

## **LoDo District: Spirited Cooperation**

*By Ellen Wilensky*

Cities and their neighborhoods are not naturally cooperative entities. When the stakes are high, and they frequently are in someone's point of view, they tend to behave more like battlegrounds than ashrams. Bricks are flung. Politicians, influence, money and loud voices are activated. It can be deadly! No wonder level-minded citizens band together to create neighborhood organizations such as LoDo District, Inc.! Someone has to call a halt to the battle in order to create consensus out of conflict, harmony out of chaos, brick out of stucco. But what happens when one neighborhood has three bands...or four? When dialogue is in order, one neighborhood organization declares a truce, the parties sit down, drink coffee (or beer) and the good work begins. So it is in LoDo. All exaggeration (?) aside. The complicated task of representing a beloved, mixed-use, historic district that is subject to the influence of many public and private organizations, falls to LoDo District, Inc. Gloves on or gloves off as necessary, cooperation with an impressive array of other LoDo stakeholders is a primary, and often challenging, focus of "The District". Here are some examples.

### **The City & County of Denver**

#### ***Bell Park***

Why not start at the top? **The City of Denver** is in the process of trading land in the historic district—Bell Park and its neighboring parking lots—for property required for the new justice center. This particular swap is notable because it involves the very first rezoning effort that, if successful, will remove land from the historic district. Prime, developable land that will no longer be subject to the protection of the Lower Downtown design review process or the density regulations designed to ensure the intimate character of our neighborhood. Good thing? Bad thing? Gloves? No gloves? Executive Director, Fabby Hillyard, is meeting with **Administration Officials** and other interested groups to help influence a positive outcome for both the City and the neighborhood.

#### ***Parking Kiosks***

Parking! Always a fraught discussion in any city and, it seems, especially so in LoDo. Increase meter rates and revenue to the city at the expense of merchants? Decrease rates and encourage personal car use and air pollution? Purchase prepaid parking keys in inconvenient locations or find yourself aggressively pan-handling for quarters? LoDo District is working with **the City Parking Commission** to promote the replacement of LoDo's meters with more convenient parking kiosks. Don't turn in your cash key yet, but stay tuned.

#### ***Denver Public Schools***

Will LoDo's youngest residents be able to attend school, like most of us have, in the neighborhood in which they were raised? It is now more likely since LoDo District recently supported **Councilwoman Judy Montero** in arranging a land swap with **Denver Public Schools** that will eventually lead to the construction of a school near LoDo. All LoDo residents, three-years-old and under, should meet at Common Grounds coffee house to celebrate!

### **The Breakfast Club**

No, not the 80's movie. The monthly egg-and-coffee fest attended by LoDo District Board President Dave Moore and Executive Director, Fabby Hillyard. Dave and Fabby join leaders of the **LoDoNa** (formerly St. Charles Neighborhood Organization), **Downtown Denver Residents Organization** and **Friends of Union Station** to collectively address neighborhood issues. "The Club" recently cooperated in studying the potential effects of extended hours for bars and is currently planning neighborhood forums on subjects of interest to us all. The recent inclusion of Friends of Union Station opens an informal forum for discussing (gloves on and off) different approaches to the development of Union Station apart from the pressures of the official USAC process.

### **Denver Partnership/BID**

Remember when the men in purple were not a ubiquitous sight in the neighborhood? When catfish-like vacuum carts did not scour our roads sucking up the detritus of the night before? Who then swept the sidewalks in the wee hours and reminded property owners to eliminate graffiti? Well, we all did the dirty work—or didn't and suffered for the lack of it. The purple people are the result of the expansion of services of the **Downtown Denver Business Improvement District (BID)** into LoDo in 2002. It wasn't an uncontested introduction, however, and its continuing value to the neighborhood must be monitored closely. LoDo District took the lead to make sure that the neighborhood's commercial property owners, who are assessed for these services (\$393,000 in 2005), got their money's worth. And since LoDo's needs are different from the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Mall's (the primary focus and funding source for the BID), The District continues its communication with the BID and its parent **The Downtown Denver Partnership**, hand in glove, to improve and focus services on our distinct needs.

### **Lower Downtown Design and Demolition Review Board (LDDDRB)**

This board's purpose is to ensure that LoDo continues to look like LoDo well into the future. It is comprised of 7 volunteers and the city's preservation architect. **The LDDDRB** meets monthly to pass judgment on each and every proposed new building, renovation project and sign that make up our architectural environment. Thumbs up—like it or not—and the project becomes a permanent part of our landscape. Thumbs down can mean an expensive return to the drawing board, or even permanent denial, for the applicant. (Definitely gloves off!) These people regularly make decisions that affect the neighborhood for decades or longer. LoDo District, Inc. has the serious responsibility of making recommendations to **the Mayor** for appointments to this influential conclave. The process of recommendation involves the review of resumes and extensive interviews of candidates to select those volunteers whose professional skills and personal understanding of how LoDo should look and feel best serve the neighborhood.

### **Regional Transportation District (RTD)**

LoDo District's Transportation Committee and **RTD** have a long, storied relationship. (Gloves on and off.) From the strenuous efforts to **extend the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Mall and the mall shuttle** all the way to Union Station, to the seemingly eternal process required to **convert Wazee Street** into a 2-way road, to the struggle to appropriately **locate a light rail station immediately behind Union Station**, the two organizations are clearly engaged in a firm, yet often disputatious union. It seems, as goes transportation...so goes LoDo. Which makes sense in light of our roots as a transportation hub and the upcoming conversion of Denver Union Station into a modern, multi-modal facility. Therefore, the

Transportation Committee and RTD will continue to work hard into the future on such projects as the DUS Paver Program, the Strategic Transportation Plan, the possible funding and construction of a parking garage in LoDo, the relocation of Market Street Station (and possibly RTD's LoDo headquarters), and, of course, the impact of Denver Union Station redevelopment on pedestrians and traffic in our neighborhood. With all this commonality, it is in everyone's interest that this union continues to debate productively and resolve the issues.

### **The Barth Hotel**

All the grand efforts described above are designed to make LoDo a friendly, safe and attractive place for all the people that use it. Sometimes, though, it is easy to overlook the quietest and least demanding members of our community. LoDo District has maintained a special relationship over the years with just such a group. **The Barth Hotel** and its residents sit humbly in the midst of luxury lofts and bustling commercial activity. **Senior Housing Options** and the Barth Hotel provide assisted living for low-income, elderly and disabled citizens. For 15 years, LoDo District has cooperated with **LoDoNa, Kentwood City Properties**, and others in providing holiday celebrations of a white-glove caliber for residents of the Barth. The annual Holiday Party at the Barth is a heartwarming occasion that brings together the affluent and needy residents of our neighborhood. This is followed, each year, by Christmas at the Barth. **LoDo District members**, along with many other generous friends, donate practical and thoughtful (not to mention artfully wrapped) gifts to oft forgotten Barth residents. On Christmas-eve morning, when gifts are opened, the spirit of giving brings increased significance to the holidays for volunteers and residents alike.

There is so much more to say about cooperation. The difficulties cannot be overstated, nor can the rewards when it works. And there are so many more groups with which we strive to improve our neighborhood or just plain keep it from being ruined! There's **Union Station Advisory Committee**, of which we've written recently; **Larimer Square; EDAW**, our partner in the "State of the Neighborhood Study; the **Inter-Neighborhood Council**; the **Denver Police Department and Fire Department**; **The Ballpark Neighborhood**; our sports and entertainment neighbors--**The Colorado Rockies and The Pepsi Center**; the real estate brokerage community and real estate owners and developers; **Historic Denver** and Denver's **Landmark Preservation Committee**. The fact that so many have focused their activities and interests on our 20-block neighborhood just proves that our efforts are necessary. LoDo District, Inc. will not be hanging up the gloves any time soon. We plan to be at it, in spirited cooperation, for a very long time.

We need your cooperation. Call (303)297-8090 for membership information and to find out how to get involved.