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Re-Imaging Mission Trace

A proposed development would turn the empty King Soopers building into affordable housing

Heidi Beedle

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The King Soopers building in Mission Trace has been vacant for more than a decade. That could change, thanks to Toby Gannett, a local developer.

For the past 16 years, the old King Soopers in the Mission Trace Shopping Center has stood vacant and seemingly abandoned. But Toby Gannett, owner of BCR Management, wants to change that.

In September, he presented a plan to renovate Mission Trace, turning the empty grocery store into 280 units of affordable housing and rejuvenating the area. Gannett's plans come as the city of Colorado Springs has pledged \$36 million toward the South Academy Boulevard Reconstruction Project.

"Mission Trace is the heart and soul of part of the Southeast," Gannett said. The Mission Trace Shopping Center has been the focus of studies and initiatives, like Dream City 2020, a 2009 plan to "promote civic engagement, and to identify common visions and values," according to the Dream City 2020 website. The latest study on the shopping center was conducted by the Urban Land Institute in 2018, Gannett said.

"When I read that ULI study, it made some great recommendations, and recommendations that came out of the Southeast — such as more affordable housing, reinvesting in our city's infrastructure and streets in that area," he said. "Having read through the study I said, 'We can probably do this if we bring together the right people.' Brendan [Clarke] of Clarke Commercial Real Estate has been negotiating for nine months to get the property under contract, and we've reached out to Matt Craddock, who cares deeply about that Mission Trace Shopping Center, having owned it for a very long time. For years, this empty building that was owned by a gentleman out of Denver, was the subject of blight. We brainstormed and I said, 'If we use the tools that I've just mentioned to you and we use Urban Renewal, which was also recommended by the ULI study. If we all work together, I think we can do a really interesting redevelopment project here.'"

Gannett's proposed project would demolish the empty King Soopers and install three separate apartment buildings for affordable housing and two commercial buildings.

"The goal would be to do affordable and low-income housing, all targeting 60 percent adjusted median income and below for the county," he said. "The buildings would be green-built, with solar and using universal design [an architectural concept that ensures accessibility regardless of age or ability]."

Southeast Colorado Springs seems to be the go-to location for affordable housing developments.

“When it comes to low-income and attainable, I think they do tend to look more towards Southeast,” said Yolanda Avila, the District 4 City Councilor during an interview this summer. “The land is not as expensive, and they don’t get the pushback they get in other parts of the city. I’d like there to be a real mix of it, and more [affordable housing] projects in the very affluent areas. When I see multifamily projects going up in different areas of the city that are much more affluent, I would like to see at least 20 percent of those to be low-income.”

I think that’s a perfect opportunity where we can provide trails and open spaces, building on what’s being done at Panorama Park.”

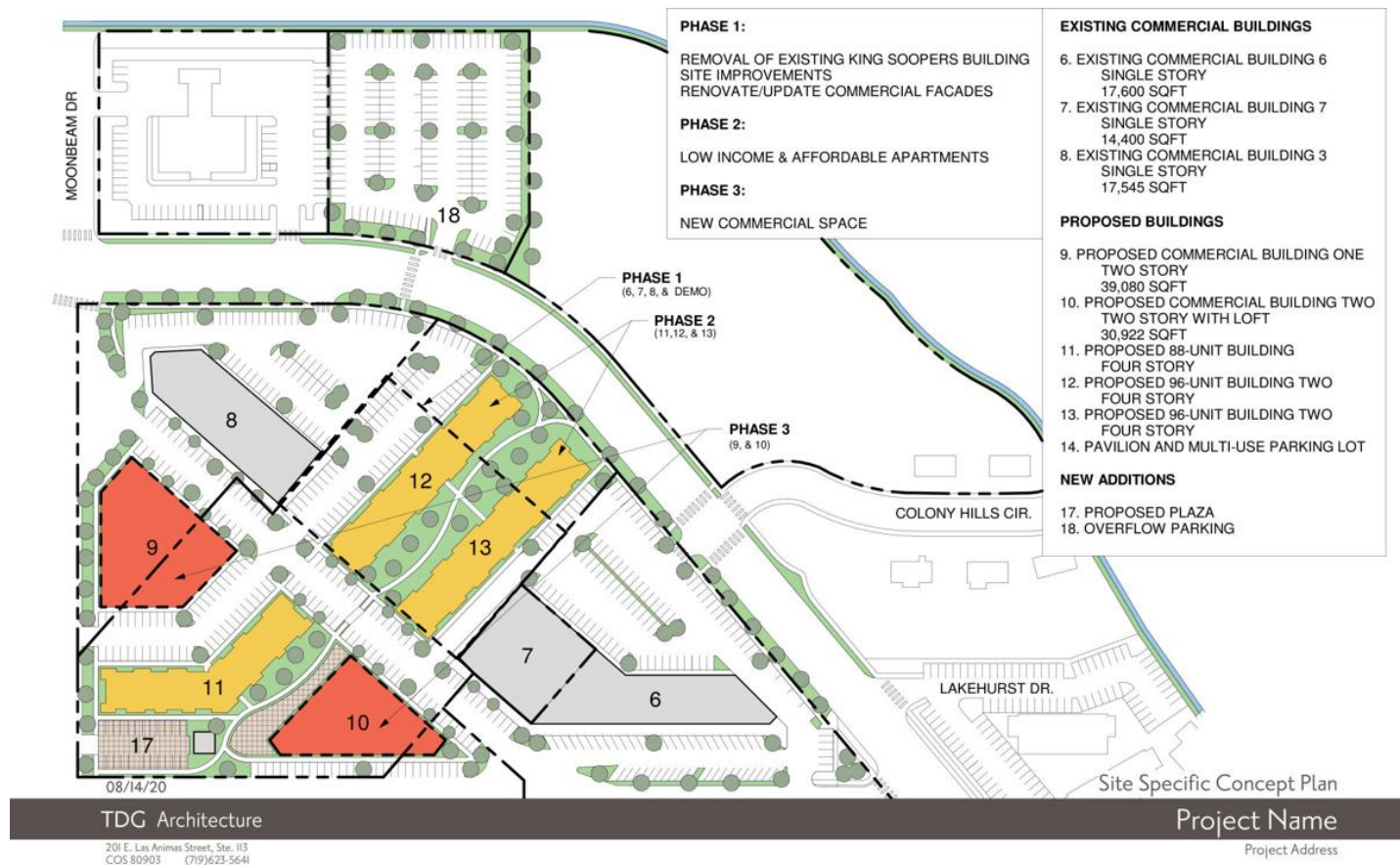
— Toby Gannett

Gannett agrees, but notes that regulations from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) affect the placement of affordable housing projects.

“Part of the reason that you’re seeing a few projects that are affordable going in in the Southeast is that they have specific designated census tracts that you can do these projects in,” Gannett said. “A lot of that is driven by HUD and what they designate as where you can put it. I’m also doing a project very similar to this called Draper Commons in the Lowell Neighborhood right downtown. We have an overall community need for affordable housing everywhere. What we don’t want to do is have it so our teachers and our civil servants and our retirees can no longer live in our community.”

Gannett’s concerns are shared by many in the community. The rising cost of housing in Colorado Springs is forcing people to get creative with their living situations. “Where people are going is into each other’s homes,” says Jeannie Orozco, the Harrison School District 2 Board president and longtime community activist. “My neighbor has three roommates. They can’t afford to move out, they can’t afford their own space. It’s causing rents to skyrocket.”

Orozco has seen how rental prices have caused hardship for low-income residents in Southeast Colorado Springs. “It pushes the price up, and it pushes the people out,” she said. “Over the last few years I’ve seen a lot of rentals turn over, not because the people couldn’t afford it but because the landlords decided they could get more out of it. You’re seeing a lot of turnover, even the rentals. As prices go up the rental prices go up. People can’t afford to live. Multifamily households have grown exponentially in the last year in the Southeast.”



Courtesy of the Urban Renewal Authority
The proposed plan for the Mission Trace Shopping Center.

Not only is Gannett's project aiming for affordable housing, but the proposed updates to Mission Trace would help improve walkability and bikeability in Southeast Colorado Springs by turning the stormwater canals into trails. “Depending on who you talk to, the average life expectancy in the Southeast is between 14 to 16 years less than the rest of our community,” he said. “Part of that is population health. The Southeast was designed before people took into account walkability and bikeability. Downtown, we have Monument Valley Park, and it’s a beautiful area where people can walk and exercise. Sand Creek doesn’t connect with the Fountain Trail system. I think that’s a perfect opportunity where we can provide trails and open spaces, building on what’s being

done at Panorama Park. There is a whole series of drainage ditches in the Southeast that could be converted into hiking and biking trails. For example ... if you were trying to get to Mission Trace, you would have to walk along Hancock [Expressway], but there is a storm culvert that could be converted into trails that would connect Deerfield Hills Community Center with Turman Elementary School with Mission Trace. I think it's an opportunity, just as the city is committing \$36 million to redo South Academy Boulevard and redo that interchange at Hancock [Expressway] and Academy [Boulevard], but I think we want to bring more trails and walkability to Southeast."

The project is still in the early stages, but Gannett is optimistic.

"The first phase we would really envision, of tearing down the King Soopers and putting in those 280 apartments, that's Phase 1," he said. "We have made application to the city and are awaiting allocation of private activity bonds to get that process going. Once those are awarded, we'll make application to the state and submit a development plan for the project. The second part is really the whole Urban Renewal aspect. We've made application to Urban Renewal, and we are undergoing a blight study right now. That was voted on — both acceptance into the Urban Renewal and the blight study were unanimous votes of the Urban Renewal Authority. That blight study is underway. Urban Renewal will take a while longer, but that process is well underway."

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Heidi Beedle is a former soldier, educator, activist, and animal welfare worker. She received a Bachelor's in English from UCCS. She has worked as a freelance writer covering LGBTQ issues, nuclear disasters, cattle mutilations, and social movements.