greater than their improvement value. The Woodlawn Shopping Center has an economic utilization of 0.71 which falls into the fair category. This utilization rate may be good enough to sustain the status quo, but not poor enough to attract private investment. The shopping center has a high vacancy rate of 22% which also indicates a level of under-performance. The Woodlawn Shopping Center is not the worst of W. Littleton Blvd's under-performing commercial uses, but should be flagged if these metrics worsen.

The five-minute driveshed findings reveal an oversupply of motor vehicle and part dealers which is consistent with many of the corridor's parcels that were found to have a poor economic utilization. Oversupply may not be a cause of poor economic utilization, but does highlight that motor vehicle and parts dealers are over competing with each other for local business. Specialty Food Stores and Drinking Establishments were both found to be undersupplied within

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

five and ten minute drivesheds. The corridor is currently losing business to local residents that have to travel elsewhere to spend their money on specialty foods and drinking.

Analysis: Land Use

The Unified Land Use Code (ULUC) now divides the corridor into five base districts: Corridor Mixed (CM), Neighborhood Commercial (NC), Small Lot Residential, Multi-Family Residential, and a small sliver of Open Space (OS). The first four districts account for 99% of the corridor's land use designation, with 54% being Corridor Mixed-Use, and 45% being residential.

The MFR District is meant to provide more intense housing types as well as smaller housing types. MFR only accounts for 14% of the corridor's total housing supply, yet 44% of the corridor's residents are non-family households and 48% of residents are renters which indicates a higher demand for multi-family housing.

The CM District accounts for 65% of the corridor's mixed use zoning and allows for more land uses than the NC District. Vehicles sales and service establishments are permitted, however the corridor is currently oversaturated with this industry group. Multi-family housing and mixed-use developments are accepted, but few of these exist on the corridor. Mixed-use development with a blend of multi-family housing and commercial uses would help diversify how the corridor functions.

Analysis: Culture

Post-World War II era gave birth to 64 commercial

buildings within the corridor study area that have been deemed to have cultural significance as it relates to Mid-Century Modern Architecture. An even split of Tier 1, 2, 3, and 4 buildings can be found along W. Littleton Blvd, with 16 Tier 1 buildings, 17 Tier 2 buildings, 16 Tier 3 buildings, and 15 Tier 4 buildings.

A cross section of 3 buildings was used to show how site design enhances the corridor, or can be detrimental to the corridor's function and identity. 2000 W. Littleton Blvd was used as an example of a property with great architecture and site design due to its landscaping and relation to the street. 1319 West Littleton Boulevard is an example of a property with great architecture but poor site design because most of the site is covered with deteriorated surface parking and there is no landscaping. Finally, 1599 West Littleton Boulevard was used as an example of poor architecture and poor site design due to its corporate-derived architecture, lack of landscaping, and site features contributing to a hostile pedestrian environment.

Catalyst Site Toolkit

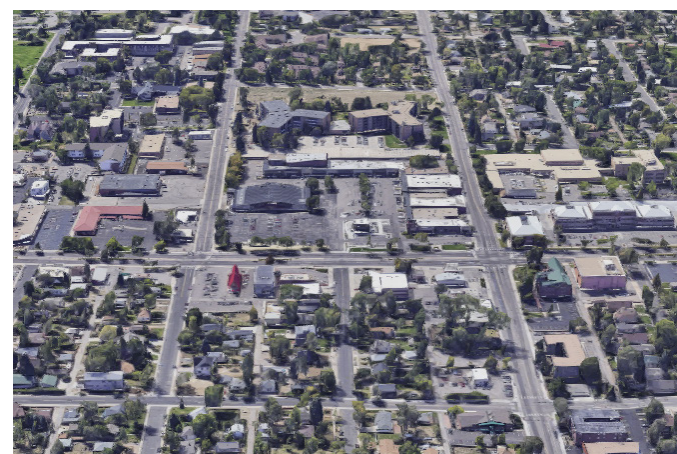
The catalyst site toolkit combined key findings from each chapter to identify sites along West Littleton Boulevard that are good candidates for future redevelopment. The toolkit begins with a set of 16 commercial sites within the study area. These sites were found to have the lowest economic utilization of all 53 commercial parcels analyzed in the economics chapter of this report. Each of these sites have attributes contributing to their poor utilization making all of them prone to redevelopment. Next, data attributes were gathered for the seven inputs seen below. These

attributes were entered into an excel formula that assigned weights to ensure the most important inputs played a larger role in the final scores. The weighted formula produced a score for each site called the Redevelopment Potential Score. The higher the score, the more likely a site could and should redevelop based on the inputs.

Romano's Pizzeria Off-Site Parking Lot received the highest score because 100% of the parcel's usable space is used for parking which is detrimental to the corridor's Mixed-Use Main Street designation. This lot also scored high because there are no tangible improvements to the land resulting in a utilization rate of 0, no historic buildings are present, and the site has a relatively high WalkScore compared to the rest of the corridor.

Key Findings + Recommendations

Key findings associated with each topic area can be found in the last section of this report. Recommendations are then tied to each key finding to provide clear ways to improve West Littleton Boulevard. However, the next page of this executive summary offers a glimpse into some of the top key findings for each topic area.



Top Finding

Demographics: Census Tract 66.01

Census Tract 66.01 is the most racially diverse, has the most housing units, the most renters, is the least educated, has the lowest median house value, and the amount of families living below the poverty level is more than double the rest of the study area.

Mobility: Pedestrians

West Littleton Boulevard lacks adequate facilities and has a poor pedestrian experience.

Economy: Parcel Utilization

34% of commercial parcels have a poor or bad economic utilization, meaning the land value is much higher than the improvement value.

Land Use: Corridor Mixed Use

65% of the corridor's mixed-use character area is designated as Corridor Mixed (CM). This Base District allows for mixed-use developments and multi-family housing, however few of these developments currently exist along the corridor.

Culture: Site Design

Some historic buildings have good site design but many do not. Those with poor site design are detrimental to the identity and function of the corridor.



Recommendation

Community engagement efforts should be focused here. Spanish translation will be helpful for this area's large Hispanic community.

Streetscape enhancements and improved pedestrian infrastructure and will help West Littleton Boulevard achieve its designation as a Mixed-Use Main Street and will contribute to a better sense of place.

Adaptive reuse or redevelopment should be considered for the 16 sites with the lowest economic utilization in order to maximize land use opportunities along the corridor. The 3 sites with the highest toolkit score should be prioritized.

Prioritize mixed use developments that contain a mix of multi-family units and demanded businesses such as specialty food stores and drinking establishments. These developments are a better fit in the CM district compared to the NC District.

Site design needs to be enhanced in tandem with building improvements in order for historic sites to enhance the corridor. This should be a priority in any future historic overlay.