

Arvada City Council Workshop Meeting, March 23, 2015

Notes taken by Susan Shirley

All councilmembers were present: Mayor Marc Williams, Mayor Pro Tem Mark McGoff, and Councilmembers Don Allard, Bob Dyer, Bob Fifer, Jerry Marks, and John Marriott.

Public attendance at 6:00 was 15.

This workshop covered three topics: The Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) Sustainable Communities Initiative, an update from the Arvada Visitors Center, and a progress report from TDS-Baja Broadband.

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DRCOG Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI): Somewhere along the line, as the transit behemoth began to unleash significant changes onto Front Range cities, many of the interested parties made the decision to collaborate in planning and carrying out goals relating to those changes. This, it is hoped, will maximize the benefits of what is happening, and have an impact beyond simply transit.

Along with Arvada, partners in the Gold Corridor planning are Denver, Adams County, Jefferson County, RTD, and Wheat Ridge. For very detailed information on the group's vision and recommendations for this area, see: http://www.arvadarecords.org/councilpacket/current_week/02.A.%20DRCOG%20Sustainable%20Communities%20Initiative.pdf

This evening's information was provided by Paul Aldretti, DRCOG's SCI Coordinator. Aldretti stressed heavily the need for attention to such things as affordable housing, availability of groceries, child care, etc., near high-density housing, and infrastructure. He gave as an example of needed infrastructure, the numerous problems navigating Ward Road by anything other than a car. The sidewalks are bad, bike lanes nonexistent, crosswalks and traffic signals sparse.

Obviously, demand for affordable housing is not even close to being met. Aldretti said his own kids moved to Colorado Springs because they could not afford to buy here. Aldretti said even the term, affordable housing, is kind of a red flag because it makes people think of subsidized housing. Mayor Marc Williams said he prefers the term "attainable housing."

Aldretti said the various concerns are the same across all regions and corridors.

Another issue, brought up frequently by the many stakeholders who have been involved in making recommendations, is that transit needs to be more affordable.

Councilmember Bob Fifer said that at a DRCOG meeting recently, the "food desert" was discussed-- along the Gold Line, there is the Target Store at Arvada Ridge, but no other groceries within a mile or more. Fifer also says that accessibility of food banks is important. Mayor Williams said he is continuing to work on getting a grocery in Olde Town.

The next SCI meeting will be April 15.

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Arvada Visitors Center

Did you know we have a Visitors Center? Do you know where it is?

Executive Director Jean Gordon presented updates to City Council, as the Center heads into its third year. The Center has focused heavily on promoting Arvada to a wider audience. To that end, they launched a website in 2013, which includes a calendar showing 300 events a year. They partner with the Chamber of Commerce, and are on Facebook and Twitter, which they update daily. They also sometimes pay to have posts promoted, finding that a very cost effective way to increase page views.

Advertising is another important venture, with ads appearing in the Arvada Press, Val-U-Ads, the July Top of the Town issue of 5280 Magazine, and City and Mountain Views magazine. The Center also produces rack cards, which are placed in fifteen Arvada locations, as well as a 22-page Visit Arvada brochure which is distributed to front range hotels and attractions, and at event booths. Center personnel attend city events and give out information, and partner with HOTA to bring events to Olde Town.

The Visitors Center welcomed 725 guests in 2014, from nearly every corner of the U.S.

Councilmember John Marriott said the City gets a lot of value for the \$119,000 annual budget of the Center, and that they have done a fantastic job of marketing Arvada. Gordon said her background is in PR and marketing, and she thinks it is a good fit.

Councilmember Bob Fifer asked if their location (hint: it's near the McIlvoy House) hinders them from getting foot traffic. Gordon said sometimes people do call, because they can't find the place. Fifer agreed with Marriott that they do a fabulous job within their budget, and he wants to make sure the City is giving them all the tools they need to be successful.

Councilmember Mark McGoff said that a recent interviewee for an appointment to a commission was asked why he moved to Arvada, and he said it was because of the warm and friendly reception he had gotten here.

Mayor Marc Williams asked if the Center has wayfinding signs. Gordon said she knows there are new signs in the works. Williams said that in Lakewood the wayfinding signs have turned out to be very important.

City Manager Mark Deven said that he had recently spoken to City Council about making seasonal adjustments in the Center's hours, and had not heard anything back, so assumes the changes are OK. Gordon said the Center has been staffed seven days a week, but that the vast majority of visits is during the week. By altering the schedule to a six-day week from May to August and a five-day week the rest of the year, funds will be freed up for more lucrative avenues, and a card rack can be placed outside for those persons who do show up on a Saturday or Sunday.

Councilmember Fifer said there should also be wayfinding signs placed on Wadsworth and Ralston Road, not just at the Gold Line Station.

Mayor Williams thanked the Chamber of Commerce for their work and support to help the Visitors Center.

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TDS Baja Broadband:

For those who weren't paying attention, Arvada is split into two sections when it comes to cable. The east side has Comcast and the west side has what was formerly known as Baja Broadband, but was purchased in 2013 by TDS Telecom, which is primarily a telephone company. So, Comcast is a very good provider and there have been very few issues with them, and what issues there have been, seem to have been relatively easy to negotiate. Baja, on the other hand, was responsible for an inordinate number of irate phone calls to councilmembers from citizens whose cable was out and could not get answers or satisfaction from that very unresponsive provider. There seem to have been some improvements under TDS, but still others remain unresolved.

This evening's presentation was given by Ken Paker, CTO of TDS Telecom. Paker said TDS has made good progress since his last report in September, gaining customers for telephone and internet, but still working on turning around the video product. TDS will be rolling out, in two months, a new product called "Catch TV," which includes improved DVR storage, whole home DVR, improved customer interface, TV on smartphones, tablets, and laptops, and -- and here's a big point of disagreement on terms-- Video on Demand. The lineup has also been substantially expanded.

Councilmember Fifer subscribes to Direct TV and described what's available to him on that provider's Video on Demand: if he wants to see a network show from earlier this year, say ABC's Shark Tank, there's a library for that, and it's not hard to get to, and he doesn't have to have a separate subscription. The sticking point with TDS is that there need to be separate subscriptions in order to do that same thing. Paker said TDS doesn't have the necessary content agreements with the various networks, and no plans, right now, to do so.

Councilmember Bob Dyer said that with Comcast he can do just what Fifer described. But, since the area covered by TDS is within Dyer's Council district, he would like the equivalent service provided by TDS, as Comcast is doing. Also, Dyer said TDS is supposed to be paying the city a fee for the number of subscribers, and while Paker's presentation showed increases, the fee paid has not changed in years, so seems not to be getting updated.

Councilmember Fifer said he is still hearing complaints about service outages and is disappointed about that problem continuing.

Councilmember John Marriott noted that one of the new products, "Fiber 2 Home," is only for new construction, not for existing homes, and asked why that is. Paker said that's because of the cost of construction and extra bandwidth, it is a strategy to optimize what's available. Marriott also wondered if TDS has enough customers to be able to do needed improvements, given that it will take significant investment to get to what the city expects. Paker said he believes TDS can turn the market around; Marriott wondered if TDS can continue with the low customer base, long enough to get to that turnaround point. Paker said TDS is a nationwide, financially sound company, which is very committed to progress. Marriott persisted, saying that it's a moving target; by the time TDS reaches a standard, the standards have moved on. Paker said that Catch TV is expected to get TDS in the ballpark. Marriott said the consumers aren't expecting "ballpark," they want to be able to buy what's already available on Comcast.

Paker said TDS has been around since 1969, as primarily a telephone company until three years ago. Baja was its first major cable acquisition. Paker said that TDS is not looking to flip TDS Baja, but is in it for the long run. He told Council he understands their frustration, but feels confident that TDS is following methodology which has worked previously in other markets.

Paker said TDS will be rebranding, taking away the word "Baja" which seems not to have such a great connotation here. Mayor Williams said he could've told them that and saved them a lot of money on research.

Councilmember McGoff asked about such statistics as an accurate number of subscribers, number of complaints and time to respond satisfactorily to complaints, saying that information doesn't seem to have been provided to City Council, and wondering if staff received those reports. City Attorney Chris Daly said the company is supposed to provide quarterly reports, which has not been happening.

Councilmember Fifer suggested focusing less on phone services, which TDS is already good at, and more on what needs work, which is video services. He wondered if some competition would encourage them to step up their game. Paker said they already have competition, which is Dish Network and Direct TV. Fifer said, that's right, and that's 90% of the market which is never coming back, because they have such a sour taste about Baja. Fifer said all the councilmembers get phone calls complaining about the service, and that it is a "wound which has never healed." There was discussion about previous bad cable companies, with Mayor Williams saying the new products need not to be lipstick on a pig.

Responding to a question from Daly, Paker acknowledged that nowhere in the US does TDS have Video on Demand such as is provided by Direct TV or others. Councilmember Fifer asked if he could go to the TDS office and see it, and also offered Paker the chance to come to his house and see how the Direct TV product works there. He suggested that, next update, Paker bring along TDS' head of product development, to facilitate answering the more specific questions Council may have about the products.

Ken Fellman, Arvada's outside legal counsel, said that the Cable Act doesn't allow cities to require specific technology, but they can require specific functionality. There is language as to what "comparable service" means. So the question that needs to be asked is whether TDS delivers service as promised.

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City Manager Deven said there is no meeting next week, as it is the fifth Monday of the month, and that there will be a joint meeting between Arvada and Golden sometime in May. Deven asked if the 19th would work for councilmembers; it did.

The workshop was adjourned at about 8 p.m.