

RAISING SUN VALLEY | FIRST OF A THREE-PART SERIES

Part One: Blocked in, blocked out

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Story by Tina Griego

Photographs by Craig F. Walker

The Denver Post

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A 2nd-grade class races past the iconic mural on the building shared by the Sun Valley Youth Center and Tha Myx International church in the Sun Valley neighborhood of Denver, CO. The class was returning to Fairview Elementary School after attending a swimming class at the Rude Recreation Center. Sun Valley is the poorest neighborhood in Colorado. It is made up of roughly 1,500 people, almost all of them live in public housing. [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

For years, residents have complained they are the stepchildren of the city, overlooked and neglected. Over time, they have learned to fight to improve the neighborhood. The redevelopment of their neighborhood with the coming of light rail will be their biggest challenge yet.

Post columnist Tina Griego spent more than two months in Sun Valley, reporting on the neighborhood's struggles and its hopes and fears as it prepares for the arrival of light rail.

Most of the time, the neighborhood is quiet.

That's one of the first surprises about Sun Valley. So many people living in such a small area, and yet it is so still. Sun Valley rouses itself, like other neighborhoods, for morning coffee and the walk to the bus stop or school. Then it settles again, as if gathering itself for the after-school, back-from-work, time-for-supper hubbub.

But something else runs through the quiet. It is not despair, though that makes appearances here. It is not resignation or exhaustion, which



Orlando Vargas, 10, bottom, tells a bedtime story to his brother Xavior, 9, at their apartment in Sun Valley Homes. Their mother, Jolena Casias, 27, got pregnant and dropped out of Lincoln High. She has higher hopes for her four kids. [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

are frequent visitors. It is more the sense of a people who have come to believe themselves invisible. "What do people say? We're the land of the forgotten," says Toni Cisneros, who raised her children and is now raising a nephew and taking care of her granddaughter in Sun Valley.

Sun Valley is a pocket of at least 1,300 people, nearly all of whom live in public housing. This is not just a poor neighborhood. It is, by far, the state's poorest. It is not just an isolated neighborhood. It is Denver's most isolated, hidden amid industry, walled off by river and road. It's the neighborhood you're not supposed to see, the product of accident and design, cynicism and idealism.

The combination of poverty and isolation has acted like slow poison, sapping human and economic potential. It has hurt the city and neighborhood residents, most of whom are children.

But an opportunity has arisen to change that. The West Corridor light-rail line from downtown's Union Station to Golden is under construction. In 2013, a light-rail station will open here, just east of Federal Boulevard about a half-mile south of Invesco Field. People in and out of the neighborhood have been planning the transformation of Sun Valley into a well-rounded community for those who live there now and those who will come.

No other neighborhood may be as hard to change.

West 13th Avenue is the only street that enters Sun Valley's residential section from downtown Denver. It takes you to a handful of houses, old and in various states of decrepitude. They sit at the tail end of an industrial stretch crisscrossed by trains and freeway lanes, a power plant and substation. Railroad crossing signs flash, and vapor from underground steam pipes drifts across the road. Women push strollers, and men wrestle grocery carts along dirt shoulders.

West 13th leads to Decatur Street, and Decatur cuts through the center of Sun Valley. Here, the housing projects come into view. They're not what you'd expect, if what you expect is forbidding, gray towers. Sun Valley is brick and stucco apartments, laid out in one and two stories along winding roads and around well-maintained common greens. A handful of new playgrounds are scattered among the buildings. Clotheslines sag with pants and shirts and blankets, drying in the sun, forgotten in the rain. The air carries the smell of detergent and bacon and frying potatoes.

Federal Boulevard lies a block west, up the hill, along the bluff lined by the towering Denver Department of Human Services building, the Westside Family Health Center and the Family Crisis Center. Thousands of people a day drive past Sun Valley and never know people live below.



Somali refugees (from left) Kheiro Huseien, Malaika Lugendi, and Butula Hussien and Rugia Hamza of Sudan, watch the students pass through the hallway at Fairview Elementary School where they attend the Families Learning Together class in the Sun Valley neighborhood of Denver, CO. [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

According to the Denver Housing Authority, about 950 residents live in the Sun Valley Homes. This is an official count and so an undercount. People have a way of moving into the projects unannounced. Another 245 people live in the Decatur Place apartment building, which is owned by a nonprofit. Decatur offers subsidized, two-year transitional housing to single parents and their children. The rest of Sun Valley's residents live in the single-family homes along West 13th and a couple of neighboring blocks. Only 27 homes remain in the neighborhood, about five of which are vacant. Stability is not a defining attribute of Sun Valley.

Put another way: More than nine of every 10 people in the neighborhood live in subsidized housing, and that not only makes Sun Valley unlike any other neighborhood in Denver, it makes Sun Valley Homes unlike any other housing project in the city. It exists unto itself, not part of any larger residential neighborhood.

The residents of Sun Valley Homes and Decatur Place work. They go to school. They live on Social Security or public assistance. Many are disabled. The government pays two-thirds of their rent. Their rent is based on their income, and their income is a fraction of Denver's. The median annual household income in the projects is about \$8,000, less than 20 percent of Denver's. In Decatur Place, the average annual family income is just \$4,400.

Sun Valley is so much a government invention, the first few times I visited I wondered whether it even should be called a neighborhood. But it has long been a community, fractious, always-changing, full of resourcefulness and resiliency, bound, however temporarily, by shared hardship.

"You can meet the best person in your life in Sun Valley," David Roybal tells me as he walks the projects, registering voters. He's 24, a one-time gang member full of enthusiasm and hope for the neighborhood. Roybal lived in Sun Valley Homes from 1987 to 2005 and now rents a house on West 13th.

"It is a community," he says. "It ain't like a neighborhood you drive through and see all the pretty houses and trees. It's like you drive through and you see the people here and you speed up." He laughs. "What's crazy is we have so many people coming through and no one knows Sun Valley."

Spend time here and you'll hear English, Spanish, several African languages, Arabic, French, Vietnamese. Somali-Bantu women glide by, draped in layers of colorful fabric. A Vietnamese elder passes and waves, her face suddenly girlish. And there goes Mrs. Edith Wilson, grandma, the Mayor of Sun Valley. Any of these titles will suffice. She is Dakota Sioux, and in 1957 moved into these projects and never left. She raised 11 children here, two of them adopted. She offers some neighborly advice: "The people here are nice. Just keep your nose to yourself and you'll be all right."

A boy zips past Mrs. Wilson on a bicycle, and a group of kids crouches next to the garbage bins, the ones people joke about. You know how you know you live in a ghetto? The Dumpsters are in front of the building. Ha, ha. Bitter funny.

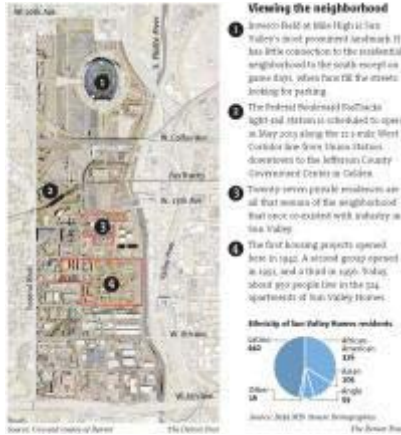


Manuel Olguin gives a haircut to 7-year-old Carlos Rodriguez Jr., outside his home in Sun Valley Homes. A barber by trade, at age 26, Olguin says he has lived in this apartment all his life, always with his parents and now with his two children. [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

The truth is, Sun Valley is a hard place to figure out because there's not one Sun Valley. There are many. Some overlap. Some never meet. Some clash.

There is the Sun Valley of ill repute, of drugs and gangs. The neighborhood was long known as the most crime-ridden in Denver. This is the Sun Valley that prompts the authors of a recent study of the neighborhood to conclude: "Whereas residential neighborhoods often look at adjacent industrial uses as a negative, that is reversed in Sun Valley, where owners of industrial properties may feel the residential neighborhood pulls down their property values."

This Sun Valley prompts Mrs. Wilson's grandson to offer his own advice: "Don't come down here if you don't know"



anyone."

But crime rates are down here, as they are elsewhere in the city. Most complaints are about partying neighbors and outside youth coming in to stir up trouble.

Sun Valley is the home of refugees. For many years, they were Vietnamese. Now they are Ethiopian and Somali-Somali and Somali-Bantu. They are grateful for their apartments and the elementary school and the neighbors who smile when they say hello.

Sun Valley is rooted by the longtime resident, and it is passed from one generation to the next. It also is a place in constant churn. Half of all residents leave the projects within four years.

Sun Valley residents show up at parent-teacher conferences, volunteer in the bountiful community garden and at the Sun Valley Youth Center. They attend the meetings of the Sun Valley Homes Local Resident Council and have joined the Sun Valley Coalition neighborhood group.

But one part of Sun Valley transcends all others: mothers and their children.

More than half of Sun Valley residents are 18 and younger, and most are toddlers and elementary school kids. No other neighborhood in the city comes close to this ratio of child to adult.



A backhoe is used to dig out concrete under Federal Blvd where the Lakewood Gulch is being widened as part of the West Corridor Light Rail Project, in the Sun Valley neighborhood of Denver, CO. [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

They are children of single moms. Of the 324 households in Sun Valley Homes, 43 are headed by two parents. Almost 85 percent of the rest are headed by single women. In Decatur Place, 89 of the 96 single parents are women. Two years ago, nearly seven of 10 births in the neighborhood were to single moms, compared with 28 percent citywide, according to the Piton Foundation.

They are children of young mothers. About 15 percent of those births were to teen moms, 50 percent higher than the city as a whole. They are children of parents who do not finish school. Census data from

2000 — old, but consistent — showed nearly 57 percent of residents 25 and older have less than a 12th-grade education, compared with 21 percent



Edith Wilson, also known as Grandma Wilson, reads over her daily scripture while waiting to take the curlers from her hair. At age 89, and having lived here close to 60 years, Wilson has seen a life full of change at the Denver Housing Authority's Sun Valley Homes. [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post) citywide.

To walk down the streets in Sun Valley is to see many of these mothers and think, oh, they are so young. They are aware few glances come without judgment. There is, and always will be, a tendency to blame the poor for their poverty, to assign to their circumstance a moral value. That people are responsible for their choices is obvious. What is less obvious is what choices are available. Upbringing, education, family values and mental disabilities can all narrow the perception of what's possible. What lies in plain sight to one person may not just be out of reach for another, but unimaginable.

That's the nature of this island in a metropolis. It is not only hard to see into. It is hard to see out of.

A 27-year-old named Jolena Casias moved in to Sun Valley Homes two years ago. She'd been in transitional housing before that, a shelter before that, with relatives before that, in foster care before that.

Her mom, she says with a shrug, "was never interested in being a mom." Jolena has four kids, three by a man who started having sex with her when she was 14. He was 22. She dropped out of school and later earned her GED and a certificate to be a medical clerical worker.

"I wanted kids," she tells me during her lunch break. She's working full time for minimum wage at a home-health agency. "I didn't feel anyone would love me, and they would love me.

"Living in the projects gives you a bad name. They don't see a mom like me trying to make her life better. This is all I can afford now. I don't intend to rely on the government forever. My kids deserve their own room and a backyard and maybe a puppy. I always tell them, 'You can have whatever you want. You can be whatever you want. If you finish school.' That's what I tell them. 'Don't give up.' "



Margaret Jauregui stands outside her home on West Holden Place. She remembers taking care of the lot to the right of her home when it was vacant. She and her neighbors proposed turning it into a park. [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

Something occurs in a place where so much poverty has been concentrated. Particularly in a place that has been cut off from other working- or middle-class families and where millions of dollars have been spent to help people survive, but scant attention has been given to an environment that will allow them to thrive.

Sun Valley has no nearby jobs for residents, most of whom have no cars. It doesn't have enough affordable child care. It has no neighborhood-serving businesses. No grocery store outside a small market that sells strollers and sandwiches and diapers, \$1 for two. A 7-Eleven and Family Dollar store sit up on Federal.

Something happens in a place where most streets dead-end.

An isolated community becomes an insular community. It becomes a community of us versus them, a place where suspicion of outsiders and the institutions they represent runs deep.

Norms reset. They reset to accommodate single parenthood and dropping out of high school and government dependency and violence.

"My dad was out of the picture, that's how it was with all my friends," Roybal says. "Just witnessing violence, being young, being jumped into a gang, and we would think that's normal. You get the crap kicked out of you just to hang out with the big boys. And then you go to school, and it's like, 'Wait a minute, you're saying this isn't normal?' And it messes with your head. . . . Some people here are so oppressed, they don't have life in them to live."

I go see Norma Giron, principal of Fairview Elementary School, which sits in the heart of residential Sun Valley. Fairview is more than a school in the neighborhood. It is an anchor and a haven. Its teachers are counselors, coaches and mentors to children and their parents. It's not a strong school academically, but its students are showing growth. When Giron arrived to take the school's helm 11 years ago, she was horrified to discover one-third of the student body had



Mohamed Hussein, 10, left, and his cousin Abdi Osman Siid, 8, play along 11th Ave, between the Xcel Energy property and the Denver Housing Authority's Sun Valley Homes in Denver, CO. The pair were easily entertained themselves, sword fighting with wooden stakes, playing with brick, a hubcap and climbing trees. [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

been shuffled into special education. They were not learning disabled, she said. They were educationally deprived.

How does the poverty and isolation here impact the school, I ask her.

"Oh, my God," she says. "In every way. Everyone needs models of what else there is. . . . Our kids don't see what's possible. If you ask them what they want, they can't describe it. We had the word 'driveway' as one of our vocabulary words, and they didn't know what it was.

"Our students are streetwise. They know where the bad houses are. They know who is safe. They talk openly about that drug house or that gang member. They live with dramatic experiences, watching family members get arrested, watching women get beat up. It just takes their innocence."

Sun Valley has existed more or less in its current form for at least 30 years — long after public officials and policymakers recognized that such concentrated poverty was toxic for the people who lived amid it and the cities that allowed it to persist. Yet it has persisted. Out of neglect. Or the lack of resources and political will. It persists because Sun Valley represents in pure form the daunting legacy of social and economic segregation and the challenge of providing economic and educational opportunity to the neediest among us.

"There's no question that Sun Valley has always been the most difficult project to understand and to deal with," says Sal Carpio, a former city councilman who was executive director of DHA from 1994 to 2006. "It is a whole different world."

The easy thing to do would be to demolish the projects and relocate the tenants. Give them a choice between housing projects that are less isolated or vouchers to allow them to rent on the open market. End their isolation. Let the market dictate what fills in the 30 acres now occupied by Sun Valley Homes.

But for most of this neighborhood's history, the city has done what's easy here — with disastrous results. The fact is the needs in Sun Valley are a more magnified form of the needs in Westwood, in Villa Park, in Elyria- Swansea: a healthy environment with easy access to good jobs with benefits and strong neighborhood schools and services.

"Sun Valley is very hard. But if we can figure out how to do this right, we can figure out how to do all kinds of things right," says developer Bill Mosher, a former chair of DHA's board of commissioners.

To do this neighborhood right, or, more to the point, to do right by this neighborhood, you first need to know how, over many years, it's been done wrong.

RAISING SUN VALLEY | SECOND OF A THREE-PART SERIES

Public policy made Sun Valley "a place to warehouse people"

By Tina Griego

The Denver Post

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Edith Gonzalez takes a break from yard work at the home she shares with her husband, Isidro, on West 13th Avenue in Sun Valley. The couple would like to sell their home; the house next door is vacant and for sale. Edith says, "That poor house goes into foreclosure constantly." The Gonzalezes have lived in their home for eight years. [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

For years, residents have complained they are the stepchildren of the city, overlooked and neglected. Over time, they have learned to fight to improve the neighborhood. The redevelopment of their neighborhood with the coming of light rail will be their biggest challenge yet.

To do Sun Valley right, or more to the point, to do right by this neighborhood, you first need to know how it's been done wrong.

Start at the beginning. In its earliest days as a neighborhood, this was a settlement of Jewish immigrants from Russia. They lived amid pickle plants, rag shops, a brick factory, shops and markets and small farms.

It was the home of entrepreneur and factory worker, a place where a poor man and woman could find the footing to cross Federal Boulevard to a nicer home. For all that has changed here, that pattern has not. It always has been a home to the poor and, for most of its residents, a way station on the road to some place better.

In 1925, the city passed its first zoning code and the future Sun Valley became an industrial zone. Jewish families were being replaced by Hispanics, who bought or rented houses in the flood plain of a river that was becoming more polluted by the year.

The Great Depression hit and out of it came the country's first public housing act in 1937. The fledgling Denver Housing Authority selected Sun Valley and Lincoln Park for its early projects. Within 15 years, the housing agency would build two more housing projects in Sun Valley, more than 600 units in total.

The Sun Valley we know today is the result of the collision of federal housing policy and public planning. In that way, the neighborhood is both a creation of government and an indictment of it.

"Sun Valley was never a good idea," says former City Councilman Sal Carpio, who was also executive director of DHA from 1993 to 2006. "It was a place to warehouse people."

In 1956, the year DHA opened Sun Valley Annex, the city's last housing project, the City Council passed a new zoning code. In effect, it said that beyond public and transitional housing for the poor, no other residences were wanted in the neighborhood.

" 'Illegal, nonconforming,' they beat me to death with that phrase every time I went down to try to get a permit," Sun Valley homeowner Paul Bobian says. Homes slid into disrepair. Some were abandoned. Others razed. Twenty-seven homes remain. Five are vacant. Ten are being rented.

The 1950s would be a pivotal decade in the shaping of Sun Valley. The city's new zoning code was passed. The Valley Highway was plowing through and over neighborhoods east of Sun Valley. The intersection of Federal Boulevard and West Colfax Avenue was remade into a giant cloverleaf exchange. All of this cut Sun Valley residents off from surrounding communities and neighborhood-serving businesses.

Over time, the ever-expanding sports district north of West Colfax Boulevard consumed more land once occupied by homes and industry.

Public housing was envisioned as serving all who needed it, like public transportation. It was supposed to be integrated into the community, without stigma. It never worked out that way.

Business and real estate interests did not want government competition in the housing business. They won three changes in the federal 1937 Housing Act that gave us the dense, isolated and stigmatized public housing project.

The construction had to be cheap; the tenants had to be low-income; and the projects had to replace slums and blighted land so that surrounding property values would rise.

Over time, federal housing policy would change again, giving preference to poorer and poorer families. Today, half of all Sun Valley Homes families live on less than \$8,000 a year. Nearly half of the tenants are Hispanic, about one-third are black-African and African-American. Asians and whites make up most of the rest.

Margie Jauregui was born in Sun Valley in 1952. Her grandparents lived here. Her mother was raised here. Margie lives in a brick house next to a warehouse.

Three years ago, Margie's grandson drowned. Baby Matthew, as everyone here calls him, was 2. His mother was pushing him in a stroller on the narrow bike path along Lakewood Gulch. They were caught by a flash flood that poured into the box culvert below Decatur Street and carried away Matthew. Neighbors say they had long asked city officials to do something about the culvert. The city later awarded Matthew's parents a small settlement.

→ RTD contractors recently demolished the culvert as Lakewood Gulch is widened and rerouted to make way for the coming light rail.

"We have to fight for everything we get here," Margie says. "The problem we have is that we're the stepchildren of the city. They do what they want with us."

This is not a neighborhood engineered to fight. Still, it wins some battles, improves life for its residents, gains confidence.

Now come the city people and the light-rail people and the housing people and they say, "The train is coming. Your neighborhood is going to become a healthy, vibrant place and we want you here to be part of that change. What would you like to see?"

In the neighborhood, hope and excitement rise. But so, too, does doubt that the new Sun Valley has a place for them. Residents watch the flood plain and beautification work on the South Platte River and the rerouting of Lakewood Gulch and the rebuilding of the Federal Boulevard bridge to make way for the light-rail tracks. They watch and they say to each other: "I don't know who this is for, but it's not for us."

Read more:[Public policy made Sun Valley "a place to warehouse people" - The Denver Post](http://www.denverpost.com/frontpage/ci_16780731#ixzz17MA9QZOY)http://www.denverpost.com/frontpage/ci_16780731#ixzz17MA9QZOY

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RAISING SUN VALLEY | SECOND OF A THREE-PART SERIES

Part Two: "The hill" born, torn

Story by Tina Griego

Photographs by Craig F. Walker

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Bears Stadium and Invesco Field. The stadium, built in 1948 on the site of a former dump, became Mile High Stadium. It was replaced in 2001 by the adjacent Invesco Field, with the Mile High site now used for parking. [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post | Historical photos courtesy of Denver Public Library)

For years, residents have complained they are the stepchildren of the city, overlooked and neglected. Over time, they have learned to fight to improve the neighborhood. The redevelopment of their neighborhood with the coming of light rail will be their biggest challenge yet.

Post columnist Tina Griego spent more than two months in Sun Valley, reporting on the neighborhood's struggles and its hopes and fears as it prepares for the arrival of light rail.

From West 11th Avenue and Decatur Street in the heart of Sun Valley, you can see the way the poor have been hidden below a teeming roadway, next to a forlorn river, surrounded by industry, and a question comes to mind: How did this neighborhood come to exist?

Start at the beginning. In the late 1800s, Jewish immigrants filled blocks with small homes and businesses, factories to the north, farms to the south. It had all they needed: a school, a synagogue, markets, a smokehouse, a bakery, a recreation center, a lake, a fishmonger.



Edith Gonzalez takes a break from yard work at the home she shares with her husband, Isidro, on West 13th Avenue in Sun Valley. The couple would like to sell their home; the house next door is vacant and for sale. Edith says, "That poor house goes into foreclosure constantly." The Gonzalezes have lived in their home for eight years. **Videos and Photos** (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

Libby (Katz) Rosen's parents moved from Russia into the neighborhood in 1904. They bought a house at 2613 W. 12th Ave., and Libby was born there in 1921. She lived in the neighborhood for 19 years, until she was married. Rosen remembers the pickle factory and the lake where the Rude Park softball field is now. She remembers going down to the South Platte River on Rosh Hashana to throw away her sins.

She remembers her phone number, Tabor 4792. Libby called her neighborhood the bergl — "the hill."

It was the home of entrepreneur and factory worker, a place where a poor man and woman could find the footing to climb the hill and cross Federal Boulevard to a nicer home. For all that has changed in this neighborhood over the past 130 years, that pattern has not. It always has been a home to the poor and, for most of its residents, has always been a temporary refuge, a way station on the road to someplace better.

People see their neighborhood one way. Yet that's not necessarily the view held by city planners or leaders or business interests. So it was with Sun Valley.

In 1925, the city passed its first zoning law. The land flanking the South Platte River, already home to factories and farms and homes, became an industrial zone. Sun Valley had a brick factory, a pickle factory, a rag shop, the power plant. Edgar and Laura Kincaid lived next to Loren and Elizabeth Spraker, who lived next to Pedro and Augusta Gutierrez. Workers lived in the neighborhood. It was a beneficial arrangement for everyone.

By then, most of the Jewish families had moved up and out, and they were replaced by poor Hispanic families. They lived in cheap houses on cheap land along the banks of a river that rapidly was becoming more sewer than waterway.

The Depression hit, and out of it came the New Deal and government-funded public housing. Denver's fledgling housing authority decided the neighborhood would be a good spot for a housing



Project Manager Harry Grieme watches the demolition of a concrete box culvert along the Lakewood Gulch as part of the West Corridor Light Rail Project in the Sun Valley neighborhood of Denver, CO. This is the section of the Lakewood Gulch where Jose Matthew Alexander Jauregui Jr. drowned in 2007. [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

project. The land was cheap, the houses were falling apart, the location out of the way. The 184-unit Las Casitas opened along Federal Boulevard in 1942 to families with annual incomes of less than \$1,000. The rent was \$2.44 a room per month. The apartments were of cinderblock and concrete, unadorned, like dorm rooms.

"I lived there with my mom and dad and nine brothers and sisters," says Frank Rangel, a resident of Las Casitas from 1955 to 1964. "There was a definite stigma to living in the projects even then. You know, stuff like, 'It's not safe to walk there after dark.' 'Only criminals live there.' We'd say, 'Hey, that's our neighborhood.' We were never afraid. We used to play volleyball over the Dumpsters. We had a good family, a lovely upbringing."

An industrial zone was not a barrier to public housing. City officials simply carved out residential pockets. Within 15 years, the Denver Housing Authority had built two more projects, 600 units total, in Sun Valley. Only Lincoln Park, directly east and just on the other side of the railroad tracks, had more. Most residents were Hispanic, and for a time public housing reinforced segregation in Denver as it did in many cities across the country. Today, nearly half of Sun Valley Homes' residents are Hispanic and about one-third are black, which includes refugees from Africa. Asians and whites make up most of the rest.

From 1940 to 1980, Sun Valley and Lincoln Park were home to nearly 1,300 public housing apartments.

Sun Valley is what happens when federal housing policy collides with public planning. In that way, the neighborhood is both a creation of government and an indictment of it.

"The whole attitude back then among city leaders toward the housing authority was, 'Don't create any trouble for me.' It was 'Get them warehoused and out of the way,' " says retired DHA executive director Sal Carpio, who was also a City Council member in the 1970s and '80s.

In 1956, the year DHA opened Sun Valley Annex, the city's last housing project, the City Council passed a new zoning code. It reaffirmed the vision of Sun Valley as a home to industry. Which meant single-family homes were no longer welcome. It was a war of attrition.



" 'Illegal, nonconforming,' they beat me to death with that phrase every time I went down to try to get a permit," Sun Valley homeowner Paul Bobian says. In 1990 he moved into the home his parents and grandparents once owned and found it in bad shape. "I had to pay \$1,680 for homeowners insurance only to find out that if the house burnt down, I couldn't rebuild. I had to put up bonds as collateral to get a bank loan to make this house livable. When I had it appraised, the appraiser said it was the worst single-family dwelling area in the city of Denver."

Homes slid into disrepair. Some were abandoned. Others razed. Twenty-seven homes remain. Five are vacant. Ten are being rented. The small neighborhood businesses, the hamburger joint, the two mom-and-pop shops eventually went too.

"I believe in my heart that this neighborhood was destined to fail by design," Bobian tells me.

"Zoning redlined us," says Phil Kaspar, a resident and property owner in Sun Valley. "And that didn't just reduce the number of private homes here. It reduced the number of positive role models. It's criminal to take kids and put them in a neighborhood like this where there are almost no positive role models."

In 2004, residents successfully lobbied the City Council to allow most of the remaining single-family homes to become legal uses.

By the mid-1950s, Bears Stadium had been built on the site of a former dump in the northwest corner of the neighborhood. The Valley Highway was plowing through to the east, demolishing homes and businesses, carrying people into the promise of suburbia. The intersection of Federal Boulevard and West Colfax Avenue was about to be ripped up and replaced with a giant cloverleaf interchange that preceded the much-ballyhooed and failed Avondale shopping center. That 1960s urban-renewal project severed Sun Valley from the neighborhoods north and west.

Mother Nature did her part too. The South Platte River flood



Frank Rangel, a former Las Casitas resident, shows a childhood photo to his grandkids. He also pointed out a field where he played football. "There was no grass, just weeds and stickers. The other teams didn't want to come and play us because they would end up full

of stickers. They weren't afraid of us; we never won a game. They were afraid of the stickers." [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

in 1965 wiped out some homes. Xcel Energy eventually built three giant fuel oil tanks on the land where Libby Rosen's father once grazed his cattle.

By the mid-1970s, McNichols Arena was built just south of Bears Stadium, renamed Mile High. Both were demolished to make way for today's Invesco Field and its ocean of parking lots, dead space most days of the year. No homes remain north of West 13th Avenue.

Becky (Ramirez) Kleibo lived in Las Casitas from 1956 to 1978, the year DHA started demolishing that project. Many residents protested the demolition. They didn't want the promised housing elsewhere. This was home. Kleibo says her father loved Las Casitas. He enjoyed walking through the projects and the familiarity of his neighbors and the sense of belonging. She did not share her father's devotion.

"When they started tearing them down, I wish they would have kept on going," Kleibo tells me. "It's trapped. Don't you see how it's trapped? It's become its own little enclave, and people don't get out of there. They become comfortable — no, no, not comfortable — but it's as though they fall asleep. They say, 'I guess this is all there is, this is just the way it is.'

"I used to argue with my parents. 'Let's get out of here.' People would grow up there and what were their goals? 'Let's see if I can get a boyfriend, get pregnant and get my own project.' "

A DHA report from 1958, just two years after it opened the Sun Valley Annex, reaches the same conclusion in more bureaucratic language: "The large concentrated compounds may have carried some institutional advantages for construction and management, but (they) resulted in serious social and political problems."

Those problems included isolation, lack of "normal community facilities," a thwarting of the "normal building market."

That's a 52-year-old acknowledgment of a mistake.

"Sun Valley was never a good idea," Carpio tells me. "It was a place to warehouse people."

Public housing was envisioned as serving all who needed it, like public transportation. It was supposed to be integrated into the community, without stigma. It never worked out that way, says Betsey Martens, executive director of Boulder Housing Partners and senior vice president of the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials.

Business and real estate interests did not want government competition in the housing business beyond rewarding homeownership with low-interest loans and tax write-offs.

They won three changes in the federal 1937 Housing Act that created the dense, isolated and stigmatized public housing project, Martens says.

The construction had to be cheap; the tenants had to be low-income; and the projects had to replace slums and blighted land so that surrounding property values would rise.



2800 block of West 10th Avenue. Sanitary concerns spurred the removal of dilapidated housing in the late 1940s, which was replaced by the Sun Valley Homes project and green space for children. Atop the hill at left in 1947 is the Las Casitas housing project. **Videos and Photos** (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post | Historical photos courtesy of Denver Public Library)

For years, residents have complained they are the stepchildren of the city, overlooked and neglected. Over time, they have learned to fight to improve the neighborhood. The redevelopment of their neighborhood with the coming of light rail will be their biggest challenge yet.

During World War II, war-industry workers and returning veterans lived in many of Denver's public housing apartments. But the federal government mandated preferences for poorer and poorer families. Rent today is 30 percent of income, no matter how low. The average rent in the Sun Valley Homes projects is \$172 a month and is slightly higher for seniors because of their Social Security.

Two problems with rent based on a percentage of income: It left housing authorities short on money to keep up maintenance, and it had the perverse effect of discouraging some residents from seeking or keeping higher-paying jobs because they didn't want to pay higher rent or move out.

Many people in Sun Valley need the help. They are elderly



90-year-old Libby Rosen displays a family photo outside 2613 West 12th Ave in the Sun Valley Neighborhood of Denver, CO. This is the home where Libby grew up when Sun Valley was a Jewish neighborhood. She moved away in 1940- after she was married in the yard. The photo, at the home, is of Libby, seated, along with her sisters- (standing l-r) Dora, Florence Goldberg (family friend), Mollie, Lottie. **Videos and Photos**(Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

or infirm or just temporarily down on their luck. But some have become enabled, says pastor Adrian "Age" Sandoval at Tha MYX International church in Sun Valley. "And enabling can become entrapment."

Much has changed for the better in federal housing policy and in the relationship between the city and DHA. Over the past 15 years, administrations have worked to improve or completely redevelop the North Lincoln, Quigg Newton, Curtis Park and Park Avenue projects. DHA is now seeking federal funds to redevelop the South Lincoln Park projects. Sun Valley, largely unchanged for 30 years, is next on the list.

"Nothing has been done in Sun Valley because there is no solution to Sun Valley in a traditional sense," Carpio says. "We knocked our heads over this, believe me.

"I believe the only way to address Sun Valley is that it has to be demolished and never replaced. . . . We had no resources to do it, and you have to be careful when you talk about demolishing someone's home when you don't have the resources to move people. We have to be careful even now."

Martens tells me something I think of long after our conversation. "Housing has never been at the heart of housing policy. There was always another agenda. Job creation. Slum clearance. Spurring the economy. . . . Residents' needs have been secondary, and what we know now is that people need to be the primary agenda."

It's worth remembering as the neighborhood's light-rail future is being planned.

Margie Jauregui still lives in Sun Valley after all these years. She was born here in 1952. Her grandparents lived here, her mother was raised here. She lives in a brick house with a brick fence topped by statues of lions. A warehouse sits next door. She is weary these days.

Three years ago, Margie's grandson drowned. Baby Matthew, as everyone here calls him, was 2. His mother was pushing him in a stroller on



Liam Johnson, 11, sports a oversized cowboy hat as he and Colton Gomez, 10, pass the homes on West 13th Ave heading back to their car in the Sun Valley neighborhood of Denver, CO. The boys attended the Broncos game against the Jets with Colton's father Rick Gomez, of Golden. While Invesco Field is technically in the Sun Valley neighborhood of Denver it is only connected to the community on game days when football fans park and pass through the neighborhood. [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

the narrow bike path along Lakewood Gulch. They were caught by a flash flood that poured into the box culvert below Decatur Street and carried away Matthew.

Neighbors say they had long asked city officials to do something about the culvert.

→ Regional Transportation District contractors recently demolished the culvert as Lakewood Gulch is widened and rerouted to make way for light rail.

"We have to fight for everything we get here," Margie says. "We had to fight for street lights. We had to fight for a grocery store, and the one they're getting for us isn't even in the neighborhood. We had to fight for a laundromat for the projects. The problem we have is that we're the stepchildren of the city. They do what they want with us."

This is not a neighborhood engineered to fight. Still, it wins some battles, improves life for its residents, gains confidence.

Now come the city people and the light-rail people and the housing people, and they say, "The train is coming. Your neighborhood is going to become a healthy, vibrant place and we want you here to be part of that change. What would you like to see?"

In the neighborhood, hope and excitement rise. But so, too, does doubt that the new Sun Valley has a place for them. Residents watch the flood plain and beautification work on the South Platte River and the rerouting of Lakewood Gulch and the rebuilding of the Federal Bridge to make way for the light-rail tracks. They watch, and they say to each other: "I don't know who this is for, but it's not for us."

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Longmont to review FasTracks tax proposals

By John Fryar

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LONGMONT — The Longmont City Council on Tuesday night will review the Regional Transportation District's scenarios under which the RTD would seek voters' approval of a sales-tax hike to speed up the transit agency's completion of the FasTracks system.

However, council members may delay until Dec. 14 taking any official city position on the RTD's potential November 2011 ballot question.

Chris Quinn, manager of the FasTracks Northwest Rail Corridor project, and Phil Greenwald, the city's transportation planner, are scheduled to make Tuesday night's presentation about the tax-increase options being considered.

Transit district voters approved the overall FasTracks system of transit improvements in 2004, along with a 0.4 percent sales and use tax to fund it.

The system originally was expected to be completed by 2017. But tax collections have fallen short of what was estimated six years ago, and costs have escalated.

The RTD staff now projects that without an additional sales tax or another major source of revenue, the agency might not be able to complete FasTracks — including passenger train service along the Northwest Rail Corridor between Longmont and Denver — until 2042.

It would require revenue from another voter-approved 0.4 percent sales-tax hike to assure completion of the entire FasTracks system by the end of 2018, RTD staffers have said.

Finishing FasTracks would take longer than that if voters were to approve a lower tax increase. Completion of the system might not happen until 2035, for example, if voters were to approve only an additional 0.1 percent sales tax.

Greenwald has written the City Council to inform it that Longmont is working with the North Area Transit Alliance and the U.S. 36 Mayors and Commissioners Coalition "to formulate a clear, regional response to the RTD's requests for comments."

Greenwald suggested that council members on Tuesday night come up with any questions they want the RTD to answer but also that they continue working on the coordinated regional response before the council's Dec. 14 meeting.

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