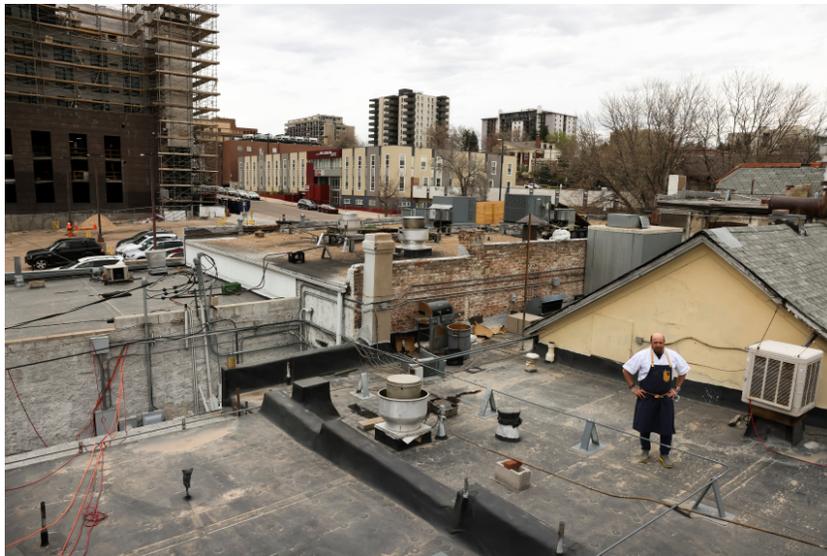


**BUSINESS > REAL ESTATE**

# Governors' Park is a little pocket of central Denver that finds itself at the heart of debate over growth

The Denver7 brutalist building landmark dispute is just the tip of the development iceberg



*Kevin Mohatt, Special to The Denver Post*

Frank Bonanno poses for a portrait on the roof of a building housing several restaurants he owns in the Governors' Park neighborhood of Denver on May 1, 2021.

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Governors' Park is one of those small but distinct pockets of Denver that doesn't show up as an official neighborhood on [the city's online map](#).

The area, straddling the border between Capitol Hill and the Speer neighborhood, has been perhaps best known over the years for its collection of independent bars and restaurants like the beloved ([and now departed](#)) Racines. More recently, folks might know it as home to the [often packed Trader Joe's](#) grocery store and some big new apartment blocks along the increasingly canyoned-in Speer Boulevard.

Today, the once quaint corner of central Denver is another focal point for urban densification where demand for more housing is driving intense developer interest. Meanwhile, neighborhood residents debate if the growth is benefiting people of all income levels, and visitors fret over scarce parking as more and more high-rises cast shade on once sunny sidewalks.

Last week, some neighbors who live in and around Governors' Park celebrated what they viewed as big wins in their efforts to impact and shape the changes taking place in the area, another part of town that is grappling with the benefits and impacts of Denver's seemingly endless growth.

First, the owners of two 100-plus-year-old commercial buildings at the corner of Grant Street and East Seventh Avenue [pulled back an application](#) they filed earlier this year for a certificate that would have made it easier for those buildings to be demolished. The decision came after meetings with a trio of neighbors who indicated they might seek landmark status for the buildings, currently home to four restaurants run by Denver chef Frank Bonanno, including Vesper Lounge and Luca.

“I am really appreciative of the owners agreeing to talk to us and see what we can do,” said Joanna Negler, who along with her husband, Michael, was one of the three residents who was ready to file landmark paperwork for the buildings. “They didn’t have to do that. They could have said, ‘No, this is what we want and this is what we’re going to do.’ ”

The second big win came Thursday night when the [Capitol Hill United Neighborhoods](#) organization board of directors voted to accept a memorandum of understanding with Property Markets Group, the big-time East Coast developer seeking to buy the property that is home to local TV news station Denver7.

The station’s building, a 1960s-built example of brutalist architecture at 123 Speer Blvd., is the subject of [an owner-opposed landmark application](#) headed for a City Council vote on May 10. The Denver residents pursuing that landmark status aren’t party to the agreement the neighborhood association planned to sign this past weekend.



Andy Cross, The Denver Post  
KMGH Denver7’s building features a Brutalist architectural style.

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That document, which includes a punch list of action items including seeking out local small businesses that might want to become ground-floor tenants in any future apartment development on the property and engaging with affordable housing advocates to assess needs and possibilities on the site, is more about what happens after May 10, [C.H.U.N. president and executive director Travis Leiker](#) said.

“What I find most exciting is I do think what we are putting together what could be a model for future sites, both in the greater Capitol Hill community and in the city and county of Denver,” Leiker said of the agreement with Property Markets Group. “From my perspective, when neighbors work together the city wins.”

Last week’s updates at the Grant Street restaurants building and at 123 Speer Blvd. don’t mean that all is right with the world when it comes to new development in Governors’ Park. There are plenty of projects on the horizon that neighbors are keeping a close eye on.

Kathy Callender lives in the Florentine building at 700 Washington St. Her west-facing condo overlooks some potential redevelopment sites in Governors’ Park including 123 Speer and the block that’s home to the former Racines building.

The restaurant, as well as another low-slung commercial building on the southeast corner of East Seventh Avenue and Sherman Street, are likely headed for demolition to clear the way for a proposed 13-story, 304-unit apartment building.

City records show that the site plans for that building are still under review. Even so, Todd Nicotra, a vice president with Virginia-based developers AvalonBay Communities, sent a letter to a city planner last week seeking permission to apply for a building permit review before the site plan approval was in place.

With the developer’s plans within the by-right zoning in place for the property, Callender said there is nothing she or any other neighbor can say to influence the design on the Racines site. She has been in touch with representatives for the company, but added: “AvalonBay could care less about us.”

AvalonBay representatives did not respond to requests for an interview for this story last week.



Kevin Mohatt, Special to The Denver Post

Racines restaurant, which permanently closed last summer after 36 years in operation, is seen in the Governors' Park neighborhood of Denver on May 1, 2021.

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Callender's interest in it that property drove her and a handful of other neighborhood residents to form a grassroots group called Citizens for Governors' Park. The group backed the efforts to preserve the 701 and 711 Grant St. buildings and has been engaged in the talks around the future of Denver's building, though it hasn't taken a position on the landmark application.

Callender is a C.H.U.N board member, but she said Citizens for Governors' Park is remaining an informal neighborhood group focused on trying to impact future development in the neighborhood.

And there is a lot of it. Her group counts at least seven future apartment buildings in the planning stages in Governors' Park area according to a map it has compiled.

Citizens for Governors' Park is not anti-growth, Callender said, and she rejects some of the "scorched Earth" viewpoints about new development she has heard in the neighborhood. Still, she wants new projects to align with principles in the city's long-range [Blueprint Denver plan](#). For her, that means buildings that are set back from the street instead of crowding the sidewalk and transitions from the taller buildings in the Golden Triangle neighborhood to the west and the lower-density neighborhood of Alamo Placita to the east.

“We need to get to the table with the developers,” Callender said.



Kevin Mohatt, Special to the Denver Post

Patrons sit in the outdoor patios of bars and restaurants on Logan Avenue in the Governors' Park neighborhood of Denver on May 1, 2021.

The group has reached out to District 10 City Councilman Chris Hinds for help with that. Hinds is planning to host a roundtable discussion with Citizens for Governors' Park and other neighborhood groups later this month.

“We have five different stakeholder groups and they're not asking for the same things,” Hinds said of the forthcoming meeting.

When he was campaigning for his seat in 2019, Hinds said the sentiment from Governors' Park neighbors was “basically don't tell anyone how amazing this little slice of the city is.”

Now that the secret is out and higher density development is pouring in, the neighborhood is at the whim of the existing zoning code put in place by his predecessors, Hinds said. He believes that is why there have been so many [landmark designation applications in the area](#) in the last two years.

“It might be the only tool that neighbors have to oppose development,” he said.



Kevin Mohatt, Special to The Denver Post

The inside of Luca restaurant is seen at dinnertime in the Governors' Park neighborhood of Denver on May 1, 2021.

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Across Broadway in Golden Triangle, a long-in-the-works zoning and design amendment is finally getting ready to go before City Council this summer, Hinds said. The changes [go back to 2014](#) and have been through a two-year stakeholder engagement process. A similar process in Cherry Creek is moving faster, but it is being run by the neighbors, not the city's planning and development department.

With pandemic-driven staff cuts and furloughs impacting the planning department, Hinds said creating neighborhood-specific design guidelines and principals for Governors' Park could take time.

Neighbors' best bet given the speed at which things are moving may be to work directly with property owners and developers to the extent they can.

One reason Denver7 chose Property Markets Group as the company it hopes to sell the 123 Speer property to is that the developer embraces collaboration, station general manager Dean Littleton said. The company has also agreed to a sale-and-lease-back arrangement that will give Denver7 time to move its operations, providing a window for more work with the neighbors about what comes next.

"We've been here a long time and this neighborhood is our home too," Littleton said. "We want to leave it a better place."



Andy Cross, The Denver Post

KMGH Denver7's building, located near the intersection of Speer Boulevard and Lincoln Street is pictured on April 28, 2021.

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Evan Schapiro, Property Markes Group's managing director of acquisitions, said he has loved Governors' Park since first visiting it a few years ago, and reached out to Denver7 before its property was even up for sale.

"It just felt so perfect. It felt very real. It felt very authentic," Schapiro said.

If the City Council does see fit to make the station's building a landmark, Schapiro said he isn't willing to call the deal dead but added that the property's market value hinges on the existing zoning which clears the way for 12-story buildings.

One thing Schapiro is ready to commit to is keeping that zoning in place. The possibility of seeking a rezoning to go higher — maybe up to 16 stories — has been discussed among the neighbors, with some supporting the idea and others opposing it.

"I fully appreciate the concern of losing that charm and losing that authenticity but I by no means think that is gone," Schapiro said of Governors' Park. "What makes a neighbor is the people that actually live there, and they are having proactive conversations with us."

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