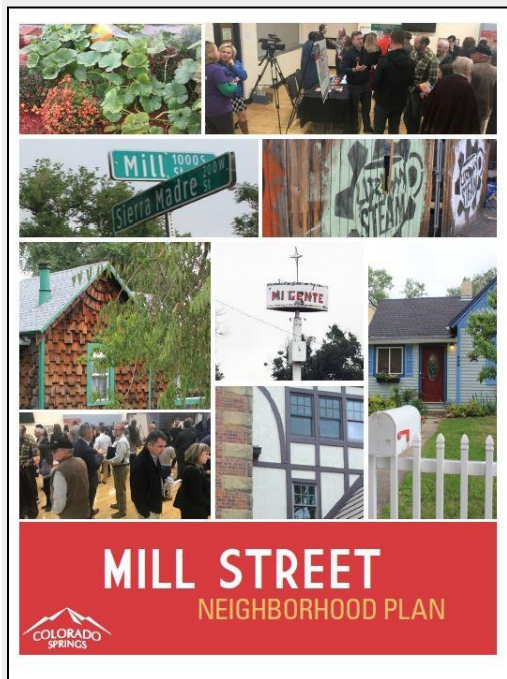


Still Here: Planning for Inclusivity and Resilience in Downtown Colorado Springs

by Catherine Duarte, AICP

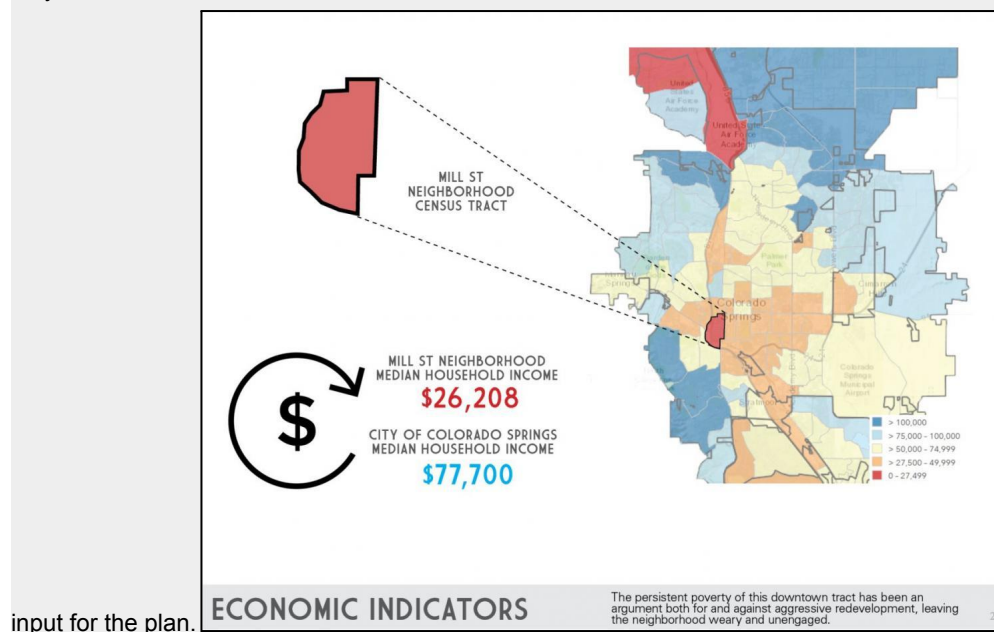


An interstate, two homeless shelters, a coal-fired power plant, a park notorious for illicit activity, warehouses, a railroad, an upcoming soccer stadium and a wave of luxury housing. These are the tensions at play in the Mill Street

neighborhood, a historic community just southwest of downtown Colorado Springs. The residents who remain and have fought against decades of public disinvestment, environmental conditions, and contentious land use decisions reached out and initiated the call for a plan to address their place in the downtown's future.

The City of Colorado Springs Community Development Division, whose focus is to assist low-income neighborhoods, preserve and create affordable housing, and address homelessness, was well positioned to respond to resident concerns. Using Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds, staff planners partnered with the Colorado-based firm Design Workshop to design an inclusive planning process that was not afraid to address past injustices and produce a practical plan that could immediately be implemented.

Building community capacity beyond the few active neighborhood association members took time and is still an ongoing effort in the implementation phase. It was imperative that the team devise an outreach strategy explicitly mindful of the decades of neglect and broken promises that had caused disenfranchisement among longtime residents. The larger socio-economic profile of the neighborhood indicate barriers to traditional civic engagement (60% low-income, 65% renters, 50% live alone, 34% persons living with disabilities, 16% seniors), so the team embraced innovative engagement strategies, such as caroling for comments, that prioritized meeting residents where they are. This led to a successful outcome of more than 30% of residents and 50% of business owners providing



input for the plan.

The Mill Street Neighborhood Plan provides the framework, resources and policies for a more resilient future, for residents to survive and thrive in the face of dramatic change. The plan's purpose is to be intentional about the future evolution of this neighborhood: encouraging redevelopment of vacant and underused properties in harmony with the neighborhood culture and empowering residents to affect change.

The overarching goals of the plan address immediate safety and quality of life issues for residents and businesses as well as long-term holistic approaches to preservation and connectivity. Since receiving unanimous approvals by all reviewing entities in February 2019, the Mill Street Neighborhood Plan is being put to use. City staff and the planning commission have begun using the new project alignment tool and Community Development staff has gotten to work on implementing a number of the 79 actions outlined in the plan, including but not limited to:

- Partnering with the area's non-profits on regular cleanups;
- Conducting a Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design assessment of the public spaces;
- Installation of new lighting and replacement of old lighting heads;
- Building relationships between residents, businesses and shelter managers; and

- Coming up in 2020: accessory dwelling unit grant program; housing rehabilitation initiative; public art collaboration with the City's Water Resources Engineering Division; street tree planting; and capacity building assistance for neighborhood association and local businesses.

