

Denver Region Sustainable Communities Initiative



Sustainable Communities Regional Principles – Background

The SCI Executive Committee, composed of leaders representing all sectors of the community, reviewed the outcomes of the Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI). Based on the knowledge and experience gained through every activity conducted under SCI, the Executive Committee offered five Sustainable Communities Regional Principles intended to serve as a common foundation for work to meet shared challenges and goals. The Regional Principles were endorsed by the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) Board of Directors May 20, 2015.

In 2011, as part of a coordinated effort with 86 partner organizations, DRCOG was successful in securing a \$4.5-million grant for the benefit of the region. The three-year grant from the Sustainable Communities Partnership, a federal collaboration of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of Transportation and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, supported regional, corridor, and site-level planning and implementation activities.

SCI consisted of a consortium of municipalities, counties, state agencies, housing authorities, nonprofits, corporate interests, and philanthropic and academic organizations. The project's overarching goal was to align investments, programs and policies to maximize the benefits that result from the region's commitment to build-out its transit system. It anticipates a region with greater access to job opportunities across the entire income spectrum; lower combined transportation and housing costs; reduced consumption of fossil fuels; reduced strain on our air and water resources; and ultimately the development of mixed-use, pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly communities along transit lines that allow residents to easily access their daily needs without having to get into a car. These attributes were intended to align with and support Metro Vision, the region's long-range plan for growth and development.

SCI activities were divided into five main activities.

- Regional Planning
- Catalytic Projects
- Corridor Planning & Implementation (East & Gold Rail; NW Rail/US 36 BRT)
- Stakeholder Engagement
- Outcomes Assessment and Knowledge Sharing (OAKS)

SCI Executive Committee Members Appointed by the DRCOG Board

- Jim Taylor, DRCOG Advisory Committee on Aging, SCI Executive Committee Chair
- Lorraine Anderson, RTD Board of Directors*
- Robert Blankenship, Mile High United Way
- Craig Carlson, Metro North Chamber
- Tom Clark, Metro Denver Economic Development Corporation
- Tom Gougeon, Gates Family Foundation/Mile High Connects
- Jack Hilbert, Douglas County Commission, DRCOG Board of Directors
- Monica Lyle, Colorado Health Foundation
- Aaron Miripol, Urban Land Conservancy/Mile High Connects
- Chad Ochsner, REMAX Alliance
- Rob Osborn, Xcel Energy
- Carla Perez, Jacobs Engineering
- Joshua Radoff, Urban Land Institute
- Sara Reynolds, Housing Colorado
- Aaron Serna, Colorado Governor's Office
- Linda Tinney, US Bank Colorado
- Hon. Elbra Wedgeworth, Denver Health **
- Cris White, Colorado Housing and Finance Authority
- Anna Zawisza, Alliance for Sustainable Colorado

* Replaced by Chuck Sisk, RTD Board

** Replaced by Olga Garcia, Denver Health



The Regional Principles offer recommended strategies to guide action through partnerships among organizations as well as by specific groups based on their missions, roles and programs. The choice to adopt or implement these strategies will be determined by individual communities, organizations, and agencies.

The Sustainable Communities Regional Principles follow:

1. **Housing Opportunity**

Housing is more than just shelter. It is a key determinant of local and regional economies, drives travel patterns and habits, and is a primary factor in determining the physical and social health of the region's residents. Ensuring that every resident has a safe, decent, accessible and affordable place to live is critical to the long-term economic success of the Denver region.

2. **Healthy Places**

One of the biggest attractions of the Denver region has long been the high quality of life and public health supported largely by environmental conditions and access to amenities that encourage active living. As the region continues to grow it must do everything possible to continually support and enhance the quality of public health, environmental resources and the built environment. The expansion of the regional transit system offers new opportunities for achieving this goal by enhancing accessibility to services and amenities, increasing activities that support healthy lifestyles, encouraging development that is conducive to health, and providing the availability of alternative modes of transportation. These activities should be conducted in partnerships with organizations currently involved in related work and should build on existing efforts.

3. **Economic Vitality and Resiliency**

The strength of the Denver region's economy is its workforce. Continued economic vitality and resilience requires a targeted approach to ensure access to opportunity for all residents. This includes access to good paying jobs, affordable housing, health care and transportation that supports people in maintaining employment. Open communication and collaboration must cut across all sectors of the economy and focus on improving opportunity for all incomes, races and education levels. That is the basis for long-term economic growth.

4. **Transit Accessibility**

The Denver region's investment in building out its transit service presents an opportunity to provide enhanced access to opportunity such as jobs, education and health for all residents. However, these benefits can only be realized if the transit service is both physically and financially accessible to residents. Increased access to transit and multimodal options is especially critical for communities throughout the region, including low-income communities, the disabled, communities of color and older adults.

5. **Transit-Oriented Communities**

Vital Transit-Oriented Communities (TOC) are key to fully leveraging the regional transit system. These communities should demonstrate diverse uses including residential, retail, commercial, and industrial depending on the conditions specific to that station area. They should include a range of amenities and services to support people who reside and work in the station area, but also assist those who use the station to access transit. TOCs should be characterized by increased density, infrastructure that enhances accessibility and promotes active living, and design for resource efficiency (including water, energy, etc.). They also should be sensitive to the culture, character and needs of existing and surrounding communities.



A banner for the Denver Region Sustainable Communities Initiative. It features a background image of a modern residential building and a park area with a paved path and trees. The text "Denver Region Sustainable Communities Initiative" is written in a white, cursive font across the top. Below the title, there are logos for SCI (Sustainable Communities Initiative) and DRCOG (Denver Regional Council of Governments).

Denver Region Sustainable Communities Initiative



Sustainable Communities Regional Principles

Based on the knowledge and experience gained through activities conducted under the Denver Region Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI), the SCI Executive Committee, composed of leaders representing all sectors of the community, offers the following Sustainable Communities Principles. We encourage agencies and organizations throughout the Denver region accept these principles. They are intended to serve as a common foundation for work to meet shared challenges and goals. The ultimate outcome of these efforts is to ensure the highest possible quality of life for all residents by leveraging opportunities created through the expansion of the region's transit system.

These principles are predicated on continuing collaboration among key organizations and interests in the region including the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG), the Regional Transportation District (RTD), local governments, and foundations, community organizations and other groups through the auspices of Mile High Connects.

The principles include recommended strategies to guide action through partnerships among organizations as well as by specific groups based on their missions, roles and programs. The choice to adopt and implement strategies designed to achieve the shared principles will be determined by what is appropriate for specific circumstances – they are not meant to be universally applicable. The lists of strategies are not exhaustive. They will necessarily change and be augmented over time based on changing needs and situations.

Communities, agencies and organizations operate within a variety of fiscal, political and other realities. The application and implementation of these principles and the strategies that are adopted to implement them must be sensitive to those contexts and not be perceived as mandates.

1. Housing Opportunity

Housing is more than just shelter. It is a key determinant of local and regional economies, drives travel patterns and habits, and is a primary factor in determining the physical and social health of the region's residents. Ensuring that every resident has a safe, decent, accessible and affordable place to live is critical to the long-term economic success of the Denver region.

Each community, agency and organization operates within different realities: fiscal, political, economic, legal, etc. As such, the application and implementation of these principles, as well as the strategies provided herein, must be voluntary and sensitive to those contexts.

- 1.1 Develop regional targets or thresholds to reduce gaps in housing across the income spectrum with an emphasis on those areas in which there is greatest need (i.e., first-time market entry, older adults and low-income households) including home ownership and rental. Include goals for both new development and preservation of existing affordable units. Build consensus around targets/thresholds.



The region needs quantifiable/measurable goals and outcomes to guide collaborative efforts toward achieving them. Goals and targets provide something against which to measure progress and establish accountability. Currently, there is a shortfall of 58,000 affordable homes (Housing Colorado/Colorado Homebuilders Association). Use existing goals (including 40 x 40 – 40,000 additional affordable homes by 2040) as guidance for these targets and thresholds.

1.2 Ensure affordable housing has access to high-frequency transit/multimodal transportation. Considerations should include transit accessibility (including first/final mile connections), urban centers, job accessibility, education choices, and accessibility to services/amenities.

Combined housing and transportation (H+T) costs are 60 percent of household expenses for families with income of \$50K or less. Every effort must be made to reduce H+T so that all households, but particularly those at lower-income levels, have funds for other needs. This is essential not only for the budgets of individual households but also for the economy of the entire metro area. Improving access to transit is a principal strategy in achieving this goal.

1.3 Identify and develop financing/funding resources sufficient to meet affordable housing targets.

One of the biggest reasons for the shortfall in affordable housing is the lack of local and state revenue sources available to support affordable housing preservation and development. Federal, state, regional, and local agencies and organizations must collaborate on leveraging existing resources and develop new funding mechanisms necessary to meet the identified goals.

1.4 Establish/facilitate greater coordination among entities to support achievement of regional housing targets or thresholds.

Housing is a regional issue that demands regional solutions and cooperation. Residents don't see city limits when looking for a place to live. Neither do workers when looking for a job. Each jurisdiction benefits from their neighboring jurisdictions' efforts in building and preserving a broad continuum of housing.

1.5 Incentivize jurisdictions to adopt plans, policies and incentives to achieve balanced housing plans and goals.

Because the availability of affordable housing benefits the entire region, support for those communities that work to increase the availability of affordable housing should be a priority. Jurisdictions will be far more likely to take meaningful steps to address regional housing goals if they are incentivized and supported to do so via staff capacity, technical assistance, monetary resources, etc.

1.6 Eliminate all Racially Concentrated Areas of Poverty (RCAP) and Ethnically Concentrated Areas of Poverty (ECAP) by 2040.

Among the top 30 major metro areas nationally, the Denver Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) is second to New York in the share of households earning less than \$40,000 in a majority low-income census tract. The Denver MSA also had the third-largest increase in low-income household segregation between 1980 and 2010 (DRCOG Regional Housing Strategy). Reducing racial and economic segregation has been shown to increase economic opportunity, decrease many costs incurred by local government, and improve overall upward mobility.



2. Healthy Places

One of the biggest attractions of the Denver region has long been the high quality of life and public health supported largely by environmental conditions and access to amenities that encourage active living. As the region continues to grow it must do everything possible to continually support and enhance the quality of public health, environmental resources and the built environment. The expansion of the regional transit system offers new opportunities for achieving this goal by enhancing accessibility to services and amenities, increasing activities that support healthy lifestyles, encouraging development conducive to health, and providing the availability of alternative modes of transportation. These activities should be conducted in partnerships with organizations currently involved in related work and should build on existing efforts.

Every community, agency and organization operates within different realities: fiscal, political, economic, legal, etc. As such, the application and implementation of these principles, as well as the strategies provided herein, must be voluntary and sensitive to those contexts.

2.1 Develop regional targets or thresholds related to human health and environmental quality.

People manage what they measure; therefore, having targets for human health and environmental quality should enable a concerted effort to reach the set targets.

2.2 Identify and share best practices, model policies and metrics for human health and environmental quality (including the built environment/active design, access to healthy food, active lifestyle/recreation choices, access to healthcare, etc.). Develop mechanisms to share best practices and metrics with jurisdictions, NGOs, etc.

Best practices and case studies provide examples of what is working that can serve as guidance for communities. The projects and processes that are already working are the best ways people, organizations and communities have of learning, evaluating and implementing/replicating successes.

2.3 Establish and facilitate greater coordination among entities to support achievement of regional human health/environmental quality targets or thresholds. Develop mechanisms to reduce disparities between communities, zip codes, etc.

Human health and environmental quality are comprised of multiple, complex interrelated issues. Most of these issues cannot be addressed by one department or entity; only a coordinated approach can lead to lasting and real progress. Using the expertise of various participants allows for a better approach and ultimately better outcomes.

2.4 Identify and implement appropriate incentives to encourage and support communities in achieving identified targets and goals.

Reward activities by organizations and people that promote and support public health and environmental quality.

3. Economic Vitality and Resiliency

The strength of the Denver region's economy is its workforce. Continued economic vitality and resilience require a targeted approach to ensure access to opportunity for all residents. This includes access to well-paying jobs, affordable housing, health care and transportation that supports people in maintaining employment. Open communication and collaboration must cut across all sectors of the economy and focus on improving opportunity for all incomes, races and education levels. That is the basis for long-term economic growth.



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3.1 Develop regional employment targets or thresholds (by wage level, sector, etc.).

A thriving region requires a balanced approach to employment where opportunities exist for all skill sets and a targeted approach to grow jobs in sectors that meet the region's growing cost of living. In addition, as the region changes over time, employment must meet job demand through diversification across sectors.

3.2 Determine appropriate targeted areas (geographic) for employment growth based on regional and local priorities. Considerations include transit accessibility (routes, fares, etc.), potential employment/sector clusters, accessibility to employment/training, housing proximity, etc.

As the Denver region continues to grow, opportunities to affordably access employment centers are critical for success. Planners and employers should be forward thinking in their location choices to provide the opportunity for employees to live and work in close proximity. This includes a focus on an inclusive choice of housing to meet the needs of all employees across wage levels.

3.3 Adopt plans, policies, and incentives to achieve employment goals.

A resilient region requires a diverse labor force capable of meeting the needs of employers. Establishing goals based on the needs of employers within the region is a necessary step to ensure the availability of the region's labor force today and into the future.

3.4 Enhance connections between jobs and education/training opportunities.

The Denver region supports a vast set of employment sectors. Within those sectors is a wide range of needed skill sets. Providing opportunities to match training to the skill sets that employers demand and to advance along career paths will be crucial for long-term growth.

3.5 Establish and facilitate greater coordination among entities to support achievement of regional employment targets and thresholds.

The Denver region consists of diverse residents, employers, education/training providers and policy makers. Reaching employment targets requires working toward defining shared outcomes so that employment gains can be made by people of every income and educational level throughout the region.

3.6 Ensure that economic growth is inclusive of all income levels, races/ethnicities and education levels.

The Federal Reserve (2006, Eberts, Erickeck and Kleinhenz) documented that a skilled workforce, racial inclusion and improving income equality correlate strongly with economic growth. The continued success of the region depends on recognizing and supporting the inclusive growth across incomes, races and education levels. Increasing income is a necessary step in laying the foundation for long-term, stable economic growth.

4. Transit Accessibility

The Denver region's investment in building out its transit service presents an opportunity to provide enhanced access to opportunity such as jobs, education and health for all residents. However, these benefits can only be realized if the transit service is both physically and financially accessible to residents. Increased access to transit and multimodal options is especially critical for communities throughout the region, including low-income communities, people with a disability, communities of color and older adults.



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4.1 Facilitate public/private partnerships and prioritize resources to improve accessibility to transit stations including first and final mile connections.

One of the greatest impediments to the use of transit, and therefore to increasing ridership, is the inability of making easy, safe and timely connections to stations. This is especially true for communities that use or depend most on transit use. Enhancing the ability of people to access stations using all modes of transportation requires improving infrastructure (including sidewalks and bikeways), connections to local bus routes, car sharing services, and public and private shuttle systems. Solutions must factor in potential barriers including accessibility, cost, etc., that are especially critical to low-income communities, people with a disability, communities of color and older adults.

4.2 Develop, implement and provide resources to programs to ensure that transit cost has the lowest possible impact on low-income communities, older adults and other vulnerable populations that may be most dependent on transit.

Fare levels are a major determinant to the use of transit. Low-income households, older adults and other populations are particularly vulnerable because of the impact on their already strained budgets. To offset this impact, it is imperative to develop programs and target resources to provide low-cost access to transit for these households. This requires partnerships involving local jurisdictions, RTD, social service agencies and community organizations in developing options that reduce barriers and costs including qualification, distribution, payment methods, etc.

4.3 Meet the service demand of low-income communities, people with a disability, communities of color and older adults to improve their access to critical resources and services including good jobs, healthy food, affordable housing, education, child care, and health care.

Because low-income populations, communities of color and other groups often do not participate in planning processes, transit service availability may not sufficiently factor in the needs of these communities including potential benefits and impacts. In particular, changes to routes and land use may cause severe disruptions including loss of access to critical services, increased time, higher costs, etc. Greater collaboration between regional and local governmental entities can improve the ability to identify opportunities and issues to proactively develop more effective service plans.

5. Transit-Oriented Communities

Vital Transit-Oriented Communities (TOC) are key to fully leveraging the regional transit system. These communities should demonstrate diverse uses including residential, retail, commercial, and industrial depending on the conditions specific to that station area. They should include a range of amenities and services to support people who reside and work in the station area, but also assist those who use the station to access transit. TOCs should be characterized by increased density, infrastructure that enhances accessibility and promotes active living, and design for resource efficiency (including water, energy, etc.). They also should be sensitive to the culture, character and needs of existing and surrounding communities.



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5.1 Continue and enhance collaborative regional and corridor planning processes that support the development of TOC. Integrate local, corridor and regional TOC planning to ensure that plans are consistent, integrated and fully leverage opportunities and potential.

Convene representatives of local governments, special districts, state and federal agencies, county workforce agencies, transportation management associations, academic institutions, investors, professional associations (such as, Urban Land Institute and the American Planning Association), community and interest groups – including diverse populations – to evolve the partnerships necessary to advance residential and job development at transit stations along the FasTracks system. This work should be guided by the respective agencies’ transit-oriented development and sustainable development plans and goals, and benchmarks to achieve them, including increased ridership, providing a range of housing types appropriate for all incomes, urban infill and redevelopment, reducing pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, and enhancing public health and well-being.

5.2 Ensure meaningful stakeholder engagement in planning processes for TOC. Adopt outreach and education strategies that promote the benefits of TOC for the entire region and to all audiences.

Work collaboratively across jurisdictions, agencies and organizations to design stakeholder outreach and engagement processes that coordinate, leverage and improve existing efforts to better inform and involve communities in planning and decisions that impact them. These should especially focus on communities that traditionally are not involved in these processes.

5.3 Adopt planning, financing and policy mechanisms that guide and incentivize TOC.

Because transit-oriented communities are aligned with regional and local processes to guide desired growth to the benefit of all communities, jurisdictions should engage in collaborative processes and develop mechanisms that support planning and implementation of projects associated with TOC.

5.4 Develop tools and resources to support TOC planning and development. Consolidate data and information (including best practices, metrics, etc.) and provide these on accessible platforms for local governments, developers and other key stakeholders. Develop mechanisms to share best practices and metrics with jurisdictions, NGOs, etc.

One of the biggest impediments to TOC planning (particularly for small jurisdictions) is access to data and other information than can be used for this process. In addition, ensuring that all communities in the region are working with data and information that is consistent better supports inter-jurisdictional and cross-agency planning and development processes.

5.5 Support coordinated planning for and provision of necessary resource infrastructure to support TOC, including energy, water, wastewater, sewage, etc. Ensure that this infrastructure is sited and constructed in a manner that reduces adverse social, public health, environmental and economic impacts.

The high-density, diverse use nature of transit-oriented development creates new challenges to the provision of resources. These challenges are best met through coordination of all players including jurisdiction planning staff, utilities, etc. This also requires that TOC development emphasize design principles that increase resource efficiency to the highest possible degree and reduce the impacts of their provision.

