

HISTORIC MEDIANS

COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO

Downtown Colorado Springs and its central neighborhoods are characterized by mature vegetation. Large trees, planted during the city's early history at regular intervals along the street and, later, along the center medians, provide visual continuity for the area. Early landscape practices remain in evidence throughout the parts of the city where medians are found and contribute to the historic fabric. Center medians or "parkings" were mostly installed between 1905 and 1912.

Charles Mulford Robinson, secretary of the Municipal Art League of America and known as the father of the City Beautiful Movement, in a report to City Council, shared his vision of the future of Colorado Springs as a health resort and a Mecca for lovers of beauty. He subsequently analyzed a number of central streets and prepared individual recommendations. Wood Avenue had already been "parked" for several blocks, and Robinson advocated the continuation of such improvements on a network of other streets. Robinson's report was delivered in conjunction with the visit of the National Good Roads Association, and, in keeping with that association's goals, he recommended the "parking" of a number of our wide streets for reasons not only of beauty but for cost savings in construction and maintenance.

In May of 1912, Charles Robinson reiterated his suggestion for more center medians to be created as part of his Colorado Springs, the City Beautiful plan. [NOTE. The Pikes Peak Library District is reprinting this plan in 2012 on its 100th anniversary considering it a key part of our history.] By the end of 1926, landscaped medians were a fixed feature in the historic portion of the city.

Much of the character and uniqueness of Colorado Springs' downtown and central neighborhoods is attributable to the theme of development of Colorado Springs under General Palmer as a "garden city". Further, these parked medians contributed to the inspiration of Palmer "to provide open space so that city residents could never be deprived in their walks, rides or sports of that glorious sense of being all out of doors."

The landscaped Historic Medians, along with uniform setbacks, varied historic architectural styles and mature landscaping of the parking strips that border the street, are the single, most important unifying element in the downtown neighborhoods and provide a link between the neighborhoods and the downtown core.

Historic medians are those on Wood Avenue between Uintah and Columbia Streets; Cascade Avenue between the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad tracks (on the south) to Jackson (on the north); Nevada Avenue between Las Animas (on the south) to Fillmore St. (on the north); Wahsatch Avenue between Costilla Street (on the south) and Jackson Street (on the north); Willamette Avenue between Cascade Avenue and Institute Street; Platte Avenue between Prospect Street and Hancock Avenue and Kiowa Street between El Paso and Institute Streets.

The adjoining property includes the North End Historic District which, in Fall of 2000, applied for and was granted Historic Preservation Overlay zoning. The Weber-Wahsatch Historic District also adjoins.

The city's historic medians are valued by the residents of the neighborhoods in which they are located. In addition, a survey in the local paper in the 1980s identified the mature downtown landscaping and medians as the second most important characteristic of the city (after the setting at the foot of Pikes Peak). The Historic Preservation Alliance sponsors a number of historic walks and tours within the area characterized by the Historic Medians. Some of the tours have had as many as one hundred participants who were eager to snap up the history of our city's layout, design and architecture.

In the course of the application for Historic Preservation Overlay Zoning status, which the Old North End was granted in the Fall of 2000, the sentiment was repeatedly expressed that people would also like to acquire protection for the medians. Indeed, over 50% of the residents voted for the Overlay Zoning. Although anecdotal in nature, residents and visitors alike express their appreciation for the beauty and elegance of the medians. This has led the Neighborhood to proceed with efforts to investigate the establishment of a Conservation or Improvement District which would protect features in the landscape.

Perhaps of more statistical value, one might note that the City has added a policy to its Comprehensive Plan which states that the city should **"maintain and protect our existing landscaped medians"**. (Strategy T201f) That the city views these medians as an asset is further reflected in Objective CCA2—to create "Quality Designed Streets" which have "shade trees, medians and parkways..." The City's Intermodal Transportation Plan has also adopted a **"livability" goal—both human and environmental- in which landscaping is expressed as an objective (B 1.3) and "protecting and enhancing" existing residential neighborhood amenities is expressed as a value (B-2).**

For the Springs Community Improvement Plan, SCIP, a committee of 60 citizens from all parts of the city, in creating the language to govern the projects which were chosen for construction, specifically stated that transportation plans which involved intersections in historic neighborhoods and downtown **"should enhance the beauty of the area, not cut into the medians for road lanes."**

Finally, the North End Neighborhood Plan, created in 1989 and adopted by City Council in 1991, recommends preservation of the medians in stating: "Charles Mulford Robinson's beautification plan for the city in 1912 inspired the beautiful parkways down the center of our streets, which distinguish this neighborhood from any other. These features certainly deserve preservation. ...Our tradition of parks and amenities had noble beginnings, but...little has been done to ensure future preservation and enhancement....The city founders and early residents worked hard to create an image of Colorado Springs as an urban oasis in the West. The character of this unique urban neighborhood must be preserved and enhanced..."

In 1995, City Transportation Engineering removed (without consultation with any other entity) a sizeable portion of a median at Wahsatch and Boulder Street in order to install left turn lanes. In the wake of the brouhaha that accompanied this egregious action, a memo was issued indicating the importance of the medians as "tangible representation of the Downtown and thus significant historic resources." It was determined that **"proposed alterations to the existing configurations must undergo a public review process prior to any decisions to alter the medians."** Nevertheless, a reading of a Gazette article (August 29, 2001) quotes the Mayor as "wanting to move right away....No public hearings are needed...only local businesses, churches and Palmer High School should be contacted for their opinions."

And, despite the City of Colorado Springs' statements (in its new Intermodal Transportation Plan and Comprehensive Plan) assuring protection of the Historic Medians of Colorado Springs and to acknowledge their value, there remains a cavalier attitude toward removing bits and pieces of them as transportation planning might see fit. For example, the citizens on SCIP (Springs Community

Improvement Plan) could not have been more clear in their intentions to protect the medians and enhance their beauty. Nevertheless, the office of City transportation, with support from at least one City Councilman, decided that the needs of the automobile (safety and mobility) deserved primacy over the integrity of the medians. Therefore, as the SCIP projects moved forward, medians at Jackson and Nevada were shrunk—a total of thirteen feet. A large tree on the median died as a result of the construction. The intersection now has a much more open, more industrial “feel” as opposed to that of a quiet neighborhood which had characterized the intersection previously.

A failure to respect and value the *integrity of the medians as worthy entities in and of themselves* characterizes the benighted attitude of many, so that solutions are not sought which begin with the premise that the Historic Medians must be protected and preserved.

It is crucial to keep up the existing trees and to plant more trees, as they may be the best defense against visual, noise and air pollution from I-25 and other arterials in the downtown.

The City Parks Department has had an important role in maintaining the medians. The North End in particular is synonymous with grand street trees, grassy parkways and colorful flower beds. However, not all trees that have been lost are being replaced for the future, and due to cutbacks in Parks budget, not only are they neglecting general maintenance of the medians, but they are ever eager to replace grass with stamped concrete (inappropriate for all areas within the Historic Median vicinity) in order to avoid mowing in the narrow confines of median noses. In the course of the SCIP construction on neighborhood intersections, neighbors were shocked to learn that the Parks Department had “slipped in” plans for several stamped concrete median noses to replace what had been grass. It was only with considerable effort and outcry that neighbors were able to overturn this decision.

Phillip Langdon, in his book, A Better Place to Live, describes the deterioration of neighborhoods as beginning with the loss of neighborhood amenities—our parked medians are among our central neighborhoods’ most important amenities.

The Historic Medians must be saved:

- The Downtown Partnership has recommended replacing medians on Nevada and other downtown streets to add to the beauty and walkability of the downtown. What a strange irony to talk of replacing historic medians while slicing into one on Cascade in the heart of downtown.
- The city is currently working to become more sustainable, greener. The medians are a large part of downtown livability and walkability.
- Many communities NARROW traffic lanes to encourage drivers to be more attentive to the roadway. Widening a roadway enables/encourages cars to drive faster and provides a greater threat to pedestrians and cyclists.
- The medians are the single-most defining, unifying element of the streetscape
- Medians are an important visual asset not only to the neighborhoods but to the city at large
- They are part of the historic fabric of downtown and downtown neighborhoods and are testament to the wisdom of the Colorado Springs, the City Beautiful plan established in the early part of the century.

- They provide important buffers to visual, noise and air pollution. EPA studies report savings of several million dollars on costs associated with air pollution on heavily treed areas.
- The grassy, treed expanses of the medians lower summer heat levels and reduce the need for air conditioning in the central part of Colorado Springs; conversely, in winter, the central part of town is protected from harsh winds and weather by its large trees. More pavement and less median increases the urban heat island effect.
- The trees and grass on the medians slow the rate of rainwater runoff and erosion. They stabilize soils and groundwater which results in diminished costs for maintenance of storm water infrastructure.
- Medians provide psychological and physiological benefits to both residents and drivers
- They soften the starkness of roadways
- Medians provide a measure of traffic calming and increase safety for pedestrians and bicyclists
- and they provide a haven for pedestrians midway across a busy roadway
- Their parklike effect draws people out to walk, visit with neighbors thus combating the “fence effect” which often is a harbinger of crime in heavily trafficked areas.
- Protection of the Medians is owed to the countless early residents who paid for the medians from their own pockets.
- Colorado Springs has been given the designation of “Tree City”—there are few trees older and more beautiful than those that were planted on the medians and along the streets in the central part of the city during its earliest years.

Destruction, despoliation or, loss of any part of the Historic Medians of Colorado Springs could be said to be a good example of “not missing the water till the well runs dry”. People take the beauty of the medians for granted until they are made aware of their wonderful history and their importance to the livability of the city. People may also not realize how fragile and deserving of our protection these historic structures are. In this climate, a 100 year-old tree which looks grand and sturdy can be easily destroyed over a few months by construction equipment (as has happened at Jackson and Nevada and on the Willamette medians).

While it is not likely that wholesale removal of any entire median will occur, the tendency to snip off bits and pieces of the medians is very likely to continue. Eventually the effect is the same—the grand gifts of beauty and clean air and spaciousness which have been ours to enjoy for 100 years will be gradually reduced to a few shady spots under a few anemic trees. The fear is there—not that anyone will set out to deliberately destroy the medians, but that their continual erosion will eventually have the same result.