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DURA marks 50 years of urban improvements

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Tracy Huggins, Denver Urban Renewal Authority executive director, says it's the organization's job to make old parts of the city new again.

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When the [Denver Urban Renewal Authority](#) started 50 years ago this year, Lower Downtown Denver was a rat-infested slum.

Today, with DURA's help, LoDo and other urban areas of the city are vibrant places teeming with new restaurants, hotels, housing and office buildings.

The state of Colorado created DURA in 1958 to help get rid of urban blight and slums in the City and County of Denver. Since then, DURA has worked on more than 75 projects.

But through the years, slums and severe blight largely have been eradicated, so DURA is updating its strategic plan to reflect the shift, according to the authority.

“When a community changes, you need to refashion your tools. ... We want to readjust how TIF [tax-increment financing] is used, now that we’re involved in community development rather than blight,” said Tracy Huggins, DURA’s executive director. “Parts of a city become old, and DURA’s job is turning the old back into new.”

TIF and the ability to condemn property are the authority’s principal tools for improving urban areas.

In Colorado, TIF was created by state law as a way for urban renewal authorities such as DURA to redevelop blighted property by funding the gap between the total cost of a project and the level of private financing it can support.

The city and DURA set a level of property and/or sales tax, and forecast new, incremental taxes that may be generated by the project after redevelopment. The difference between current and projected revenue then can be used to finance bonds or reimburse developers for their expenses.

But not all DURA projects require or qualify for TIF help. Of the total \$7.1 billion in projects DURA has worked on, and currently is involved with, the authority has invested nearly \$650 million in TIF funds, according to the group.

While the city can condemn property only for public use, DURA can condemn for private redevelopment. The authority has used its condemnation powers only three times since 1992, according to Huggins — for Broadway Marketplace, the Rio Grande Building and the Women’s Bank Building.

Through the years, DURA funds helped with the building of downtown Denver projects ranging from the Pepsi Center sports arena and the new Elitch Gardens amusement park to the Denver Pavilions shopping mall and Adam’s Mark Hotel (now the Sheraton Denver).

Some of those projects have involved controversy — such as St. Louis hotel owner Fred Kummer’s demolition of Zeckendorf Plaza, designed by renowned architect I.M. Pei, for his Adam’s Mark Hotel, and moving Elitch Gardens downtown. The original Elitch’s was located in northwest Denver’s West Highland neighborhood; the amusement park’s new version was built on 28 acres in the Central Platte Valley in 1995.

“Bringing Elitch’s to downtown was a very unique effort,” said Susan Powers, partner at Urban Ventures LLC and former DURA executive director. “People asked if it was really the image we wanted for downtown, and I said yeah, it is. It’s a place to play; it lightens up the heaviness of downtown.”

Powers hired Huggins 17 years ago as DURA's finance manager, and Huggins became director in 2000.

One of DURA's — and Denver's — largest projects is the ongoing conversion of the old Stapleton International Airport to the Stapleton neighborhood, with new residential and commercial development. DURA provided some \$200 million in TIF revenue bonds for the creation of infrastructure such as roads, sewers and drainage for Stapleton.

"Without DURA ... we wouldn't be as far along as we are," said John Lehigh, president and COO of Forest City Stapleton Inc., the project's developer. "I'm sure this is by far and away the largest thing they've ever done."

The authority also has contributed significantly to urban housing, from affordable apartments over the redeveloped Denver Dry Building on downtown's 16th Street Mall to providing low-interest mortgages to low-income homebuyers.

The city contracts with DURA to provide low-income housing, and half of the authority's 17-person staff works on that effort. DURA invests roughly \$3 million a year, from federal funds, in such housing.

"The investment over the last 20 years has been significant, but the preservation of housing stock in neighborhoods around the core of the city is tremendous," said John Shaw, senior vice president and general manager for Denver at development firm Opus Northwest LLC. "That work is unsung, but it's an important part of the puzzle."

Shaw also is vice chair of DURA's board of directors.

"It was always important to us that neighborhoods outside the core of the city had programs that allowed people of low-to-moderate income to stay in their houses and rehab them," Powers said. "Those neighborhoods are as important as the core of the city."

However DURA changes how it operates the authority, it will continue to deal with the changing needs of Denver's neighborhoods.

"Even in positive change, areas are left behind," Huggins said. "We make sure those areas are addressed."