

The City's Plan for Park Hill Golf Course Is...Launching a Small Area Plan

Sara Fleming



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The Park Hill Golf Course is shuttered now. It could be years before its future is determined.

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There has been no shortage of strong opinions on what should happen to the historic 155-acre land that was once Park Hill Golf Course after Westside Investments [bought the property in a controversial sale](#) last July. Some residents have been vocal about their desire for the entirety of the land to [remain open space](#). Others want to see affordable housing or a grocery store.

The uncertain future of the land has [stirred tension in the historic neighborhood](#), and Westside and the city have long promised a public community planning process before any big moves. The city's Community Planning and Development (CPD) department now confirms that it will kick off a formal "small area planning" process for the property some time in 2020 — despite an active [conservation](#)

[easement](#) that prevents the land from becoming anything but a golf course, much less being developed.

“We need to engage the community and have a conversation about what we want to happen,” says Sarah Showalter, the city’s interim planning manager.

The city will facilitate a series of public meetings led by selected community members who reside, work or are otherwise involved in the neighborhoods surrounding the golf course. They will discuss their preferences on issues such as land use, transportation, density, design, parks and other aspects of urban planning. Within about a year after the process starts, CPD will produce a lengthy document that will outline a vision for the golf course, ideally based on a consensus reached by those involved.

Laura Swartz, CPD’s communications director, clarifies that the small area planning process will be separate from Westside’s efforts to remove or modify the conservation easement, which will require approval from Denver City Council, and possibly approval by a judge. Open-space advocates [sent a letter to city council and the mayor in October](#), citing an attorney who wrote that because of a 2019 state statute change she helped draft, removing any conservation easement requires a judge’s declaration that the easement’s original conservation purpose has become impossible to fulfill. The city says it believes there is a clear legal path to removing the easement, though the Denver City Attorney’s Office has not elaborated on what that will entail. If Westside cannot remove the conservation easement, it may be liable to restore the property to a golf course at its own expense.

The “small area plan” that CPD aims to create with Park Hill Golf Course is a smaller version of the plans coming out of [the city's Neighborhood Planning Initiative](#), which aims to create visions for all of the city’s neighborhoods within the next fifteen years. A small area plan is generally focused on one large redevelopment site, such as the [Loretto Heights Area Plan](#), which wrapped up in September 2019 and outlined a vision for the future of redevelopment of the historic Loretto Heights campus, also owned by Westside.

The city has not decided when it will kick off the Park Hill plan or which community groups will be on the steering committee. Showalter and Swartz say that outreach will focus on the neighborhoods “closest to the golf course,” though the planning process will technically be open to anyone to participate. As the property owner, Westside will get a seat on the steering committee.

CPD is aware that Park Hill Golf Course is a heated topic. “This is a really important piece of property that means a lot to a lot of people. We understand that and understand that there will be strong opinions. People are attached to it, and that means that you’re going to have a lot of emotions and passion,” Swartz says.

The planning process, Showalter adds, “is an opportunity for everybody to come together, hopefully in a way that is productive and isn’t assuming that visions have already been made.”

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Sara Fleming is a freelance writer and formal editorial fellow at Westword. She covers a wide variety of stories about local politics and communities. A born-and-raised Coloradan, when she's not exploring Denver, she's on a mission to visit every mountain town in the state.

- Contact:
- [Sara Fleming](#)
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- Twitter: [@sarajfleming](#)