

2001 Rudy Bruner Award

SILVER
medal winner



SOUTH PLATTE RIVER GREENWAY

Denver, Colorado

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PLACEMAKING FOR CHANGE: 2001 RUDY BRUNER AWARD FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE

BRUNER FOUNDATION, INC.

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2001 RUDY BRUNER AWARD FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE

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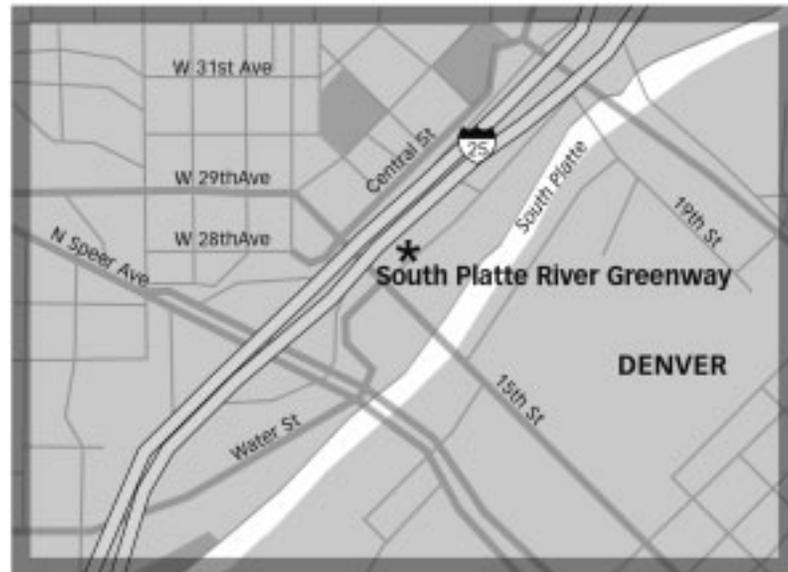
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Project location



Project location (detail)

SOUTH PLATTE RIVER GREENWAY AT A GLANCE

SUBMITTED BY:

Greenway Foundation, Douglas Ellis, *Associate Director*

WHAT IS THE SOUTH PLATTE RIVER GREENWAY?

- Sixty-seven miles of reclaimed land along the South Platte River and Cherry Creek, running through Denver and neighboring counties, connecting to another 35 miles along minor tributaries.
- A continuous hiking/biking path.
- Reclamation of a previously polluted river and its degraded surroundings.
- Re-vegetation of the river's banks.
- Reuse of adjacent areas for wildlife habitation and recreation.
- A series of 17 interconnected urban parks along the Denver portion of the South Platte, plus others along tributaries.
- Removal of impediments to boating along the river and creation of recreational rapids for kayaks and rafts.
- An historic trolley that runs along a portion of the Greenway and is slated to connect to an urban light rail system.
- Programs that foster stewardship, environmental awareness, and recreational activities for urban youth and adults.

- Significant contributions to the redevelopment of Denver's urban core through the attraction of adjacent housing and commercial developments as well as major cultural, entertainment, and sporting facilities, including a children's museum, aquarium, and amusement park.

MAJOR GOALS OF THE SOUTH PLATTE RIVER GREENWAY

- To reclaim a severely polluted river and its blighted environs.
- To create a bikeable, hikeable, "boatable" Greenway through downtown.
- To link the Greenway to the city and to a regional open space and bikeway system.
- To engage members of Denver's marginalized communities in the Greenway.

CHRONOLOGY

Three distinct phases of activity can be identified for this project. The mid-1970s until the early 1980s was a period of initiation and intense activity of cleanup, design, and construction. From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, the pace slowed and emphasis shifted to programming and extension of the Greenway into surrounding counties (Adams and Arapahoe). The period from the late 1990s to the present has seen investment in new parks as well as consolidation of the Greenway parks into Denver’s municipal park system.

1974

Mayor Bill McNichols appoints Joe Shoemaker chairman of the new Platte River Development Committee (PRDC) with \$1.9 million in seed money.

1975

First project, Confluence Park, is dedicated.

1976-1983

PRDC becomes The Greenway Foundation, a conduit for private funding. In this period, the first major achievements are completed, including:

- Elimination of over 250 sources of pollution.
- Construction of 10.5 miles of bike paths along the downtown section of the river.

- Construction of the first part of the Cherry Creek path.
- Completion of three more parks in Denver and 10 more on nearby former landfill sites.
- Removal of 10 obstructions on the river, replaced by boating chutes.
- Initiation of the River Rangers, a program that employs young people to assist in the maintenance of parks and trails.

1984-1986

Two tributary greenways are built; outdoor education program is initiated.

1986-1989

More of Cherry Creek and the Cherry Creek South Greenway are completed.

1993-1995

“Punt the Creek” boating attraction is created.

1996

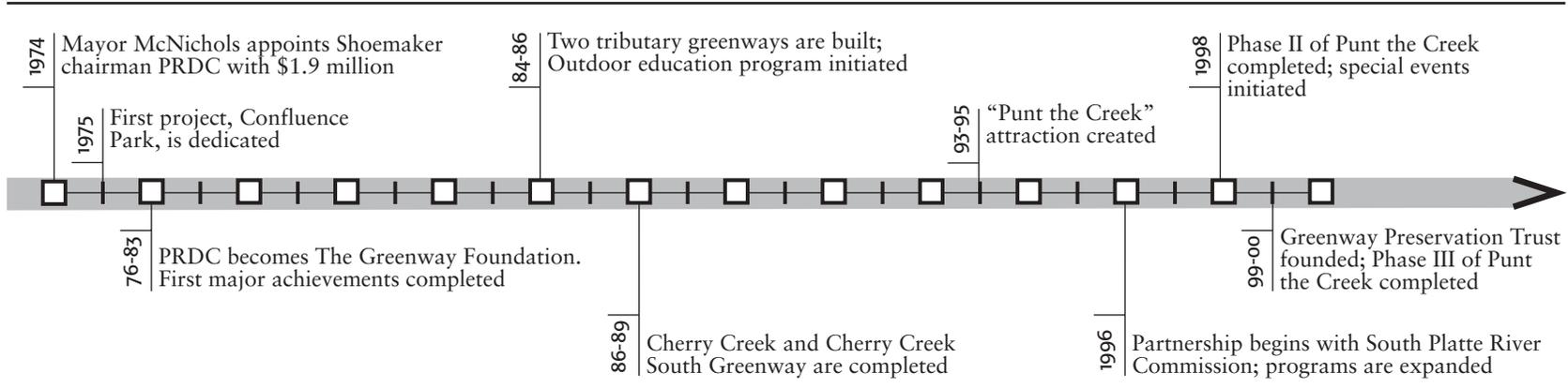
Partnership begins with South Platte River Commission; programs are expanded.

1998

Phase II of Punt the Creek completed; special events initiated.

1999-2000

Greenway Preservation Trust founded; \$1.5 of \$5 million goal raised; Phase III of Punt the Creek completed.



KEY PARTICIPANTS

Persons who were interviewed are indicated by an asterisk (*).

The Greenway Foundation

Joe Shoemaker,* *Founder of PRDC/The Greenway Foundation*

Jeff Shoemaker,* *Executive Director*

Doug Ellis,* *Associate Director*

City and County of Denver

Bill McNichols, *Mayor (1969-1983)*

Federico Pena, *Mayor (1983-1991)*

Wellington Webb, *Mayor (1991-present)*

Andrew Wallach,* *Assistant to the Mayor,*

Manager for the South Platte River Initiative

Bar Chadwick,* *Director, South Platte River Initiative,*

City Parks Department

Jennifer Moulton,*+ *Director, Community Development Department*

Local Community & Non-Profit Groups

Greg Pratt,*+ *Director, River Reach Youth Initiative*

Foundations and Funding Sources

Tom Abbott,*+ *Denver Rail Heritage Society*

Anschutz Foundation

Boettcher Foundation

Casey Davenport,*+ *Audubon Society*

Denver Foundation

El Pomar Foundation

Ellen Fischer,* *Gates Family Foundation*

Johnson Foundation

Piton Foundation

Jane Taylor,*+ *James Beckwourth Society*

Museums and Recreational Attractions

Susan Skahill* and Paul Aldretti,* *Colorado Ocean Journey*

Wendy Holmes,* *Children's Museum*

Landscape Architect/Urban Designers

Merle Grimes,* *MDG, Inc.*

Mark Johnson,* *Civitas*

Facilitator/Agency Relations

Tracy Bouvette,* *Principal, Camp, Dresser, McKee, Inc.*

Local Business Owners/Managers

Bob Voltz,* *General Manager, Recreational Equipment, Inc.*

Jon Kahn,* *Confluence Kayaks*

Private Developers

Dana Crawford,* *Urban Neighborhoods, Inc., Developer of the*

Flour Mill Lofts (and an original committee member)

Diane Groff,* *Marketing Specialist, East-West Partners,*

developer of Riverfront Park

Trillium Corporation *(developer of the balance of Burlington*

Northern's rail yard)

+*(Also on South Platte River Commission)*

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

HISTORY AND VISION

The South Platte River Greenway is centered around the confluence of the South Platte River and Cherry Creek, the site where Native Americans camped and where modern Denver was founded in the mid-1800s. Due to periodic flooding and other considerations, central Denver developed somewhat further east, and the edges of the river became the site of industrial activity.

In the period between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, there was a general disregard for the health of the river,

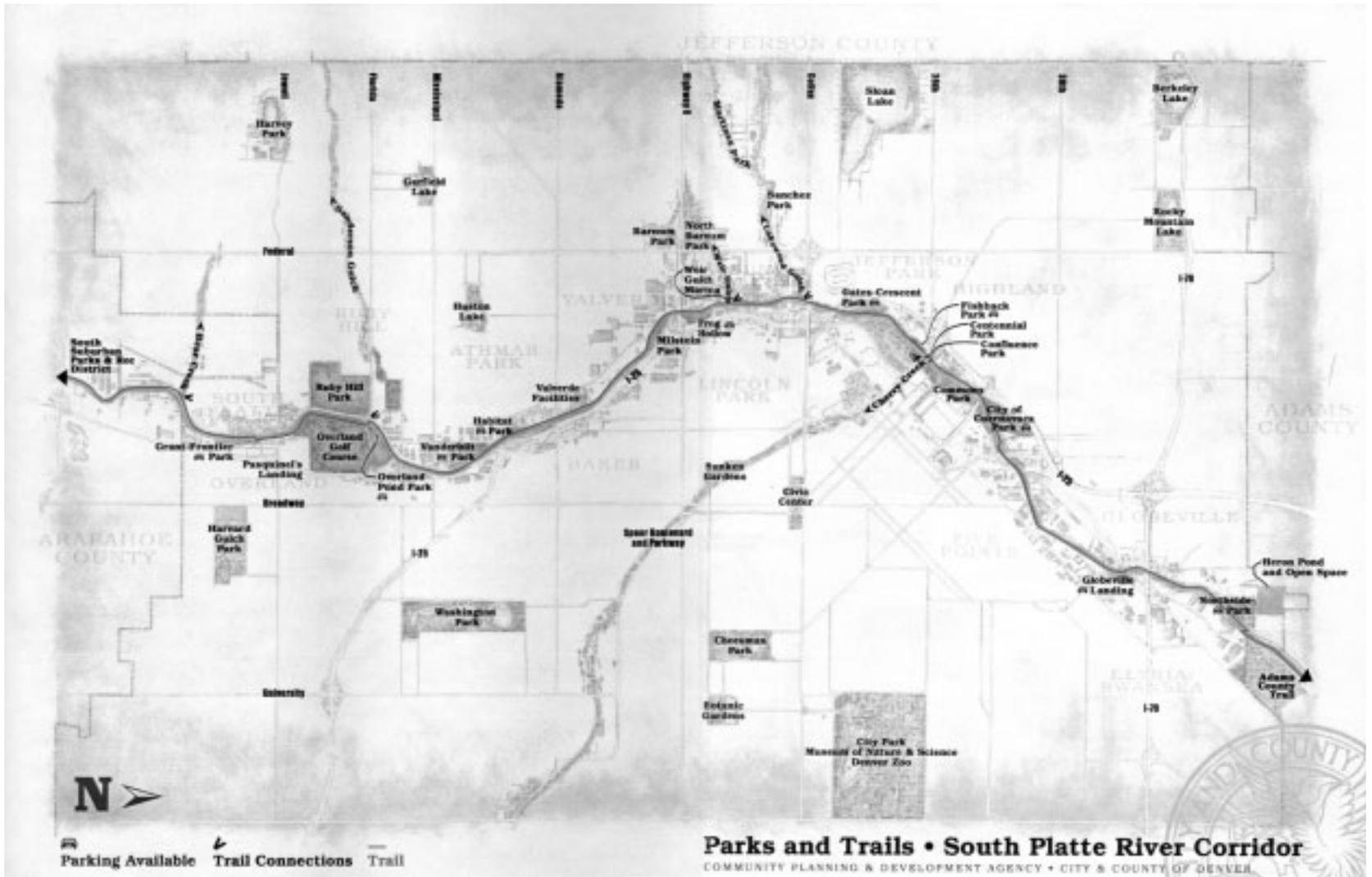


River polluted by industrial waste

and it soon became heavily polluted by both industrial and domestic waste. In attempting to convey the state of the river in frontier times, James Michener's *Centennial* described the South Platte as "a sad, bewildered nothing of a river ... a mean pestiferous bother ... a mile wide and an inch deep — too thick to drink, too thin to plow." Nor was it much improved by the 1960s, when at least 250 sources of pollution were still dumping various forms of waste and effluent into the river. The South Platte was considered so toxic that drinking from it could be lethal and even mere skin exposure dangerous. Denver turned its back on the river, shut its eyes, and held its nose.

But the river was capable of demanding attention. In 1965, there was what hydrologists termed a "100-year flood" which devastated surrounding areas, causing \$325 million in damage. A subsequent report suggested spending over \$600 million on flood control and redevelopment, but no such measures were implemented except for the construction of an upstream dam in Chatfield which greatly reduced the flood threat. This lack of action was seen by local residents as just one more failed attempt to deal effectively with a troubled urban river that had returned to its pre-flood state.

In 1974, the city's attitude toward the river changed. Mayor Bill McNichols set aside Denver's remaining \$1.9 million in revenue-sharing funds to address the needs of the river and prepared to form a committee to oversee its disbursement. It was at this moment that Joe Shoemaker took an interest in the river, spurred in part by a visit to the Riverwalk in San Antonio, Texas. Shoemaker was a



City plan for Greenway

highly experienced public servant and politician who had served as Denver's manager of public works and in the state legislature as the powerful chairman of the Joint Budget Committee. (He had recently been defeated by McNichols in the mayoral election.)

When Shoemaker approached McNichols about reclaiming the river, the timing was opportune. McNichols needed someone to head the newly formed Platte River Development Committee (PRDC), and who better for this difficult and politically risky position than his former political opponent, Shoemaker.

The four key goals of the committee were to:

- clean up the river's pollution;
- create a continuous hiking and bicycle path along the river;
- open the river for boating along its entire urban course; and
- reconnect the river to the city.

ORGANIZATION/LEADERSHIP

The importance of Joe Shoemaker to the Greenway cannot be over-emphasized. He is, most observers agree, both tough and charismatic and has brought to the effort a powerful presence and his considerable political experience and connections. He is totally committed to the Greenway, the primary focus of his career for over 25 years.

When Shoemaker was asked by Mayor McNichols to head the PRDC, its membership had not yet been determined. Shoemaker

helped structure the committee to be representative of the broad range of technical, business, recreational and community interests around the river. He lobbied for inclusion of those who might resist or mistrust the effort and was able to get them all to work together with impressive effectiveness, as described in the next section.

Several years later, after its initial phase of activity and expenditure of the \$1.9 million, the PRDC evolved into The Greenway Foundation. As a non-profit organization, the Foundation could raise funds from foundations and other sources in a way that a city-sponsored entity could not. Until recently, when the city's interest was rekindled, most of the achievements in developing the Greenway had been accomplished by the Foundation.

Shoemaker brought his son Jeff on board in 1982 in a temporary capacity — and Jeff stayed, taking over the lead from his father. Jeff, a musician and music educator by training, has a different style from his father, but one that may be more appropriate to a time that demands broader participation and more patience. Jeff also served in the state legislature and is both knowledgeable in politics and well connected.

During the mayoral administration of Federico Pena (1983 to 1991), the Greenway received less attention; Pena's focus was on the new airport, a stadium, and downtown development. During that time, the Foundation directed its efforts toward developing programs and extending the Greenway into neighboring counties, where there was both interest and funding.

In recent years, the involvement of the City and County of Denver has increased. Mayor Wellington Webb has helped to conceive of the Greenway as a linear park system that could be completed during his administration (and which was described by several interviewees as “his legacy”). The mayor declared 1996 the “Year of the River.” The city has built Commons Park along the Greenway, at the terminus of an axis down 16th Street from the State Capitol—the first such new park created in Denver in 100 years. The mayor’s office was active in the landscape planning for this park, suggesting the installation of formal gardens inspired by Versailles. The city has also sponsored another new park, Northside, at the north end of the Greenway.

In 1995, the Mayor created the South Platte River Commission to plan and oversee development in the corridor around the Greenway. In 2000, the Commission, co-chaired by the Mayor, produced the *Long Range Management Framework, South Platte River Corridor*, a master plan that called for institutionalization of a corridor oversight board whose functions would be to:

- provide a focus for the agencies and groups interested in the river;
- document and update information about the area;
- designate the river zone as a natural area with added protection for its ecology;

- establish priorities and criteria for projects and review development proposals;
- be a focus for resources needed to maintain and enhance the area; and
- develop a strategy for maintaining water quality.

The Commission’s name can be seen on signs labeling recent park improvement projects along the Greenway, suggesting that it is active in channeling resources into the area. Recently, the mayor was instrumental in having the 17 parks that border the Denver portion of the Greenway declared a park district. This action has assured ongoing development and maintenance of these parks by the Denver Parks Department.

In the meantime, recognizing that the Greenway receives different levels of priority as mayoral administrations change, The Greenway Foundation has formed a second entity, The Greenway Preservation Trust, to raise an endowment for the permanent programming and maintenance of the Greenway. It has so far raised \$3.15 million of its \$5 million goal which it hopes will generate approximately \$250,000 annually for expenditure on the Greenway.

The Greenway Foundation and its leaders have demonstrated an ability to be flexible and work within prevailing political constraints and possibilities. From an emphasis on physical development, to programming, to management and maintenance, the organization

has grown and matured with a necessary change in leadership. It has formed an effective partnership with the city and other agencies (recently the Army Corps of Engineers), where the Foundation's role remains that of an advocate able to get things done quickly, which is often impossible for a large bureaucracy. The formation of The Greenway Preservation Trust manifests a desire to ensure the long-term sustainability of the project.

THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Beginning in 1974, Joe Shoemaker used short, effective meetings to drive a process aimed at demonstrating that real improvements could be made to the river in a brief period of time. He was working to counter years of negativity about the impossibility of the task and the undesirability of the river by involving city bureaucrats and by becoming an "ambassador" for the river — taking anyone who would go (especially if he or she had power or resources) — on a tour. Shoemaker's task was a significant one as the river was so degraded that it was difficult for many people to visualize it as a place that would be attractive to the general public. There were reportedly comments in the press that the project seemed laughable.

Shoemaker initiated the PRDC's planning process with very high expectations for its achievements (see goals under "History and Vision,"). The PRDC began by selecting four one-mile-long study areas and assigning each one to a team of committee members and engineering consultants. Other sub-committees worked on design

issues such as lighting, seating, planting, and trail configuration. Astonishingly, the PRDC put four projects out to bid in 60 days.

Not everything went smoothly. There was resistance, for instance, from a citizen group that advocated for a very large and expensive park near one part of the river. This early dispute delayed a grant application that would have augmented the funds available for construction.

The actual bids for river cleanup were double the \$1.9 million that had been allocated for the effort. With no immediate prospect of



Globeville Landing

additional funding, Shoemaker pressed to spend the available funds to complete two of the four sections of the river originally selected in a manner that would have the greatest environmental and political impact. The two projects he and his committee identified were Confluence Park, the most historically significant and prominent site, and Globeville Landing at the north end of town. The Globeville site was close to a low-income, minority neighborhood. Addressing these two sites demonstrated that multiple interests would be served by the effort to reclaim the river. Because the PRDC focused all its efforts on these two projects, within several months there were tangible improvements that could be used to demonstrate progress and attract additional funding. A large celebration was held on Labor Day of 1975, less than a year after the rehabilitation and development process was initiated.

The Greenway Foundation's effort has always sought to include diverse constituencies, but the ways these constituencies have been included have changed over time. At the start, it made use of a representative model, identifying individuals who could represent various groups and interests and placing them on the primary committee. In more recent times, the Greenway's planning has become a more participatory process, at least where major projects are concerned. Though meetings of the original committee were open to the public, now public forums are held and broad input is encouraged. From the beginning, the Greenway Foundation's leadership has demonstrated an ability to balance competing interests and to satisfy the primary goals of recreational users, environmentalists, and developers.

DESCRIPTION OF THE GREENWAY

The Greenway is a linear system of open space that follows the South Platte River and its tributaries through Denver. It consists of a total of 67 miles, 10.5 of which run along the South Platte in Denver. The remaining sections run along Cherry Creek and other tributaries.

The Greenway consists of:

- A continuous hiking and bicycle path, at least eight feet wide in the narrow portions, sometimes running on both sides of the river, with bridges as needed to allow movement from one side to another. With the popularity of biking and rollerblading, newer sections of the path are typically 10 feet wide in the central area, reflecting the greater usage that could not have been foreseen initially. Wherever possible, The Greenway Foundation provides separate paths for walkers and cyclists, rollerbladers.



Bike trail along South Platte

- Seventeen parks of varying size and character along the Denver reach of the South Platte, all of which are now owned and maintained by Denver's Parks and Recreation Department. Only

three of these parks existed before the Greenway was created, and the most recent of these are currently being built by the city. Parks are identified by attractive, modern signs, and there are also postings about hours of use and allowable activities.



Play area at Grant Park

- River banks and adjacent areas that have been reclaimed and planted, often with native species that provide a wildlife habitat. It is reported that many species have returned to the river, including beaver, otters, fish, and numerous kinds of birds, such as herons and kingfishers.



Long view of river

- The river itself has been almost entirely cleared of impediments to boating for rafts and kayaks. Several rapids have been improved or created. One dam remains and will be revamped in the future. Even on a cold, early spring weekday, many kayakers were shooting and surfing the rapids.



Kayak in the rapids

- Paths which line both sides of Cherry Creek, one designated for pedestrians, the other for bikes and skaters. There is also a series of locks that are for punting (the Greenway derives some income from renting punts in season).



Cherry Creek path

The cleanup of the river entailed not only the elimination of 250 direct sources of pollution, but also changing the local mindset concerning the nature and importance of the river — from that of an open sewer fit only to be abused and avoided to that of a potential recreational and environmental resource. The Greenway Foundation has been very active in restoring the wildlife habitat and in effectively balancing the competing interests of those who want to use the river for recreation and those who want to keep it natural for ecological reasons.

The system of parks along the Greenway is worthy of more detailed description. Some are small neighborhood parks with play structures

and picnic benches that are also provided at the more central park near the Children’s Museum. Most are planted with Kentucky Blue Grass which is hardy and wears well but requires a great deal of water. This contrasts with native grasses and vegetation planted in many newer parks that are similarly designed as natural habitats and require much less water.

Representative parks along the Greenway include:

- **Confluence Park** (where Cherry Creek joins the South Platte River), which is one of the first two parks developed over 25 years ago and currently undergoing renovation. It includes a bridge across



Confluence Park



Confluence Park view toward downtown



Kiosk at Globeville Landing

the South Platte, a developed rapids area on the river, a stage platform cantilevered over the river, and seating and viewing areas on steps and grass. It is flanked by an historic building that was a transport museum and has recently been renovated as a Recreational Equipment, Inc. (REI) flagship store.

- ***Globeville Landing***, which is at the north end of the Denver portion of the Greenway and was the other park built in the first phase of construction to demonstrate a commitment to the surrounding neighborhoods. The Globeville neighborhood consists of modest, generally well maintained bungalows and

has a population that is primarily Hispanic and African-American. The Pepsi Co. bottling facility to the east of the park also supported the clean-up and improvement along the sections of the South Platte River that pass through the area.

- ***Commons Park***, which is the newest park in the chain. The park is bordered on the east by the first phase of East-West Partners' major housing development. East-West Partners was not willing to close escrow on the purchase of this adjacent land until the city had purchased the park site and committed to its construction — an indication of the importance of this open space as an amenity to the housing development.
- ***Habitat Park***, which is located in the southern portion of the Greenway and is in need of further improvement including paving and planting. It houses a building constructed by the Boy Scouts where rafts and other equipment for use on the river are stored. The park has been adopted by the James Beckwourth Society, an African-American outdoors group that brings inner-city children to the Greenway and will assist in its maintenance.
- ***Grant-Frontier Park***, which is at the far south end of the Greenway in a mainly residential neighborhood of well kept houses which border the park. The park provides play structures and picnic benches for local use. Near the park entrance is a small compound which houses antique mining gear used for school field trips during which students are given the opportunity to “pan for gold.” There are also naturalized areas that flank a particularly scenic sweep of the river.

The edges of the central portion of the Denver Greenway, closest to downtown, have become the site of major sporting, entertainment, and cultural attractions such as ball parks and museums (described in “Associated Development”). There is clearly a synergy between the Greenway and these facilities. People who come to facilities located along the river, especially the cultural sites, often use the Greenway, arriving on foot or by bicycle or trolley rather than by car. Many of these facilities would not have considered this area in its previous polluted and industrial condition.

Extended use of the Greenway as an alternative transportation system depends in part on its connection to the larger urban bikeway system and to the planned light rail system. The Greenway currently connects downtown Denver and many suburban neighborhoods to the river and the attractions that run along the Greenway.

The Cherry Creek stretch in particular links the Greenway to downtown and the eastern suburbs, running 13.5 miles to the Cherry Creek Reservoir and another 23 miles beyond it. (The latter stretch has both a hard path and a soft equestrian trail.) When the downtown section was improved, locks were installed to allow punting on the creek. Running along a portion of the Greenway on the west bank is a rail line (the main rail line for Denver’s Union Station), reclaimed for use by an historic trolley run in conjunction with the overall cleanup and rehabilitation. Operated since 1995 by



Biker at Cherry Creek

the Rail Heritage Society, the single car is a modern replica of a turn-of-the-century trolley. In spring 2001, it ran from Confluence Park and the REI building to the Children’s Museum. On a typical Saturday morning, it was packed with families with children. Plans call for the rail line to extend further north and south and to connect with Denver’s new light rail transit system. At that time, it will be operated in conjunction with Denver’s Department of Transportation, which will own and maintain the tracks. This will provide an even more important alternative to automobiles for access to downtown, lightening the burden on the sporting venues’ heavily used parking lots.

ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMS

As mentioned above, the Greenway supports a variety of informal recreational activities. The pathway system built by The Greenway Foundation is used for biking, skating, and walking. Rafting and kayaking have been made possible by the cleanup of the river, the removal of impediments, and the creation and stabilization of rapids. Punting is an organized boating activity made possible by the system of locks constructed on Cherry Creek.

The Greenway Foundation is very active in programming and maintaining the Greenway. Its operations budget (along with contributions from many sources) is partially devoted to sponsoring activities in the area. These include festivals, concerts and clean-up days. For example, in the summer of 2001, there were four free Confluence Concerts held in Confluence Park. With the Mayor's South Platte River Commission, the Foundation sponsored Riverfest, which includes competition for prizes and family-oriented entertainment. NIMBY, with numerous sponsors, is an annual clean-up day held in September when the water level is sufficiently low.

The River Reach Youth Initiative has provided organized activities for thousands of Denver public school children since 1992. A typical outing on the river will involve education and awareness through talks and demonstrations; service, such as planting trees or cleaning up an area; and a river raft ride, which serves as the "carrot" to keep kids interested throughout the day. The South Platte River Environmental Education (SPREE) is another environmental learning



Punting the Creek



Trolley near Ocean Adventure

program. Since 1975, over 65,000 students and parents have participated in numerous activities with the South Platte as the focal point. With the recent support of Mayor Webb and the South Platte River Commission, the program has expanded dramatically.

Regular maintenance is now provided by the Denver Parks Department, but the River Rangers, the Greenway's initial program for maintaining the river, is still operating as a youth employment program. Each summer, the Foundation employs Denver area youth to serve as River Rangers, hired in partnership with the Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce's Youth at Work program. These young people provide additional maintenance to the various urban waterway trails, assist at all Foundation special events, and partner with other similar youth crews to improve the landscape of the various parks and open spaces along the river.

ASSOCIATED DEVELOPMENTS

Many projects have been developed or are slated for development in the vicinity of the Greenway. Because there is so much development – project budgets total around \$2 billion – it is important to consider the extent to which the presence of the Greenway with its river, paths, and parks has contributed to these projects. Some of them would most likely have happened anyway, but others would have located elsewhere or not have been developed at all without the Greenway.

Part of the story of the associated developments is linked to the general urban context and economic base of Denver as it has ebbed

and flowed over the years. When the project began, Denver's economy, primarily driven by the energy industry, was experiencing a boom that turned to bust in the 1980s. In recent years, the energy sector has grown again and the economy is even stronger, having diversified with a new emphasis on telecommunications. In general, the robust economy of Denver has made possible much of the development associated with the Greenway, including the cultural and the sporting venues as well as the market-rate housing.

Projects next to or near the Greenway include:

- ***Children's Museum.*** The museum opened in 1983 on the west bank of the South Platte and was the first of the large facilities to locate there. The museum “chose” this site largely because The Greenway Foundation made the land available for \$1.



Children's Museum



Family activities at Children's Museum



Children panning for gold

Even so, the decision entailed some risk. At that time it was difficult for people to find the museum, since there was nothing else of note in the area to use as a landmark. The museum is a progressive institution, with colorful, child-oriented architecture. It has recently redefined its mission as serving early childhood development through interactive play. After this change in mission, the museum's attendance increased by 60% from its previous level of about 250,000 per year. The museum considers The Greenway Foundation to be a "partner in spirit" and feels that it would not be located here and might not even exist without Greenway synergy. The museum and Greenway jointly market each other's activities. In addition to its extensive indoor programming and displays, the museum operates nature walks





REI headquarters



Ocean Adventure

along the river and attracts families who also come to ride the trolley and use the open space at Gates-Crescent Park.

- *Colorado Ocean Journey.* This non-profit organization raised the \$93 million needed to create a self-described “world-class” aquarium and is now in its third year of operation. Exhibits emphasize the aquatic habitat with a focus on rivers as they run down to the ocean. The site was selected for its proximity to the South Platte, but this was only appropriate after the river had been cleaned up. The facility includes a “river walk” and a wetland habitat that attracts native wildlife.
- *Recreational Equipment, Inc.* REI recently opened a 94,000 square foot flagship store opposite Confluence Park. The

location is ideal for this purpose, since customers use the bike path to travel to the store and to test bikes for possible purchase. Its 100 bicycle parking spaces are often full on weekends. Similarly, customers can test kayaks on the rapids immediately outside the store. REI is housed in a restored historic building which was originally a trolley barn and later a transportation museum. The building was described as having been a wreck until REI spent \$32 million restore and renovate it (made up, in part, by about \$10 million in city, state, and historic preservation tax credits). This project was full of challenges but was an immediate commercial success. Described by some visitors as “awesome” for its soaring space and indoor climbing wall, it had a million visitors its first year and generates the highest volume of sales of any store in the company.



Flour Mill



Six Flags Elitch Gardens

- *Six Flags Elitch Gardens.* This amusement park is located across the river from and just south of Confluence Park. Elitch's Gardens had long been a fixture in Denver, and, but for the cleanup of the river, would likely have relocated to a suburban site.
- *Sports Venues.* The area is also the home of two major new sporting venues: a brand new basketball and hockey arena, the *Pepsi Center*, and, for football, *INVESCO Field at Mile High Stadium*. These facilities are directly linked to the Greenway, enabling access via bicycle or trolley.
- *Flour Mill Lofts.* This converted mill between the newly-created Cuernavaca Park (named for Denver's sister city in Mexico) and the remaining rail lines was developed by Dana Crawford, who previously created Larimer Square, the first retail revival project in lower downtown Denver (LoDo). She was an original member of the Greenway PRDC. The first phase of the Flour Mill was completed in early 1999 and has 17 loft units. Since it was the first residential project in the area, it faced many financing hurdles. Despite her experience and previous successes, Crawford was "turned down by every bank in Colorado" and only obtained financing after half the units had been presold. Because they have

so much window area, the apartments have tremendous light and views of downtown, the river, and the Rockies. Most of the buyers were empty nesters or young professionals without children. Construction of a new section is well underway, built in a similar style to the original concrete frame mill. While the original units sold for about \$250 per square foot, the new ones will be priced near \$400 per square foot. Crawford has purchased an additional 5.5 acre site across the tracks that will include financing for subsidized housing and thus a small percentage of units that are “affordable.”

- **Other Developments.** There are also other significant housing and commercial developments planned, under construction, or recently completed adjacent to the Greenway. This includes the development of the old Burlington Northern rail yards that lie between the Greenway and downtown. The yards were purchased by Trillium Corporation, which in turn sold the portion bordering the Greenway to East-West Partners, which plans to build about 2,000 units of housing in a 25-acre mixed-use complex to be called *Riverfront Park*. Three buildings with 183 mostly loft-style units, many of which have been pre-sold, are under construction at 16th Street. This land would certainly have been developed in any case, but the Greenway and its parks, particularly Commons Park, are a major sales point for the complex which emphasizes the views, nearby recreation, and convenient access to LoDo via a new pedestrian bridge over the remaining rail lines. East-West is enthusiastic enough about the prospects for this area that it purchased seven more acres for another development that will eventually hold an additional 1,000 units.

While there would have been pressure for developing the area around the Greenway (with downtown pushing in its direction, the success of LoDo and Larimer Square, and the availability of the Burlington Northern site), new development is happening faster, and the area is attracting more housing, sporting, and entertainment venues than it would have without the Greenway.



Model for nearby development

FINANCES

The Greenway and its projects have been funded by a rich mix of sources. The initial seed money of \$1.9 million was provided by the city from federal revenue-sharing funds. It was spent on the first two clean-up and improvement projects (the Confluence Park area and Globeville Park) and, with supplemental funding, also contributed to the next two projects. Perhaps the Greenway founders sensed that their organization would be around for a while, as they also used part of the funds to buy a warehouse near the river to serve as their offices.

The seed money was followed by another \$23 million from city, state and federal sources; the state lottery; private contributions; and



Confluence Park

foundation grants. Nearly \$50 million more has been invested by the city’s South Platte River Commission in parks, drainage improvements, and the like. Those funds came from city, state, and federal governments as well as from levies or fees from private developers such as Trillium, which provided \$2 million.

Actual and anticipated investments in area projects total over \$2 billion and include the following (in \$ millions):

COORS FIELD	\$215
PEPSI CENTER	\$170
BRONCO STADIUM	\$350
REI	\$32
SIX FLAGS ELITCH GARDENS	\$105
COLORADO OCEAN JOURNEY	\$100
CHILDREN’S MUSEUM	\$10
OTHER RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENTS.	\$35
TRILIUM-EAST-WEST (ESTIMATED)	\$1,000
TOTAL:	\$2,017

The Greenway Foundation, with its very small staff and low overhead, currently has an operating budget of just under \$1 million per year, of which two-thirds will be expended on river capital improvements. Funds come mostly from the City and County of Denver and are supplemented by contributions, earned income (e.g., from Punt the Creek), and a modest amount of interest from the Preservation Trust endowment. This last source will become increasingly important in the future as a permanent provider of funds for maintenance and programming.

IMPACT ON THE CITY

It would be difficult to overstate the positive impact the Greenway has had on Denver. Some effects are very obvious, such as the replacement of a polluted and degraded river with a significant open space and a recreational amenity. Others, such as changing the attitudes of residents about the river and perhaps the city, are more subtle.

The creation of such an amenity may be even more important in Denver than in other cities, since it is such an outdoor- and recreationally-oriented community. Many people move there for the easy access to skiing, hiking, fishing, and camping and to take advantage of a climate with over 300 sunny days per year. Yet before the Greenway, these activities and the expression of these values were largely available only outside the city.

The Greenway demonstrates to Denver residents and other observers that it is possible to restore a ruined part of the city to a



Rapids near Confluence Park



Rollerblading along the river

healthy and beneficial state and to improve the quality of life for all segments of society. At a time when many are pessimistic about contemporary urban life, it is positive and even uplifting to see that, with appropriate interventions, nature can heal itself and that a place can be created where human activity and interaction with nature can flourish and be enjoyed by the entire city. The Greenway has achieved remarkable success in reconnecting the city with its river, strengthening the association of urban life with the natural environment and reuniting the once-separated halves of the city.

CURRENT PROJECTS AND FUTURE PLANS

In addition to private developments, there are many projects currently underway, sponsored by the Greenway or independent organizations, that will expand and improve this area. These include Commons Park, the newly completed Skate Park and improvements along the Colfax Reach of the river (currently under construction near Mile High Stadium and including Bronco Bridge — a foot bridge that will likely be heavily used).

The Greenway Foundation's main plans for the future fall into four areas:

Physical Improvements

- Addition of the Zuni-Sun Valley Reach — about eight blocks long, likely to cost \$18 million — which will be constructed by the Army Corp of Engineers.

- Removal of the last impediment to boating by modifying a dam that serves a power plant.
- Ongoing improvements to river banks, plantings, habitat and natural areas.
- Ongoing expansion and improvement of parks.
- Extension of light rail to downtown and suburbs via the rail line that runs along the Greenway and is now used by the trolley.



Aerial view of Globeville Landing

The Endowment

Three million dollars of the \$5 million endowment target has already been raised. The Foundation's goal is to raise the rest by 2003. It is worth noting that 2003 is when the current administration leaves office. The endowment goals may reflect uncertainty about continuity of maintenance funding if the parks become a reduced priority of the next administration.

The Framework Master Plan

The Framework Master Plan describes the city's plan for preservation and enhancement of the river. The future role of The Greenway Foundation will be to assure that the provisions of the master plan are realized.

Park Maintenance District

The city has made the Greenway into a single park district, resulting in improved funding and the use of stable crews that have come to know how to maintain the river as well as the parks that it runs through or past. The Greenway Foundation was instrumental in the negotiations that created this district and will be active in assuring its full implementation.

ASSESSING PROJECT SUCCESS

HOW WELL THE PROJECT MET ITS GOALS

Reclaiming a severely polluted river and its blighted environs.

Pollution in the South Platte has essentially been eliminated, and the environs of the river have been reclaimed for open space, recreation, and wildlife habitat, as well as for housing and cultural and sports facilities.

Changing the image of a blighted part of town and a ruined natural resource, providing a positive model for effective urban change and environmental rehabilitation.

The Greenway is a potentially important model for other American cities, many of which have grown up around waterways which have been abused or ignored by recent development.

Creating a bikeable, hikeable, "boatable" greenway through downtown.

The Greenway has created a continuous pedestrian and bicycle path of 10.5 miles along the Denver portion of the South Platte, with an additional 13.5 miles along Cherry Creek in Denver. Along the South Platte, almost all impediments to rafting and kayaking have been removed (with the last one slated for removal in a project that will be implemented soon), and along the lower portion of Cherry Creek, locks were installed to allow punting.

Linking the Greenway to the city and to a regional open space and bikeway system, connecting outlying neighborhoods and suburbs to the city center.

The original Greenway ran along the in-town Denver stretch of the South Platte River. It has since been extended along Cherry Creek, which runs along one edge of downtown, and linked to a system with over 100 miles of hike-bike paths. This allows suburban residents to bike into downtown as well as to major sporting events. This is an important accomplishment in a modern city, so many of which are fragmented and polarized into the center and the periphery by natural or manufactured barriers.

Engaging members of Denver's marginalized communities in the Greenway and bridging and uniting the diverse constituencies in the city.

The Greenway Foundation and related entities have reached out to Denver's marginalized communities in a number of ways. In structuring the original committee, Shoemaker took pains to involve representatives of minority groups and disadvantaged communities that bordered the river, even though a degree of resistance was anticipated. Current outreach activities bring inner-city children to the Greenway for education and activities. A minority-run outdoor organization has adopted one of the parks. The only group that has not benefited has been the homeless, who used to camp along the river and have had to move to other locations. The removal of the homeless was reportedly undertaken with the involvement of social service agencies and advocacy groups who offered shelter and other services.

The Greenway has also contributed to social cohesion in Denver. It has gained the support of several mayoral administrations (though not always with equal enthusiasm), united Democrats and Republicans around a common cause, and found solutions that appear to successfully balance the concerns of environmentalists, recreation buffs, community activists, and developers.

Become a resource and supportive amenity for a new downtown residential community to be developed between Union Station and the Greenway.

The Greenway has received a lot of attention from other cities trying to reclaim their rivers. That said, there are ways in which the Greenway can be generalized and ways in which its application as a model may be limited. For example, Denver has recently been an economically successful and expanding city with resources to spend on the river. The availability of significant funding has been key to its development. The availability of a leader as powerful and connected as Joe Shoemaker was also a central factor in the Greenway's success. The Greenway joins the growing list of high-profile urban projects that have reclaimed waterfronts and rivers to enliven the environments and economies of their respective cities, including Baltimore's Inner Harbor, San Antonio's River Walk, and Seattle's Pike Place Market.

SELECTION COMMITTEE COMMENTS

The Committee was very impressed with the scope and quality of the South Platte River Greenway project. Committee members noted that while the river had a prominent role in the early history of

Denver, it had not, until this effort, been a significant part of the urban fabric of the metropolitan area other than as a source of blight. The Committee commented that rivers can play a powerful role in shaping the urban experience, citing Boston and San Antonio as models. The committee felt that it is critical to “turn around and embrace a river, to clean it up and make it part of a community.”

The ambitious and sensitive design and landscaping of the South Platte Greenway, committee members felt, was likely to make it a critical part of Denver’s future. In that sense, they viewed this project as “an Olmsteadian” creation. The combined environmental clean-up, parks, recreation, and alternative transportation aspects of the Greenway will make this area “a home” for Denver residents for many years to come. Committee members saw the Greenway as an important “opportunity to bring disparate parts of the community together” and applauded the project’s ability to connect people to nature. The committee felt that the Greenway “truly gives them a sense of place, that this is where I belong, that this is where this community belongs.”

Committee members also emphasized, however, the long-term nature of the impact of the Greenway. As a landscape project, they felt, the Greenway is not yet fully mature. “This is a 100 year project...It is a big achievement that will help structure this area for a long time to come.”

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Chapman, G. (2001, June). “The Intersection of Environmental Planning and Social Justice: Denver’s Platte River Greenway.” Masters of City Planning thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, City, MA.

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Mayor’s South Platte River Commission (2000, November). Long Range Management Framework: South Platte River Corridor. Denver, CO: Office of the Mayor.

Shoemaker, J. with Stevens, L. (1981). Returning the Platte to the People. Denver, CO: Greenway Foundation.

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RELATED RUDY BRUNER AWARD WINNERS

Readers who are interested in the South Platte River Greenway may also wish to read about these gold and silver award-winning projects from previous years:

Yerba Buena Gardens, San Francisco, CA (1999)

Nation Aids Memorial Grove, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, CA (1999)

Harlem Meer, Central Park, New York, NY (1995)

The Park at Post Office Square, Boston, MA (1993)

Brooklyn-Queens Greenway, New York, NY (1991)

Stowe Recreation Path, Stowe, VT (1989)

Radial Reuse Plan, Lincoln, NB (1989)

(For full bibliographic citations of Bruner Foundation books, please see Introduction. Information on all RBA winning projects is available at www.BrunerFoundation.org.)

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