

LoDo District: Neighborhood Tooth Fairy?

By Ellen Wilensky

When is the LoDo District more like a tooth fairy than a politician? No joke, but the punch line is...when it gets ahead of issues and problems on behalf of its members. It is difficult to take credit, politician-like, for crises avoided rather than solved. But when that happens, and it often does, the benefits to members are much like the dollar (or five) surreptitiously placed under pillows *à la* the tooth fairy. Yet, does anyone ever stop to wonder how hard the tooth fairy must work to reward all those missing teeth night after night? Does the tooth fairy beat her own drum and send out press releases? Or does she go about her business—earnest, dependable and faceless—perpetuated by the community’s winking desire for something benevolent and generous?

So, when the question, “what have you done for me lately?” is posed to the LoDo District, like most membership organizations, we can trot out an impressive list of problems solved. But how do we list the less tangible accomplishment of intercepting problems that then never materialize due to our proactive attention? Those non-problems allow the neighborhood to flourish—seemingly on its own—and that is when members really get bang for their buck. When LoDo District volunteers donate their time and talents, more like tooth fairies than politicians, we can all go about our business of living, working and visiting in a neighborhood that feels inviting and dynamic rather than in the grip of great struggle.

The LoDo District has a long history of unheralded work on behalf of the neighborhood, starting with the Neighborhood Plan. This document, adopted by the city as part of its master plan, took over five years and countless volunteer hours to produce.

The project was undertaken in order to anticipate and avoid issues that could threaten the future vitality of LoDo. We can't exactly know what might have happened to our neighborhood if the effort hadn't been made, but we do know that today's LoDo is a place we can all be proud of. Developers and city government have solid input about neighborhood requirements and residents and business people know what sort of community they're investing in when they come to LoDo. Further, the document may prove its importance in the coming months and years as the City of Denver, along with the Downtown Denver Partnership, enters into a new master planning process. When it comes to LoDo, the planners should have little question about the neighborhood's vision for its future. Which means that our destiny will not be derailed due to lack of documentation of that vision.

A more recent example of proactive planning is the formation of the new Economic Development Committee. Some would question the need for such a committee. LoDo is thriving...isn't it? Residential real estate is desirable and increasing in value. LoDo remains a top tourist destination. Denver Union Station development ensures a rosy future for retail. Why economic development? Are we being greedy? Not according to Gwen Anderson, a LoDo District Board Member, attorney and transit/development consultant who has been involved in the evolution of LoDo for more than thirteen years. According to Gwen, "at one time everything about LoDo was cutting edge. Our collection of restored, historic buildings; the location of Coors Field downtown; and an impressive selection of dining and entertainment venues. As a result, several metro area communities have modeled developments and strategies on the successes of LoDo. Consequently, although LoDo is still unique, it is not without

competition.” In the proactive eyes of this LoDo stalwart, what was meant to be mixed-use has succeeded *only in part*. A critical walk around the neighborhood will reveal that the mix of uses is not yet quite as diverse as it was meant to be. A greater number and variety of non-bar/restaurant retailers would add a richer flavor to the community. More residential units and the amenities to attract a multi-age population are high priorities. Increased awareness among visitors that LoDo is a place to shop as well as to be fed and entertained is an important goal. In spite of the perception, citywide, that—no worries—LoDo is doing fine, we are lucky to be associated with visionaries, such as Gwen Anderson, who look further down the road than most and decide that action must be taken now in order to reach our potential and, yes, avoid losing ground to competitors. Therefore, LoDo District has formed a committee that is working on a “business plan” for LoDo. At this time, a diverse group of LoDo lovin’ professionals gathers monthly to assess the current and future economic climate. They have removed rose-colored glasses in order to examine where our neighborhood may not measure up to the vision put forth in the Neighborhood Plan. They are attempting to quantify our attractions and overlooked opportunities—and identify our weaknesses. In the end, LoDo District will end up with an actionable plan for enhancing our economic future. The steps taken will probably be varied and creative, but not necessarily the stuff of headlines. So, when empty storefronts fill up with intriguing shops and a burgeoning community of neighbors meet on street corners and in coffee shops—and when tourists return to their homes to regale friends with tales of the “happening” street life in our corner of Denver, the citizens of LoDo may not be aware that LoDo District had a hand in it. But, likely, that new boutique or

gourmet market or even the new next-door neighbor that shares your taste in wine, might be more a gift from the tooth fairy than pork from a politician.

For membership and committee information, please call (303)628-5424