

Revisioning Welton Street Five Points Vibrant, Transit Rich, Business Supporting, Pedestrian Friendly, Sustainable



Welton Street 2024

Introduction:

The Welton Corridor is the Historic Center of Denver's African American community and one of the main business corridors of the Greater Five Points Neighborhood. The pinnacle of the business community's success on Welton came in the 1950's when the population of the neighborhood reached its height and the corridor was served by the primary street-car line into North East Denver. In the decades since numerous forces have converged to create a challenging environment for businesses along the Welton Corridor, including the physical configuration of the corridor's infrastructure; a one way street, narrow sidewalks with little shade or green infrastructure and a single tracked light rail line that serves the corridor in a slow and inefficient manner.

In an effort to create a street configuration that supports the success of businesses along the Welton Corridor, promotes sustainable transportation options such as walking, biking and transit use, and builds on the community's rich cultural heritage, a group of Five Points stakeholders has come together in 2024 for a revisioning effort to imagine a Welton Street that is transit-rich, sustainable, beautiful, green, and well connected to Downtown Denver, Five Points and the populations centers that would patronize the businesses along Welton Street if the physical conditions of the street improved.

Background

In 1994 Denver opened its first light rail line. Known as the D-Line, The project linked Downtown to Five Points via a line that extended up Welton street to 30th and Downing, and stretched South to Mineral Blvd in Littleton connecting Englewood, South Broadway and Auraria Campus to Downtown Denver. The line was partially intended to be a demonstration project to make the case for greater transit investment in Metro Denver. At the time the choice was made to go with a high boarding style train car that would require ramps at every stop. This meant that the stops would be substantial in size with the need to make room for the vertical climb for boarding the trains. The decision was also made to single track the portion of the line between 24th street and 30th street through the center of Five Points to minimize the impact of the tracks on the Welton street business corridor.

Public enthusiasm for the D-line was initially very strong with good ridership and strong public support. RTD utilized this support in its effort to pass the Fast Tracks initiative in 2004 which greatly expanded light rail and commuter rail in the Metro Area, with a plan to add an additional 113 miles of light rail and commuter rail tracks to the system. One of these rail projects was called the Central Rail Extension, and called for the extension of the light rail tracks from 30th and Downing to meet the new A-Line commuter rail line at 38th and Blake along the Downing street corridor.

Reality quickly set in as it became apparent that the voter approved initiative would not have nearly enough money to fund the build-out of the promised 113 miles of additional rail lines. In addition the decision to single track light rail on Welton Street and use high profile train vehicles was having major repercussions for the businesses and development along Welton Street:

Unintended Consequences of the Original Welton Street Light Rail Configuration:

- The single track timing was not working as intended and the trains were consistently waiting inordinate amounts of time at 24th street for the earlier train to make its return from 30th and Downing. This was throwing off the schedule for the entire line and making the trip less useful for people trying to reach Welton via light rail.
- The high profile cars were creating a sense of danger on the sidewalks of Welton Street where they towered over the narrow sidewalk and small storefronts adjacent to the tracks.

- The cost of infrastructure improvement increased dramatically for shop owners, builders and developers trying to make improvements and add infill along the corridor because of the complications that resulted from building next to the light rail tracks.
- RTD forbade the installation of trees along the corridor or even substantial vertical planters to ensure that there was no interference with the train by vegetation.
- The presence of the train and its interaction with the five pointed intersections along the corridor caused RTD and Denver to not allow Welton Street to be converted to two-way traffic as almost all other major streets in Five Points were converted from one-way to two way-traffic. Blake, Walnut, Larimer, California and Lawrence street were all converted to two-way traffic while Welton Street remained a one-way street.
- Delayed construction completion of the Welton Street Light Rail impacted the sales and revenue generation of businesses in Five Points, causing quite a few to close their doors.

Attempts to mitigate negative consequences leads to further deterioration of the corridor:

In an effort to mitigate the delays caused by single tracking Welton street, RTD closed the 29th and Welton stop in January of 2013. Despite promises made to the community, the station was not removed or maintained by RTD and the abandoned station sits as an eyesore on the 2900 Block of Welton to this day.

Despite this effort the improvement to timing was negligible and RTD continued to experience delays caused by the single tracked section of Welton Street. To finally resolve the issue the decision was made in 2017 to orphan the Welton street corridor train and cut it off entirely from the rest of the light rail system. Instead of a one train ride from Mineral to 30th and Downing, the Welton line would become its own line hence-forth referred to as the L-line. The new L-line which started service in January of 2018, provided a looping service from 14th street to 30th and Downing. Riders wishing to reach Welton street from the South or the South from Welton Street now had to change trains in Downtown. While this effort did improve the timing for trains in the rest of the system, the negative impact on Welton street was swift and conclusive. The L-line trains continued to operate on delayed timing because of the single tracked Welton section of the line. In most cases it was faster to bike, scooter or even walk from Downtown to destinations along the Welton Corridor than it was to take the train which continued to be stuck in an inefficient infrastructure configuration.

Welton Street Suffers the Consequences of poor transit planning:

By 2019 the hopes of Light Rail bringing positive impacts to Welton Street had faded. The corridor was bleak with little transit ridership left on the inefficient L-line, and a streetscape that felt desolate with vacant parking lots, shuttered store-fronts, and the lack of any shade or greenery resulting from RTD's no trees policy. The wide one-way corridor allowed cars to race past the vacant storefronts and struggling businesses. There was little reason to stop on Welton street as legacy businesses such as Coffee at the Point, Dunbar's Kitchen and Tap, and Welton

Street Cafe all closed their doors. Today Five Points suffers from the heat Island effect that inflicts neighborhoods that lack green infrastructure with a higher average temperature, causing heat and pollution related illness among residents of the community. A recent study of Denver Neighborhoods found that Five Points has the 6th highest average temperature among Denver neighborhoods.



Broadway and Welton

Community Plans for a better Future

The slow steady deterioration of the promises made to the Five Points community by RTD and the City of Denver about the benefits of Light Rail caused the community to ask on numerous occasions and through numerous planning processes for a better solution and configuration for Welton Street. The realization that extending the light rail from 30th and Downing to 38th and Blake was unlikely to ever happen because of the excessive cost and need to take properties along Downing to make it happen, also lead the community to think in a new direction about what transit options would be best to serve the neighborhood and the Welton Street corridor specifically. Dating back as far as 2011 community discussions were focused on whether a streetcar that ran in traffic would be more beneficial to Welton street and the neighborhood than the current light rail configuration.

1. [The 2011 Five Points Welton Street Marketplace Vision Plan final report](#) suggested Welton street be reconstructed with Two-way traffic, Two way street car replacing light rail, wider sidewalks, parking on both sides of the street and bike amenities.
2. **The NorthEast Denver Neighborhoods Plan** found that Two-way operations may help support the main street character of the Welton Corridor. Conversion of Welton would be necessary to support any future Two-Way street car operations. The plan

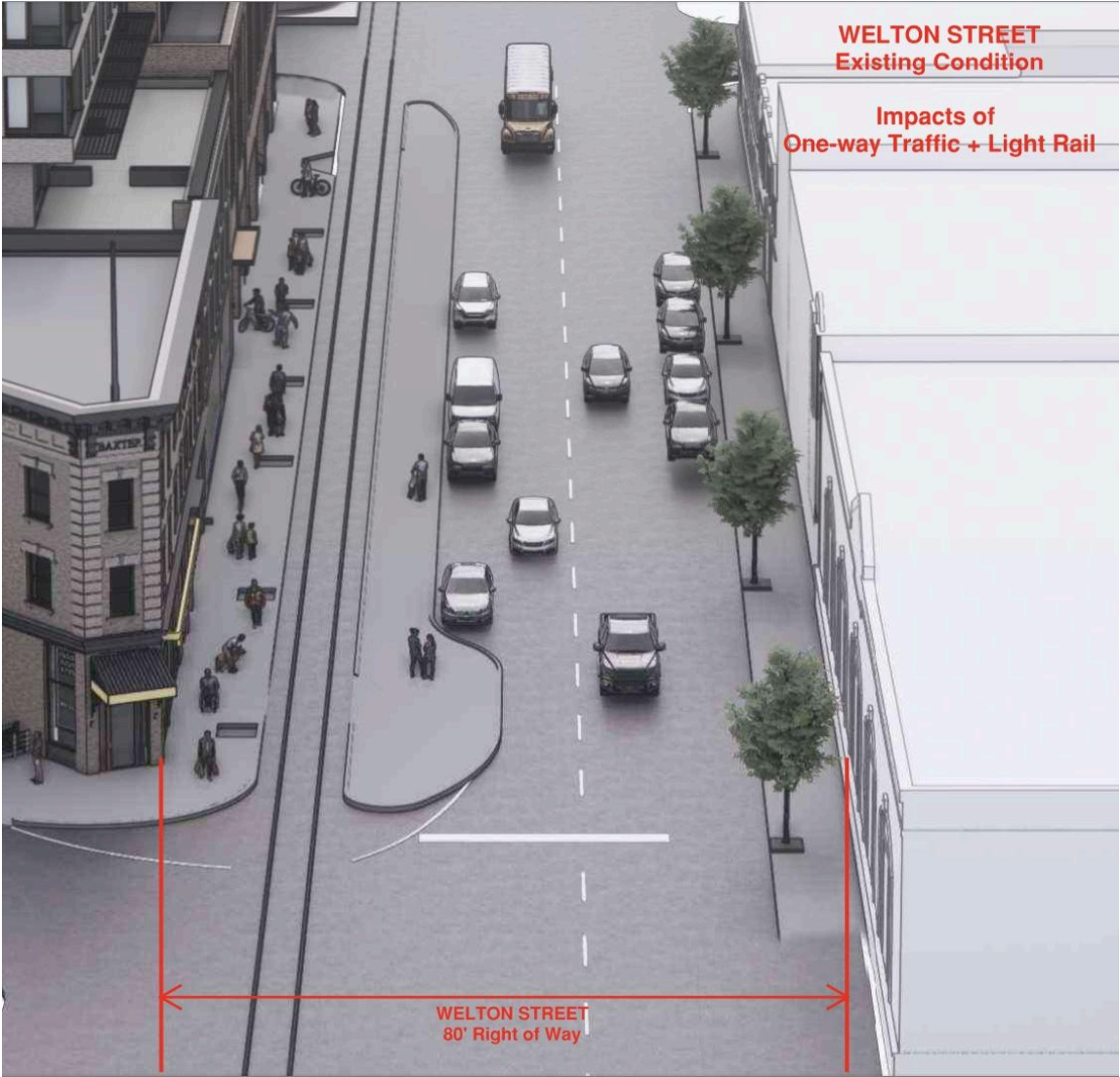
recommended the use of a modern streetcar to replace the existing light rail configuration.

3. [The Urban Land Institute Five Points/Welton Corridor TAP report](#) published in August of 2011 found that “because of the flaws in the original design, the configuration of light rail in the Welton Corridor does not support commercial revitalization of Five Points.”
4. [Northeast Five Points Business District Vision Plan Implementation & Revitalization - Five Points Business District](#) published in 2013 identifies that light rail and one-way traffic were created for regional mobility, not to best support a pedestrian friendly neighborhood business district and calls for a more safe pedestrian environment including the potential of a two-way Welton Street.
5. **Northeast Downtown NEST Steps Study 2015 (need plan)**
6. [Neighborhood Transportation Management Plan 2019](#) Talks in general about the need to improve Welton street and suggests small projects such as cross walks which are not very viable with the train and one-way fast traffic.
7. [Denver’s Complete Streets Guidelines adopted in 2020 classifies Welton street as a Main Street.](#) The Main street classification carries with it the following prescription for street design:

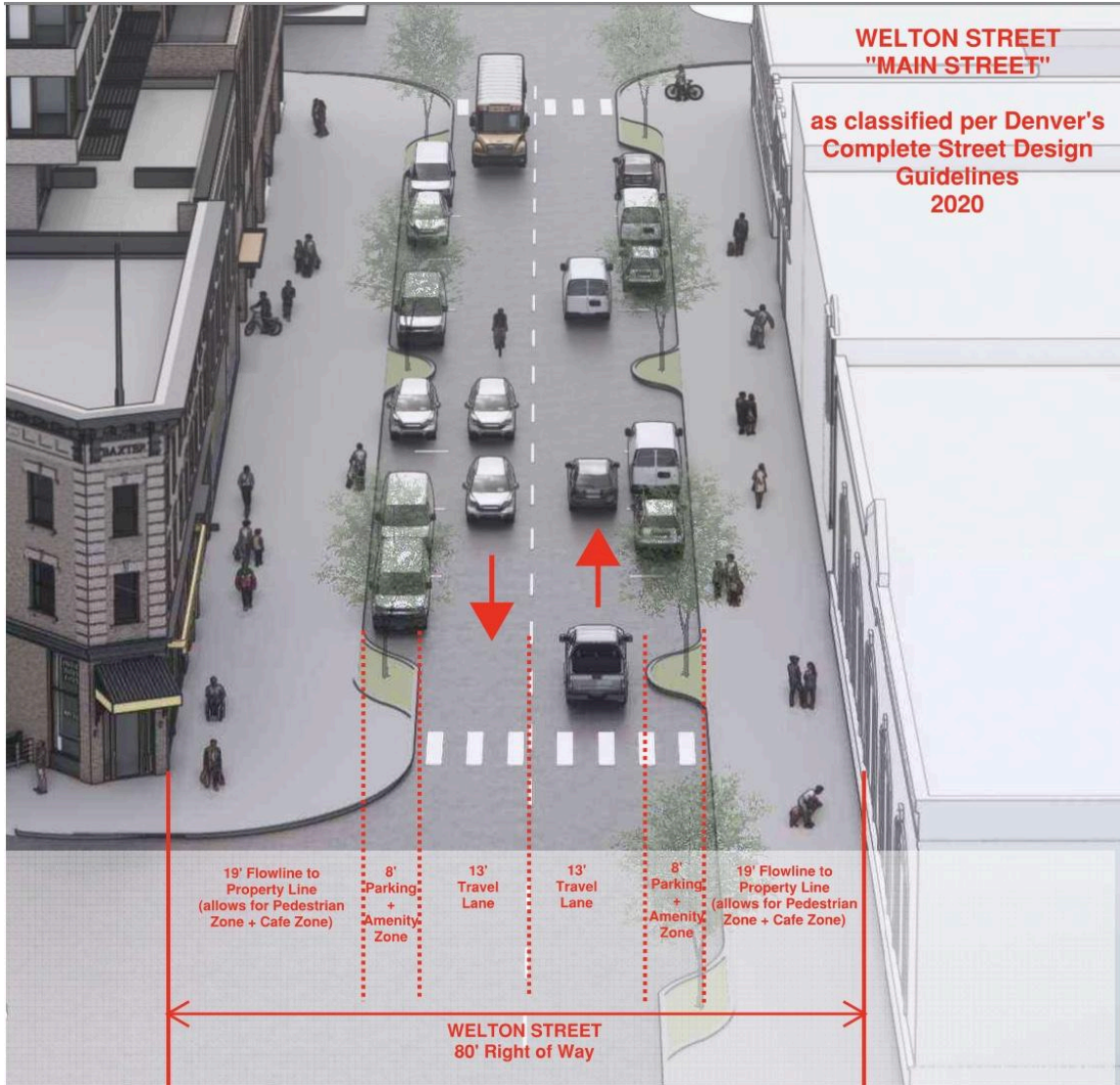
“Street-level uses are highly activated, including café seating in the right-of- way. Sidewalks are generally wider with fewer driveways to prioritize people walking or rolling. Consistent street trees, streetside planters, café seating (sometimes within the street), bump- out stormwater planters, and ultra- urban green infrastructure facilities provide a buffer between people walking or rolling and traffic.”

Visual representations of Welton’s current configuration vs. what a Main Street configuration could look like along the corridor:

Current Configuration:



Main Street Configuration



Next Step: Opportunity for major progress Now

Over the past 14 years the community has weighed in multiple times to express their collective desire to see a new improved configuration for the Welton Corridor. Through extensive public processes on multiple occasions the message has been consistent that the current configuration of one-way traffic with single track light rail and narrow sidewalks with little shade is harming the community. This perception has been born out as the Five Points community has watched Welton street struggle as the other major business corridor in the neighborhood, Larimer Street, has prospered with a two way conversion, increased pedestrian space and the

addition of bicycle lanes. All of which helped to create an atmosphere more conducive to the success of small local businesses.

Now is the time to act and gather community input on the specifics of what a reinvisioned Welton Street would look like so that it is indeed the transit-rich, pedestrian friendly, local business corridor that the light rail once promised. Several converging forces make timing critical to ensure that money is not wasted and changes happen in a timely manner on the corridor:

- RTD is poised to spend a significant amount of money in 2025 to rebuild the 30 year old tracks on Welton. It would be far more prudent and fiscally sound to evaluate what the community wants to see long term with the street configuration prior to spending money on maintaining a 30 year old system that has failed to produce the promised positive impact on the community.
- Businesses along Welton have continued to struggle and the impact of the street configuration needs to be addressed soon before more businesses fail.
- The effort to build out the 5280 Trail along 21st street through Five Points creates a unique opportunity to consider a spur off of the trail that could come up Welton and Larimer street, creating a Five Points Cultural Loop for greater pedestrian access and connectivity. There is interest from the group leading the 5280 Trail project in helping to lead a charette to develop a community vision for such a project.
- Funding opportunities for a project of this scale need to have broad public support and a clear vision. A process now that would gain broad community input on what a reimagined Welton Street would look like will be key to securing funding for the actual build out of the infrastructure project.

Welton Street Deserves Better

Some examples of streetscapes that could enhance the Welton Corridor, bringing better health and economic outcomes to the residents and businesses along the corridor:



Larimer and 14th Street Denver



Indianapolis Cultural Loop



Indianapolis Cultural Loop



25th Ave redesign in Jefferson Park



Union Station Streetscape Denver.

Conclusion

The current configuration of the Welton Corridor, while well intentioned at its inception in the early 1990's, has led to an environment that is not sustainable for the businesses on the corridor, the people who live in the community, or for the environmental and fiscal health of the City of Denver. We ask that RTD and DOTI participate actively in a public process in 2024 to gather broad community input on what a reinvisioned Welton Street could look like so that the overwhelming message from the people of Five Points that the current configuration is not working can be honored and a new way forward can be developed in a timely manner for implementation.

LINKS

1. https://www.denvergov.org/files/assets/public/v/1/transit-oriented-development/documents/tod_strategic_plan.pdf (2014) – Welton is in the “general urban” (then existing condition) and “catalyze” (future action/future state) category of stations
2. <https://www.downtowndenver.com/wp-content/uploads/Northeast-Downtown-Neighborhood-Plan-1.pdf> (2015)

3. <https://www.denvergov.org/files/assets/public/v/2/doti/documents/programsservices/neighborhood-mobility/five-points/five-points-final-action-plan.pdf> (2023)