

On grounds of old base, a new community is born *The Boston Globe* **Redevelopment seen as model for conversions**

By Jeff Kass, Globe Correspondent | June 26, 2005

DENVER -- A tidy grouping of homes and businesses on the city's eastern edge boasts some unusual trademarks: Navy blue doors, buildings with five-pointed Air Force stars chiseled in concrete on walls, and a B-52 bomber outside the neighborhood museum.

The community is Lowry, a former US Air Force installation in Denver and an adjoining city that is being heralded as one of the country's most successful military base conversions as the president and Congress prepare to shut down more bases.

Behind the blue doors are now the Officers' Row homes, which are part of a residential and commercial rebirth for the old base that includes new schools, vibrant business district, and thousands of new homes.

More than a decade ago, looking at the ratty hangars, barracks, and roads, it was easy to miss the potential.

"You're not giving [over] a pristine piece of ground," said Hilarie Portell, spokeswoman for the Lowry Redevelopment Authority, which is in charge of converting the 1,866-acre site. "You get 1,000 empty buildings, 28 miles of obsolete roads, and utilities the city won't accept."

Some lessons were hard fought. Environmental cleanup battles and the slower-than-expected growth of a state community college branch are two major issues Lowry continues to work through.

Lowry benefited from a confluence of trends. Traffic was snarling the suburbs just as city living was becoming more attractive. Close to downtown, Lowry offered a new alternative to the city's dated housing stock. Denver and the neighboring city of Aurora -- which contains 11 percent of the Lowry land -- defied traditional municipal antagonism and quickly struck a deal on jointly managing the project.

"It's one of those things where, rather than seeing all they could lose to each other, these cities saw all they could gain," said Otis White, president of the Atlanta-based public policy consulting firm Civic Strategies Inc. "I think [the planners] were lucky and smart. Mostly they were lucky."

According to the website of the Wings Over the Rockies Air and Space Museum on the Lowry grounds, Lowry Field's first, unpaved runway became operational in 1938. Ten years later, it became Lowry Air Force Base under a military reorganization after World War II. In 1966, the last plane took off as the base became a training facility.

The base closed for good on Sept. 30, 1994, over the loud objections of local government officials, as part of a nationwide round of base closures.

The previous year, anticipating the closure, city officials in Denver and Aurora approved the Lowry Reuse Plan, which outlined the scope of the housing, commercial development, and parkland to be built on the former base. The first buildings and runways were demolished in 1996. Homes started going up in 1997, and the first residents moved in in 1998.

Just past the main business district are the Grand Lowry Lofts, a massive brick building that housed military personnel and offices when the Air Force base was open.

The lofts, with two stone eagles guarding an arched entry, are among the 3,000 homes and apartments that now house 6,500 residents, a mix including young professionals, retirees, and those in need of low-cost housing. By 2007, 4,500 dwellings are expected to house 10,000 people in a mix of million-dollar homes and affordable houses.

Commercial construction began in 1999, the same year three new schools opened. Lowry now has six private schools, one public elementary school, and a library. The 3.8 million square feet of commercial space now includes 110 employers and 6,000 workers. The community, called Lowry, is credited with adding \$4 billion in economic benefits to the region.

The town's business district has a neat array of shops and restaurants, including a supermarket, a Mexican restaurant, a tanning salon, a bicycle shop, a Starbucks, a toy store, and Lowry Liquors, with its logo of five-pointed stars.

But Lowry, which seems as trim and unified as a Lego set, still has a couple of pieces missing. The redevelopment agency and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and the Air Force have cooperated -- and clashed -- over the pace, thoroughness, and cost of environmental cleanup of the former base. Construction of the Great Lawn, Lowry's 50-acre centerpiece park, has been delayed because of concerns about asbestos, which was found elsewhere on the base.

Portell and Markham say the Air Force, which has ultimate legal responsibility for the cleanup, should allow the redevelopment authority to manage the cleanup.

Spokeswoman Sonja Coderre says the Air Force has plenty of expertise in environmental cleanups from other base closings. But she acknowledges that documentation to pinpoint potential problems may be difficult to find or incomplete.

On a site of approximately 141 acres, mostly in Aurora, the Colorado Community College System planned for the equivalent of 10,000 full-time students but now expects 5,333, according to Marilyn Golden, vice president for finance and administration. Currently, the equivalent of 2,000 full-timers are enrolled.

The college system wants to use 80 of the acres for a mix of housing and businesses. Golden says a slow economy, state budget constraints, and shifting student enrollment is forcing the change.

Chuck Woodward, co-author of a guidebook on Lowry, was one of its first residents. He retired to Lowry, where his homeowners association takes care of snow removal and grass cutting. The 68-year-old likes being part of a cutting-edge community.

He is bothered by the delay in building the Great Lawn, but enjoys being within walking distance of the shops, restaurants, and the library, where he volunteers.

The former high school history and psychology teacher moved from Aurora to a four-bedroom, 2,100-square-foot home full of windows and light, a gas fireplace, and a small backyard with a little pond. Since he moved in nearly seven years ago, he believes, the value of his home has jumped from about \$200,000 to about \$465,000.

"These sites can be real economic development opportunities," said Portell.

"They certainly are a hard economic loss in the short-term. They definitely are hard to implement. But we say this: There is life after closure." ■

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