

## LoDo's Newest Neighbors

By Jim Theye, LoDo District.

The public has now had a chance to meet the two finalists to become our new neighbor - right next door at Denver Union Station (DUS). The remaining teams are the Continuum Partners and East West Partners Team (Continuum) and Union Station Partners (USP) team. They haven't really moved in yet ... in fact the successful team hasn't yet been selected. But, we are beginning to see who and what they might bring along when they finally move in sometime around 2011 or 2014 or so. At last, we know who wants to make DUS their long-term home, and LoDo is fortunate to have such credible neighbors looking to move in next door.

Each team has submitted its proposal, and recently presented to the public to explain their strategies for the redevelopment of DUS. Each proposal is exciting and challenging, and the details of funding, tax incentives, massing, and zoning are intricate enough to make the entire Union Station Advisory Committee (USAC) seek out a dark, padded room. Everyone seems to agree that this is a rare opportunity, and it is worth the effort to do this job right and fulfill the goals of everyone involved.

*And how will this affect LoDo?* Our historic district is on the doorstep to Denver's soon-to-be big and beautiful, world-class multimodal transportation hub. Will the zillions of DUS travelers activate our sagging retail presence, or will the area behind DUS become the new retail destination? Will visitors flock to the new development, make their connection and depart as quickly as they arrived, or will they journey to our doorstep and take advantage of the neighborhood amenities?

These rhetorical questions are presented to explore some aspects of the proposed redevelopment on the LoDo community. The new DUS will experience thousands of both commuter and destination travelers, and will offer approximately 250,000 square feet of retail, shopping, and entertainment amenities. It will compete with and compliment LoDo's residential and office space, restaurants, retail, and other offerings.

New commuters by the train and bus loads will zoom through the new station en route their final destination. Some will stop and shop while others will come and go. It seems certain that either proposed development program will bring many new visitors into the District to dine, work, shop, or seek entertainment.

The DUS Master Plan, that consensus document recently generated through the exhaustive efforts of dozens of concerned volunteers and professional planners, placed light rail directly behind the current Union Station. It envisions an activated Wynkoop Street pedestrian environment that bridges the old with the new. Part of the plan was to disseminate pedestrian traffic, ultimately to disburse into the heart of downtown Denver. This outcome would be managed differently by either developer, but, by contrast, the Continuum proposal locates the new light rail station several hundred feet west of the

station, a considerable distance from Wynkoop Street. This is only one of several significant deviations in each proposal from the Master Plan. Another is the USP concept of focusing density at the site by erecting two tall towers, one of which exceeds the current height restrictions for the site by several times. This brings activity closer to LoDo, but the requisite zoning changes represent a significant obstacle toward that offering.

Nobody with whom I have spoken objects to the concept of a high-density tower, and maybe we could attract a world-renowned architect to design a signature skyline, but the world seems well-populated with almost great buildings, and this site is too important for less than fabulous architecture.

How would LoDo be impacted by the Continuum design for locating the light rail station separate from the main terminal? This could be a flaw from LoDo's perspective, since it moves the center of activity further away LoDo and out toward the Central Platte Valley (CPV). But Shannon Gifford, LoDo District Board member and USAC Committee Co-Chair, comments that the area between the terminals would likely be activated most by destination visitors that would come for the amenities, such as shopping or entertainment venues. These visitors are more generally more apt to linger and explore than commuter users who simply make their connections. It is likely that many of these destination visitors might wander into LoDo as well.

Starting a project of this magnitude with a fresh slate allows the development team to identify anchor tenants and build a strategic tenant mix. It would seem that LoDo property values would likely benefit through their proximity to the new retail amenities. Darrin Revious, broker with Fredrick Ross and a LoDo District Board member comments that LoDo should benefit from whatever happens at DUS. "Moving thousands more people through DUS will move commercial lease and purchase rates upward," he said. He sees LoDo and DUS retail better able to compete for visitors with Cherry Creek and the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Mall.

One positive potential impact on LoDo is that, under each proposal, the regional bus lines planned to be underground in front of the station have been relocated, so that all the significant excavation work takes place on the back side of Union Station. LoDo might not have to endure a long-running construction program on the Wynkoop side to install the subterranean bus terminal. This would eliminate a painful phase of disruption to traffic, parking, and noise.

Parking and traffic are always hot topics in LoDo. The USP proposal imagines an oversized parking structure designed for about 4000 cars. It seems that the proposed high-density garage might encounter resistance because of its size, but most of LoDo would love well-designed parking somewhere within a few blocks of the historic district. "Parking seems to be about where it is, how you get there, and how you get out" said Fabby Hillyard, Executive Director of the LoDo District, Inc. She thinks that both teams must be thoughtful in how they handle parking and traffic flow, and the City will need to help resolve traffic issues and mitigate congestion areas. She points to what is about to

happen at 15<sup>th</sup> and Wewatta, where a relatively high volume of traffic becomes constricted.

The upcoming deadline of the developer selection process may manifest a subsequent proposal phase. It seems plausible that transgressions from the Master Plan could be modified by each team to better accommodate important community needs. For example, the Continuum team could offer a modified proposal to bring light rail up 17<sup>th</sup> Street on a head-in track, or the USP team might alter their height and density programming if given a chance to keep the discussions alive.

The competing proposals each have their strengths and weaknesses, and LoDo is fortunate to have two visionary teams vying to control the redevelopment program. Each seems certain to bring many more people into LoDo. Through the process, accompanying improvements and infrastructure should make it easier to get here and get around. The amenities each provide should benefit our community and position us to better manage the pedestrian environment that we all enjoy. LoDo is on the doorstep to the future center of Denver. We can all look forward to many more visitors passing through our heritage community as our new neighbors start moving in.