

RAISING SUN VALLEY | THIRD OF A THREE-PART SERIES

Residents are biggest skeptics about Sun Valley transformation

By Tina Griego

The Denver Post

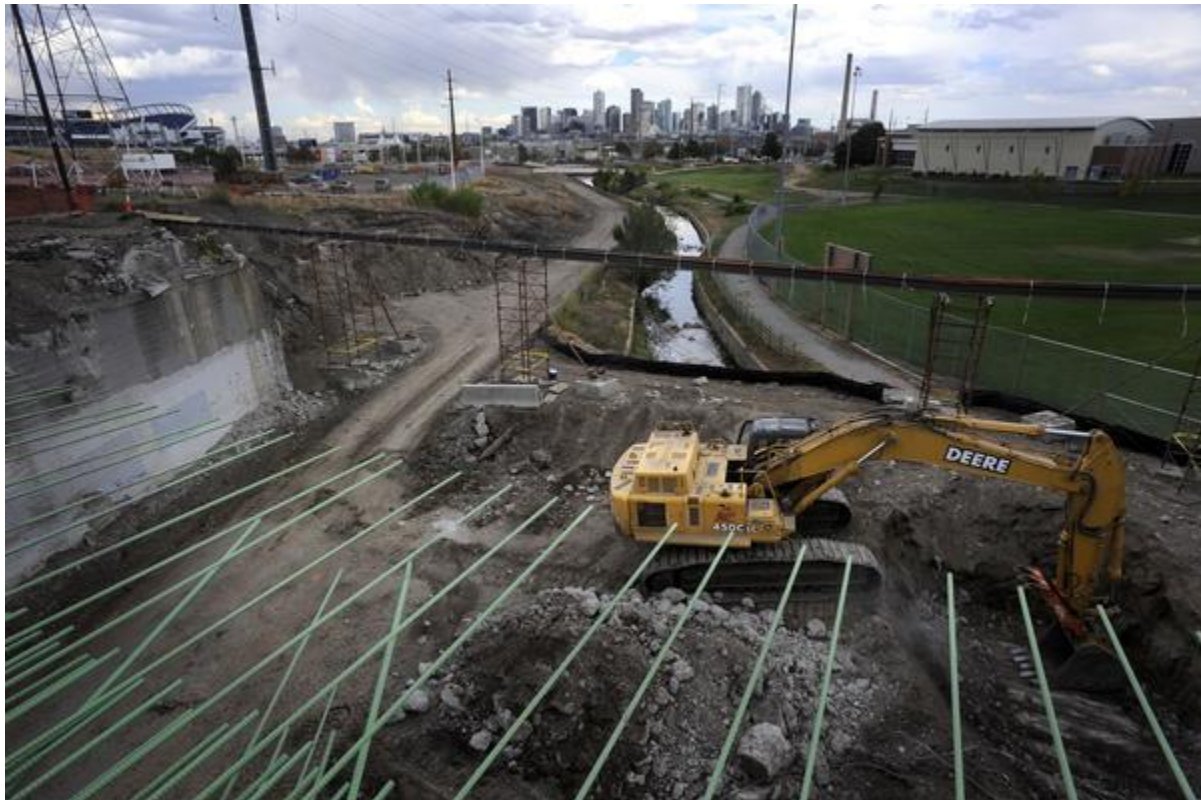
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Game Plan. A trackhoe digs beneath Federal Boulevard where Lakewood Gulch is being widened for the West Corridor light-rail project. The planned 2013 opening of a rail station has planners envisioning a transformation for Sun Valley, including an entertainment district. But residents fear that when, and if, the development comes, their wishes will end up the same way their neighborhood often has: overlooked. [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.

The talk in Sun Valley these days is all about the future. The light rail coming through. The station scheduled to open in the neighborhood in May 2013. The development that will accompany it.

No one knows what the future Sun Valley will look like. No one knows how long it will take to build. But the vision is of a Denver neighborhood with three times as many

apartments as are there now. One-third will be public housing. One-third will be affordable rentals and condos. One-third will be market-rate units for sale.

They'll be mixed among one another, so that the public housing becomes indistinguishable from the private. The neighborhood will grow skyward. The buildings will have upper floors that offer views of downtown and of the mountains. An entertainment district of bars and restaurants might extend from the southern promenade of Invesco Field toward the light rail station just east of Federal Boulevard.

People will come to Sun Valley in search of opportunity instead of leaving it.

A lot of assumptions underlie this picture. Among them that light rail will make the neighborhood more desirable, that the market will rev up, that Sun Valley residents will have a say in the future of their neighborhood.

The new administration of this city will have to figure out how to transform Sun Valley into a thriving neighborhood that serves its residents and the city at large. It will take vision and resources. It will take political will.

The Denver Housing Authority with its 33 acres is the largest owner of land available for redevelopment. But the Metropolitan Stadium District has its vast landscape of parking lots on the northern half of Sun Valley. The city has some property, as does Xcel Energy. Then, there are the owners of the single-family homes. The current drafts show gridded streets running through their properties. Willingly or not, they have become speculators, wondering when the best time might be to sell their houses and hoping for a fair price.

"We have to have a consensus and a compelling vision for the entire community," Denver Housing Authority executive director Ismael Guerrero says.

Over the past few years, the city and the Denver Housing Authority t that means Sun Valley has to go through a drastic change," says Kris Rollerson, executive director of the Sun Valley Youth Center. "And let's be realistic. If you want to live in a high-rise loft, you don't want to live next to Mama Whoever and her 19 children.

"I don't know what's going to happen. What I do fear is, 'OK, everyone, we're going to move you here and here and here.' My dream is the community would stay strong for whatever we're up against, but we don't know what we're up against."

Ask residents what they want and they say: Jobs. A community center. Safe streets. A stronger school. More adult education programs. A grocery store. More positive role models. More youth programs and gardens and green space. They say: Build on our strengths, our sense of family, our resourcefulness.

"People have to grow. Cities have to grow," Sun Valley Homes resident Asnake Deferse says. An Ethiopian refugee, he lost his house and job and moved his family into the housing projects for the first time about eight months ago. "We in Sun Valley don't have to be called the poorest people. Educate us. I don't like feeling as though we are on the bottom, less than. There are a lot of good people here. I want the people here to grow with the city. I want to see people from this neighborhood become leaders."

An Oregon-based urban design company has been taking all the suggestions for the city and adding its own expertise. The final draft of the plan is expected early next year and eventually must be approved by the City Council.

A young man named Michael Williams grew up in these projects. He graduated from high school and is working for the Denver Department of Human Services in the neighborhood. After work, he takes the bus along Federal Boulevard, and every time it goes past the light-rail construction site, he looks out the window.

"And it's like, wow, almost a sense of disbelief, really, that this is happening in my neighborhood," he says after a Sunday church service. "You know what I feel when I see those bulldozers and cranes? I feel pride, and I wish I was down there laying that track. I just see that what is going in there is going to be better than what was there."

RAISING SUN VALLEY | THIRD OF A THREE-PART SERIES

Part Three: Pressure building

Story by Tina Griego

Photographs by Craig F. Walker

The Denver Post

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Game Plan. A trackhoe digs beneath Federal Boulevard where Lakewood Gulch is being widened for the West Corridor light-rail project. The planned 2013 opening of a rail station has planners envisioning a transformation for Sun Valley, including an entertainment district. But residents fear that when, and if, the development comes, their wishes will end up the same way their neighborhood often has: overlooked. [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. Ten to 15 years from now, Sun Valley is remade. It is as if "downtown jumped the river," as one resident here imagines it.

The old houses are gone, replaced by glass and brick buildings several stories high. The bottom floors are occupied by shops that front wide sidewalks shaded by trees. The upper floors hold apartments and condos with beautiful views of downtown and the mountains. The south promenade of Invesco Field feeds into an entertainment district of restaurants and bars. Lofts and apartments overlook the river, which boasts an amphitheater, playgrounds, new bike and pedestrian paths. Light industry and workshops with living space and offices spread to the south. Work is a quick jaunt from the light-rail station that opened in 2013 just off Federal Boulevard.

The public housing is scattered among the private. You can't tell which is which. No more isolated public housing. No more concentrated poverty.

That's one vision of the new Sun Valley. It's not the only vision. No one knows what the neighborhood will become. No one knows how long it will take to build it.

The new administration of this city will have to figure out how to transform Sun Valley into a thriving neighborhood that serves its residents and the city at large. It will take vision and resources. It will take political will.

"You can see opportunity," says Malcolm Freeman, senior vice president of business development for the Denver Broncos. "What opportunity looks like is still tough to figure out. If redevelopment were embraced, you're talking about the largest assemblage of acreage that exists close to the core of the city. We're all excited."

A lot of assumptions underlie this pretty picture. Among them, that light rail will make the



Trumpeting Role Models. Joe Aragon, the youth minister at Tha MYX International church, leads Sunday school students in a biblical lesson about Joshua and the Battle of Jericho. He says he wants to reach as many kids as possible. "I want to give them a male role model a strong one. Because there is a lack of male role models in this community." [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post) neighborhood more desirable, that the market will rev up, that Sun Valley residents want and will choose to have a say in the future of their neighborhood. Finally, that the powers-that-be will include them.

The reality is this neighborhood is likely to be run right over by light rail and the accompanying development if its residents do not stay vigilant and unified. And maybe even if they do.

People here know that. Over the past decade, the neighborhood coalition has campaigned for and won many improvements, including better lighting, traffic control, police protection and new playgrounds. Numerous nonprofits have been serving residents, and all seek to help them better their lives. The neighborhood is as unified



Opening Doors. Fairview Elementary students wait to use the restroom after a field trip. Principal Norma Giron says the transition for kids moving into and out of the neighborhood is tough. "Getting to know the child and where he is, we have to readjust them to everything we do." **Videos and Photos** (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post) as it's ever been.

But residents also know this: Many of the people now living in Sun Valley will be gone by the time the light-rail station opens in 2013. The departing residents will be replaced by new families who know nothing about the coming light rail and don't see a reason to care. Like many here, they view themselves as just passing through. The demographics will continue to ensure that Sun Valley is stripped of its political voice and will. That's what happens when most residents are children, half the families in the projects are getting by on less than \$8,000 a year and most adults lack a high school education.

In 2002, Laurie Walker moved into Sun Valley for six weeks as part of a University of Denver campus ministry. Walker is now the Sun Valley community organizer for the Metro Organizations for People.

"It took me two days to accept conditions that are not acceptable," she tells a small group of Sun Valley Coalition residents at a recent meeting.

Resignation is a swift, strong current through here. It is fed by the day-to-day struggle of residents, disillusionment, and betrayal by individuals or institutions once trusted.

Overcoming this may be Sun Valley's biggest challenge as residents prepare for light-rail development.

Over the past few years, the city and the Denver Housing Authority have been regularly asking residents what they would like to see. Some respond eagerly. Some view the query as an empty gesture.

Others find the question meaningless. "You can make all these plans, but the big boys with the dollars will be the ones who decide what Sun Valley will become," Edith Gonzalez, a neighborhood homeowner, tells me. "That's the reality of life."

Skepticism is the prevailing sentiment.

"When you tell someone you're getting green grass and a picket fence, of course, everyone wants that, but that means Sun Valley has to go through a drastic change," says Kris Rollerson, executive director of the Sun Valley Youth Center. "And let's be realistic. If you want to live in a high-rise loft, you don't want to live next to Mama Whoever and her 19 children.

"I don't know what's going to happen. What I do fear is, 'OK, everyone, we're going to move you here and here and here.' My dream is the community would stay strong for whatever we're up against, but we don't know what we're up against."

One thing is certain, says Joe Aragon, the youth minister at Tha MYX International church. "If you're hopeless, you're not involved. This tidal wave is coming in. If you're not involved, instead of redevelopment, you get gentrification."

That many residents doubt they will have a genuine say in shaping the neighborhood's future is not surprising. History, after all, has taught them so. But, they also have a hard time envisioning that future and they're sure as heck not convinced it will be brighter.

That's the nature of an island of poverty. How do you see a way forward when you can't see a way out?

"Generation after generation lives here and they don't think anything can be better," Phu Do, who works for DHA in Sun Valley, tells me at a residents' meeting. "They're leery. They can't imagine the difference. They can't think outside the box."

Light rail is coming, Walker tells Sun Valley Coalition members. The neighborhood is going to change. It'll be at least five years, but this is time to dream.

A resident, listening to this, says he'd like Sun Valley Homes to get a soda machine.

At Fairview Elementary School, principal Norma Giron says: "We can't just throw residents out for who is 'acceptable.' At the same time, you want them to succeed and get out of here. It almost doesn't have an answer. What I'm afraid of is either way, the residents are going to lose."

The mood at a Sun Valley Coalition meeting in late September becomes agitated after DHA says it is applying for a neighborhood planning grant and gives residents short notice.

"The question is, are they going to listen to us?"

"They want to mix incomes. I don't think that'll work."

"I've seen it work."

"It'll work in the short term, but in the long term, it will be a problem. Something gets stolen, people will blame us. What I wish for in our neighborhood is let us have condos and houses. Don't let us live like rodents and roaches."

"We need mixed-income. Our kids need to see more than poverty."

"No offense, but I don't care about the projects. I don't live there."

"But you



(Click to enlarge)

live in the neighborhood."

"I don't care as long as they give me the money."

"It just needs to be a functional neighborhood where you can walk to places, you know, businesses on the bottom and residences on top."

"Their word for that is mixed-use."

"Well, that's what we need. Where's Ismael? Ismael needs to get his butt down here."

Ismael Guerrero is the Denver Housing Authority's executive director. He was hired in 2007. His background is in development and finance of affordable housing. "He's good people," neighborhood residents say about him.

"The dilemma we face is, 'Do you preserve what's there because it's serving a need?' " Guerrero says. "We could do a lot. Paint. Re-roof. The structures probably have another 50 years of life. So, do you accept that as the best you can offer when you know it's not acceptable? The outcomes — the concentrated poverty, the violence — are not something I want to accept."

But it's not just up to DHA, he says. Sure, DHA is the largest landowner in Sun Valley, but there are other players, including the city, the stadium district, private homeowners and Xcel Energy.

"We have to have a consensus and a compelling



Warm Embrace. Darius Townsell, 4, hugs Kris Rollerson, head of the Sun Valley Youth Center, during a break from parking cars on a Broncos game day. Darius and his mom were helping Rollerson raise funds for the center. Rollerson has about 22 students a day in her after-school program, where they get a meal from Food Bank of the Rockies, tutoring and physical activities. **Videos and Photos** (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

vision for the entire community," Guerrero says.

At the next meeting of the Sun Valley Coalition, Guerrero tells residents much the same thing. Redevelopment is at least five years out because the South Lincoln Park projects must be redeveloped first, he tells them. The homeowners tell him they're worried DHA will use eminent domain to take their property. "We don't have the need to use eminent domain," he says. "We won't."

"How can we get something for residents to stand on our own two feet?" asks Darrell Washington, president of the Sun Valley Homes Local Resident Council.

"We're looking at the whole community with the whole community," Guerrero says.

After the meeting, Washington beckons me outside. "I want to show you something," he says.

He points down the street, toward downtown. "Look at that," he says. The lights of the city are visible just beyond the dark shadow of the Xcel fuel oil tanks.

"Look how pretty that is," he says. "They know what they're doing. They say Sun Valley needs to change because of gangs, drugs or we're poor or whatever. They just want to take it. You see how pretty that is. They just want Sun Valley."



"Blessed." Asnake Deferse, his wife, Sara Gebre, and their four sons moved into Sun Valley Homes about eight months ago after he lost his job. The couple, originally from Ethiopia, are now American citizens. Sara works with infants at Fairview Elementary, and Asnake hopes to start his own business. "I am blessed," he says. "It is good to be in America. I have a home. Those who complain should go to Africa they would regret it." [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

Investors have been sniffing around the single-family homes. "I want to buy your house, 'as is,' make you a fair 'cash' offer," reads one of the postcards showing up in the mail. For the most part, the homeowners I spoke to want a fair offer on their land, enough to pay off the mortgage or to buy another small house elsewhere. Willingly or not, they too have become speculators, wondering when the right time will be to sell.

The current working plan, created over the past few years, in meetings public and private with residents, DHA, the city, the Regional Transportation District and others, envisions a mixed-income neighborhood. It would be a community better connected to its neighbors in Lincoln Park, Auraria and Villa Park. An entertainment and housing district might extend south from Invesco Field. The housing projects would be demolished in phases and rebuilt, scattered throughout a landscape of apartments and condos that would be one-third public, one-third affordable, one-third market-rate housing.

If DHA cannot assemble enough land close to the new light-rail station for this planned community, it may sell or swap its property and move tenants elsewhere. That option is not DHA's first choice, but it has to stay on the table, Guerrero says, because it might end up being what's best for residents. Mixed-income housing developments have generally been shown to improve the quality of life for public housing residents, but not their educational attainment or employment opportunities.

What neither the city nor residents need is another boutique condo development with a coffee shop on the first floor, says developer Bill Mosher, a former chairman of DHA's board of commissioners. Job creation is key, he argues, and the city should focus on bringing in light industry, say, in the green-energy economy. The future Sun Valley may look something like its earliest days, where residents live within walking distance of work. Only this time around, people aren't leaving the neighborhood in search of a better life. They're coming to it.

Ask residents what they want and they say: Jobs. A community center. Safe streets. A stronger school. More adult-education programs. A grocery store. More positive role models. More intensive counseling and mentoring for residents, youth programs and gardens and green space. They say: Build on our strengths, our sense of family, our resourcefulness.

"People have to grow. Cities have to grow," Sun Valley Homes resident Asnake Deferse says. An Ethiopian refugee, he lost his house and job and moved his family into the housing projects for the first time about eight months ago. "We in Sun Valley don't have to be called the poorest



Active in School. Joshua Montoya, 26, and Tina Chavez, 23, attend a parent-teacher conference for her daughter, Sofia, 6, a first-grader at Fairview Elementary. Norma Giron, the principal, says she seeks success for students and parents. "We want parents to be engaged with their children. They don't need to volunteer, but they're here for parent conferences." [Videos and Photos](#) (Craig F. Walker, The Denver Post)

people. Educate us. I don't like feeling as though we are on the bottom, less than. There are a lot of good people here. I want the people here to grow with the city. I want to see people from this neighborhood become leaders. I want to make that happen."

An Oregon-based urban design company has been taking all the suggestions and adding its own expertise. The final draft of the plan is expected by early next year and will eventually go to the City Council for approval.

"Whatever the future holds, I think it absolutely has to include the residents," says Roxane White, chief of staff for outgoing Mayor John Hickenlooper. "Sun Valley has such a strong

sense of a community, and it would be a shame to lose that. What has happened in Sun Valley is really not OK. If we do not do something to strengthen Sun Valley and the lives of the people there, then shame on all of us."

I do not come away from Sun Valley feeling depressed. This place with so many children is alive and vibrant and full of love and ingenuity and humor.

"Here's a Sun Valley story," property owner Phil Kaspar says during a Sun Valley Coalition meeting. "I saw two girls rollerblading. Each was wearing one blade." "I have that beat," says Barbara Burden, a resident of Sun Valley Homes. And she tells of the children who tie empty milk jugs around street signs to play tether ball.

I do not come away feeling hopeless. People here are working hard to better this community. By all accounts, the Sun Valley of today is a better place than the Sun Valley of 10 or 20 years ago.

What must be seen firsthand is a Sunday afternoon service at Tha MYX International church, where Michelle Harris sings "How Great Is Our God," her voice so beautiful and clear, it is an embrace. Or a fall morning in the community garden, where Fairview Elementary fifth-graders have pulled carrots and squash and plucked jalapenos. Or a parent-teacher conference in which a young couple beams at a teacher's praise of their first-grader who is learning to read in leaps and bounds. Or this year's Halloween hayride, festivity in the air, parents and children clambering into the wagon to be pulled by horse through their neighborhood.

These are all moments of grace, and they are held dear by the people who live and work here. But they do not compensate for what Sun Valley has become over the years. They do not make up for its geographic and socio-economic isolation and the consequences of that for thousands of children who have grown up in a neighborhood where, at times, the sky itself seems lower.

A young man named Michael Williams grew up in these projects. He graduated from high school and is working for the Denver Department of Human Services in the neighborhood. After work, he takes the bus along Federal Boulevard, and every time it goes past the light-rail construction site, he looks out the window.

"And it's like, wow, almost a sense of disbelief, really, that this is happening in my neighborhood," he says after a Sunday church service. "You know what I feel when I see those bulldozers and cranes? I feel pride, and I wish I was down there laying that track. I just see that what is going in there is going to be better than what was there."