



Image credit: <http://www.milehighconnects.org/equity-atlas.html>



CASE STUDY: DENVER, CO

The Denver Equity Atlas

Identifying Opportunities to Leverage Transit Investment

Background Information

The Denver metropolitan region is in the midst of a major transformation. In the coming decade, the region will build more than 122 miles of rail, adding 57 new rail stations and 18 miles of bus rapid transit.¹ This investment of more than \$6B has the potential to create incredible opportunity for those living in the region—linking residents to employment centers, improving affordability and enhancing quality of life in the region.

In 2011, a diverse set of non-profit and philanthropic partners came together to create Mile High Connects (MHC). Their mission was to ensure that the region’s investment in new transit service would provide greater access to opportunity and a higher quality of life for all of the region’s residents, particularly economically disadvantaged populations. To support this work, the Denver Equity Atlas presents more than 30 maps, providing a visual illustration (and discussion) of the current and future transit as it relates to the region’s demographics, housing, economy, educational opportunities, and health.

Process

Developing the Atlas. The development of the Denver Equity Atlas was a collaborative effort between two MHC members, the Piton Foundation and Reconnecting America. Inspired by the

¹ For more information about Denver FasTracks, visit http://www.rtd-fastracks.com/main_1



equity atlas that had been created by the Coalition for a Livable Future in Portland, Oregon², the two organizations set out to conduct a similar analysis of the Denver metro region.

The development of the Denver equity atlas took approximately 8 months. The process included four main phases of work: 1) initial brainstorming on data collection and mapping (~2 months); 2) data collection and mapping (~4 months); 3) developing the narrative (~2 months); and 4) final review and layout (~1 month). Factoring in the time partners spent providing input and reviewing the document, it is estimated that the Denver Equity Atlas cost \$75,000-80,000 to produce.

The project focused on seven counties in the Denver Metro Area: Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas and Jefferson. The maps were developed based on existing data that was gathered from a wide variety of sources, including Census and American Community Survey, as well as local data from cities, the transit agency (RTD), the metropolitan planning agency, health department and others. A subcommittee of MHC members also helped to contribute data from their respective organizations.

Creating a Research & Evaluation Subcommittee. The Equity Atlas was the first major project of the MHC and the first time many of the partners had worked together. To guide the development of the Atlas, a subcommittee was created. The group served in an advisory role, meeting twice a month to review materials and help with data collection. Members of the committee included Enterprise Community Partners and Urban Land Conservancy, FRESC: Good Jobs Strong Communities, Piton Foundation, the Colorado Health Foundation, Kaiser Foundation, Anschutz Family Foundation and the Funder's Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities. Bill Sadler of Reconnecting America led the committee and served as the project manager of the Atlas. Together the subcommittee members had expertise in housing, stakeholder engagement, education, health, and jobs.

Analyzing the Results. Once data had been gathered, Geographic Information System (GIS) software was used to produce maps in each of the five focus areas:

- Population and Demographic Characteristics of the seven county region
- Access to Affordable, Quality Housing Options
- Access to Jobs and Economic Development Opportunities
- Access to Educational Opportunities
- Access to Health Care, Healthy Foods, and Recreational Facilities

A map of the current and future transit network serves as the base map upon which other information is overlaid. The result is a comprehensive set of maps with an exploration of the five issue areas and recommended set of action steps.

Among the report's key findings is that Denver's transit expansion will create "tremendous opportunity" to increase transportation options and will improve access for many low income and economically disadvantaged populations. Currently, opportunities and resources are dispersed

² <http://www.equityatlas.org>



across the Denver region and there is a need for good transportation infrastructure to improve access.

Among the many issues brought to light by the Atlas is the reality that low income and economically disadvantaged residents in many parts of the region cannot utilize affordable transit choices to access these opportunities. Those residents who have found affordable options near transit (or future transit) are at risk of being displaced as development pressures increase demand for transit-accessible housing. The Atlas also reveals a need to invest in “last-mile connections,” such as bike paths, sidewalks, and shuttle services, which provide critical links between housing and jobs and support transit ridership.

To maximize the opportunities and address the challenges, the Atlas presents a wide range of action steps including the adoption of complete streets policies, upgrades to sidewalks and bike lanes, strategies for the preservation and development of affordable housing near transit stations, expansion of the Denver Transit Oriented Development Fund, partnerships with regional employers and support for small businesses to locate near transit and many others.

Lessons Learned

Stakeholder Engagement is Critical but Challenging. Among the biggest challenges in producing the equity atlas was the process and managing the amount of stakeholder input. Says Sadler, “We wanted to make sure the equity atlas was an accurate representation for the region,” which meant that the maps went through several rounds of review and revision. However, such a comprehensive data collection sparks differences in opinion and interpretation.

Sadler acknowledges that engaging stakeholders meant that the process took longer and increased the project cost, but their engagement was critical to ensuring the accuracy and credibility of the maps. Explains Sadler: “We were seeking to make a case for why equity matters to different people and that meant including everyone’s thoughts and opinions in the final document.”

Maps Tell a Visual Story. The Equity Atlas provides a visual representation of the challenges and opportunities in the Denver area. The maps also demonstrate the spatial distribution of people and jobs and the linkages (or lack thereof) between the different parts of the region. The maps support a regional approach to planning and unveil opportunities for regional collaboration to address challenges related to housing, economic development, and transportation.

With the final Atlas just released in April 2012, the MHC partners are now setting out to use the document as supporting evidence for demonstrating why equity is important to the region, why access to public transportation is critical for improving access to opportunity and how the issues of disparate groups (housing, health, education, jobs) are connected to each other and to transportation. MHC also hopes that the data in the Atlas can serve as a baseline measure of the region and that they can track data over time as new rail lines open and neighborhoods undergo change and see redevelopment begin to occur.



The maps have already gained the attention of local community groups, and even the business community, who had never before seen equity data displayed spatially. The new maps have brought attention to where people live and work and where their kids go to school—and a realization of how far apart these things often are. Notes Sadler: “There has already been a shift in the conversation just getting people to think visually and spatially about our region’s most pressing issues.”

As a next step, the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) will be using approximately \$120,000 of their Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant to make the Atlas into an interactive website where users can create their own maps.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to Bill Sadler, Reconnecting America.

For More Information

Mile High Connects Website: <http://www.milehighconnects.org/main.html>

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