

Save the green space at Park Hill Golf Course

By Harry Doby
Guest Commentary

Denver Post reporter Bruce Finley's excellent series about the desperate need for more green space and large new parks in Denver raises several fundamental issues: Lack of available land, competition from developers for the land that is available, and equity for residents in industrial or economically deprived neighborhoods.

Since 2016, residents of Park Hill and neighboring communities have grappled with this issue over the last remaining significant parcel of open space — the 155-acre Park Hill Golf Course. The current owner of the course, Clayton Trust, is looking to sell it to help fund its mission of providing early learning opportunities for children. The golf course, built in 1930, is zoned for open space-recreation, not development. Since 1997 it has been explicitly protected by a perpetual conservation easement that Denver taxpayers paid \$2 million for under the administration of former Mayor Wellington Webb.

The city negotiated with Clayton in 2017 to purchase the land for approximately \$24 million. But instead of the obvious choice to follow the city's own Parks and Recreation Game Plan and turn the land into a regional park, the city's agreement would cancel the conservation easement and allow development of this open space into high-density housing.

Fortunately, this has not yet happened, unfortunately, that is only because the golf course operator, Arcis, essentially told Clayton and the city "Not so fast, Slick." Arcis' contract with Clayton allows for two 5-year lease extensions plus first right of refusal to purchase the land.

While this caused the city to pause its plans to purchase the property, it still temporarily shut down the property for the Platte-to-Park Hill flood control project. Arcis later filed suit to further establish their hold on the land which will increase their leverage in any future negotiations should the property change hands.

Clayton made clear in a "visioning" exercise with select members of the community that they believe the property must be developed for mixed-use retail and high-density housing. The city's priority is to provide more housing for an influx of new residents. Arcis is a development company in addition to operating golf courses. While the lawsuit over ownership winds its way through the courts, Clayton, the city and Arcis are no doubt negotiating not just compensation, but potentially a "grand bargain" to develop housing instead of preserving parkland. Thus despite being zoned for open space protected by a perpetual conservation easement, Park Hill Golf Course is in danger of joining what The Denver Post calls the "concrete metropolis".

The problem with the lack of green space in Denver is growing worse. The statistics are appalling and well documented in Denver's own roadmap for the city's future: Denveright Comprehensive Plan 2040 and the Department of Parks and Recreation's own Game Plan. These documents address the need to plan for Denver's growth in the next 20 years from 700,000 residents to nearly 900,000. These documents use a holistic approach to address housing, transportation, the environment and the need for more parks and green space for the health of both our citizens and the environment.

Denver voters have voiced their support in the strongest possible way. First, we approved a green roof initiative which would reduce the heat island effect of dense high-rise developments replacing heat and

moisture-absorbing trees and plants. Second, we voted to approve a new sales tax to generate up to \$45 million annually dedicated to the acquisition and enhancement of parkland.

Why isn't Denver Parks and Recreation speaking up? The message from Denver voters is loud and clear that green space is a critical priority, but we need to make sure city leaders are listening.

With the upcoming city elections, we need to ask all the candidates where they stand on this critical issue and make sure they follow through with this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to save existing open space for hundreds of thousands of Denver residents. If in-fill development is going to occur in North Park Hill, we must demand our mayor and council members (or their successors) develop around Park Hill Golf Course, not on it.

Harry Doby has lived in the Denver-metro area for 40 years and is part of a loosely organized group in Park Hill advocating against the development of the golf course.