



Downtown Partnership/Downtown Development Authority of Colorado Springs

INNOVATION

The Gateways Initiative, launched in 2017, aimed to identify and enhance nine entryways into the historic heart of Colorado Springs, which experiences more than six million visits annually. The project achieved its goals to create a sense of arrival, to instill pride in the city center, and to expand the understanding of what defines downtown's borders beyond its historic north-south "main" street. The project was unlike any undertaken previously by the DDA, and especially served to stimulate new business and commercial interest in the outer "border" areas of downtown.

This initiative was accomplished through electrified signage, landscaping, hardscaping, public art, wayfinding signage and lighting treatments. While some downtown gateways also served as entryways to the entire city (such as interstate exits), other gateways occurred in historic neighborhoods of single-family homes. Signage was sensitive to each location, with 30-foot-tall pylon signage occurring at commercial city entryways and more modest monument-style signage occurring in areas with lower density and single-family homes nearby. While all signage shared the same design elements, materials varied depending on context. The rust-brown of Corten steel was used in most areas to tie in to natural features and the red brick of older buildings. At more contemporary locations, blackened and stainless steel were used to harmonize with nearby buildings of steel and glass. Sustainability was served by making cycling amenities at each gateway more recognizable. Landscaping featured xeric plants and grasses native to the area – an improvement upon the water-intensive bluegrass that had previously dominated those locations.

OUTCOME

The project has been enthusiastically received by the general public, property owners, business owners and visitors. In addition to creating a sense of arrival, the project addressed certain safety issues (lighting, poor infrastructure) and highlighted cultural heritage, which resonated strongly with the public. Impact was measured by positive recognition in social media as well as increasing use of gateway signage in print and broadcast coverage of downtown, reinforcing the area's new brand identity. The initiative expanded understanding of downtown as more than the historic north-south "main" street, and in 2020 into 2021 several properties adjacent to the gateway improvement sites have been sold and are now slated for near-term commercial development and renovation.

The project will have at least a 30-year life span. This is due primarily to the natural depreciation of signage elements. While DDA involvement has now moved to a maintenance role, the city Public Works department continues to address a prioritized list of infrastructure improvements (curb-and-gutter repair, pedestrian crossings, etc.) Additionally, thanks to service agreements with adjacent property owners, maintenance of landscaping and hardscaping will continue long-term and will not create undue financial burden on the DDA. Finally, due to the careful nature of the initial listening sessions and study of the greater downtown area, the areas identified as gateways will remain relevant for decades, being co-located with immovable elements such as an interstate, a college campus, a railroad line and creeks.

EXECUTION

The Gateways Initiative aimed to identify and enhance nine entryways into the historic heart of Colorado Springs. It began in 2017 with the selection of the firms Kimley-Horn, RTA Architects and Arthouse Design through a competitive bidding process. Listening sessions and site studies occurred throughout 2017, with the delivery of the Design & Implementation Guide in April 2018. In summer 2018, the board of DDA committed funds for the project, and an intense 1.5-year period of design, permitting, and negotiation among DDA, city government and property owners on shared maintenance agreements commenced. Fabrication of elements began in Q3 2019, with installation of elements occurring beginning in Q1 2020. The notable Conejos Mural was painted in August 2020. Stakeholder engagement continued throughout the process, leading to greater efficiencies, success and positive public reception.

REPRESENTATION

The Gateways Initiative was conceived and project-managed by the Colorado Springs Downtown Development Authority and the staff of its contracted partner, Downtown Partnership. More than 300 unique contacts and stakeholders were engaged in the Gateways Initiative. Stakeholders represented in listening groups included various city staff; property owners; small business owners; representatives of key institutions such as colleges, the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center and the Pike Peak Library District; and owners of single-family homes in the historic neighborhood on downtown's northern edge. The Conejos Mural Project, one sub-element of the Gateways Initiative, was based on oral histories from former residents of the now-disappeared neighborhood. The mural's design concept was refined through facilitated listening sessions with former residents, academic experts and the lead artist. The Conejos Mural Project engaged 211 community residents with a hands-on opportunity to help paint the mural. On one Community Paint Day, three generations of one family from the historic Conejos Neighborhood came together to paint. They found the experience so positive that they returned the following week to aid in the mural's completion. A web page about the mural provides information in English and Spanish.

REPLICATION

A gateways initiative such as this could be undertaken in nearly any downtown or historic district, as every city center is unique and can benefit from creating a sense of arrival. The Design & Implementation Guide provides a solid framework for any community in setting a timeline, engaging stakeholders, determining entry locations, determining aesthetic approaches, etc. Further, the project provides a basis for shared maintenance agreements with governmental agencies and private property owners in order to ensure long-term commitment to the success of any such project. For the public art elements, national best practices were utilized in issuing an RFQ, assembling a community-rooted jury, providing local context materials, conducting listening sessions between residents and the artist, and engaging community members in the execution of the project. This well-documented process provides a useful set of tools and templates for entities to follow, even if they have no prior experience administering such initiatives.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

The Gateways Initiative was complex due to the massive number of people and agencies involved with details with every site location and permitting. Further, it naturally made sense to align some elements and installations with existing public works activity occurring on various streets and sidewalks, that further either sped up or elongated certain timelines. Because much of the installation occurred during the pandemic, that also caused some minor challenges, but even the Community Paint Days for the Conejos Mural Project were able to go forward with masking, distancing and adherence to public health guidelines. The greatest challenge going forward with this project will be due to its multiple locations. The Operations & Maintenance Guideline for the project has a clear annual schedule for inspections, cleaning and maintenance, of which minimal actual work is needed but adherence to a clear schedule will be essential.