

Young Professionals “Discover” LoDo District

By Alexis Hammack and Simone Howell Raarup

Anyone strolling the streets of LoDo on a typical evening can vouch that the area is the social epicenter for the 20-something crowd. It's no surprise then that *Forbes* recently ranked Denver among the Top 10 Cities in the U.S. for young professionals. Judging by the crowds outside LoDo's restaurants, bars, businesses and the ballpark, we deserve the ranking.

The area is hot now, but as those who've been in Denver a long time can tell you, that wasn't always the case. The last 20 years have been a period of rapid and dramatic change, with the establishment of the Lower Downtown Historic District, the development of the city's premier entertainment quarter, and the advent of Coors Field and Pepsi Center as bookend anchors for our mixed-use neighborhood.

More recently, we've seen an influx of younger residents, either in the historic district itself or the greater LoDo area, including Riverfront Park, Prospect, Commons Park and the Ballpark Neighborhood. Drawn by new housing opportunities and the proximity to downtown, the broader LoDo community is attracting more and more recent college grads, members of the so called “creative class” and young professionals.

As an organization, LoDo District has seen the changes in the neighborhood at large and realized the importance of engaging this younger demographic – and where we've been failing to do so. We were lacking programming targeted at the younger segment of our member businesses and realized that we were also failing to reach the neighborhood's new young residents. For our organization to have the greatest impact, it is essential that it be representative of all demographics in the neighborhood. This meant reaching out to the newest generation of inhabitants for their input and giving them a stake in the LoDo neighborhood.

As longtime LoDo District board member Ellen Wilensky put it, “Each new generation thinks that it discovered LoDo. And, this powerful sense of identity and ownership can have a transformative effect on the neighborhood.”

In response to our desire to reach this audience, LoDo District has created a new category of membership – Young Professional. The goals of this new membership level are to provide people in the between the ages of 22 and 35 with opportunities for civic engagement, mentoring, social interaction, and networking – LoDo-style.

Being a LoDo YP grants a member virtually all the benefits of a Standard Individual Membership, but, priced at \$40 per year, it is an affordable way to get the younger demographic involved and civically-active. And, recognizing the internet-savvy nature of the group, we've made this an “e-membership” where all communications are delivered electronically.

Buzz for this new member category has been entirely word-of-mouth (often via the Internet.) And, it was so favorable, we had to schedule a Young Professionals Membership Forum to keep up with the demand. On Aug. 14, about 20 LoDo Young Professionals met at Venice Ristorante to learn about LoDo District as an organization and, specifically, this new membership group.

It was a great mix of younger staff from our existing business members, alongside faces that were entirely new to us. Young people from the real estate, banking, law, and entertainment industries were represented as were new residents of the neighborhood.

LoDo District accomplishes much of the valuable advocacy work we perform on behalf of the neighborhood via committees, staffed by member volunteers, which are organized around issues on our workplan. Similarly, we will form a LoDo Young Professionals Committee and this group will select a pair of co-chairs to serve as leaders over the coming year. Plus, all LoDo YPs will be eligible to participate with the YP Committee if they wish, and there will be opportunities to get involved with the other standing committees where appropriate.

While details and dates are still being finalized, we're hoping that the committee will offer quarterly topical forums, ideally combined with social networking opportunities. We hope that the new LoDo Young Professionals program will build on the wisdom and experience of those who have come before and, at the same time, will bring its own new flavor to the community. For more information on the LoDo Young Professionals program, contact Simone Howell Raarup at 303.628.5428 or simone@lodo.org.