

Denver waterway improvements on one gulch could mean taking dozens of homes—but plans are still in flux

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A federally backed project that aims to restore wildlife habitat and reduce flood risks along the South Platte River and two tributaries could

displace dozens of residents in some of the west Denver neighborhoods most prone to flooding.

Draft plans for Weir Gulch—which envision the acquisition of up to 70 residential properties—are now more than five years old. But they've attracted only limited public notice as city officials have discussed larger plans to revitalize the South Platte system.

City and federal officials emphasize that those plans are subject to change as they ramp up public outreach to impacted residents and get a clearer picture of what flood risk looks like in 2024 and beyond.

While some potentially affected residents in the Barnum and Barnum West neighborhoods told The Denver Post they were aware of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' 2019 study and property map, the risks and project recommendations were news to at least some who live a stone's throw from Weir Gulch.

Miki Yang, who lives two doors down from the gulch on Perry Street, had no idea last week that her property was part of any federal environmental study or real estate plan. She has lived in her home for three years but has owned the property for over a decade, renting it out to others before moving in with her family.

"Kind of strange," she said after learning from a reporter that her home was circled on the Army Corps map, recommended for acquisition. "I never heard about it."

Improvements along Weir Gulch and Harvard Gulch are planned as part of a larger South Platte revitalization project that has won \$350 million in federal funding for the city. The Post reported Sunday on the significant potential impact on the horizon as city officials, developers and nonprofits work on projects to improve the South Platte and build

dense new neighborhoods alongside it.

Water-flow and habitat projects along the gulches, which travel through Denver neighborhoods on their way to the river, are still being solidified.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 2019 published a report identifying roughly 70 residences—mainly in the Barnum neighborhoods—that may need to be acquired to make room for the expansion and improvement of Weir Gulch. The total value at the time was \$23.1 million, the report says.

As for south Denver's Harvard Gulch, the Army Corps determined that there was no economically feasible plan for acquiring structures. Instead, it recommended voluntary participation by some homeowners in flood-proofing measures, such as elevation improvements to their lots or having their basements filled in.

Reducing flooding during storms

Weir Gulch, a zig-zagging waterway, takes the form of a close-to-natural creek bed in some places. In other segments, it's an open-air concrete basin or runs completely underground. It travels under roadways, park space with playgrounds and even some buildings as it ferries water from Lakewood to the Platte in the Sun Valley neighborhood.

Weir Gulch and the areas around it represent the largest unmitigated flood risk in the city, said Ashlee Grace, director of Denver's Waterway Resiliency Program, an overall \$550 million project.

"The intent is definitely to increase the conveyance capacity so (that) it keeps the flows in the channel, and not spilling into the community that surrounds it" after heavy rainfall, Grace said.

Despite that 2019 report, officials say it's not a certainty that the city and its partners with the Mile High Flood District will need to acquire the homes identified by the Army Corps.

Design work is complete only for the portion of the Weir Gulch project in Sun Valley between where it meets the river and West Eighth Avenue, city officials say.

The city negotiated the purchases of five commercial properties last year to make that first phase possible, according to Nancy Kuhn, a spokeswoman for the city's Department of Transportation and Infrastructure. Of those parcels, two were vacant land and the others housed tenants including a construction company, a software firm, and a granite slab testing and storage business.

"Additional portions of Weir Gulch have not yet moved into the design phase, so it's too early to know what, if any, property impacts there will be," Kuhn wrote in an email last month.

In an emailed statement, Bert Matya, the project manager overseeing the South Platte River and tributaries work from the Army Corps' side, also said that it was too early to specify property impacts beyond the Sun Valley section.

"The Corps looks forward to working alongside Denver to develop innovative approaches that deliver the intended benefits of the project to the community," Matya said.

City-led outreach aimed at better determining the risk in those neighborhoods will begin in 2025, according to Kuhn, though she said the Mile High Flood District may start reaching out to people who live along the gulch sooner.

The study phase of the broader Waterway Resiliency Program dates back to the Obama administration, and the program has evolved over the more than 10 years since the Army Corps launched that assessment. It reached two major milestones in 2022, Grace said, when it was granted the \$350 million in upfront federal money through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Denver became part of an Army Corps pilot program.

That pilot is aimed at overhauling how the U.S. government approaches massive infrastructure projects, with an aim of speeding up timelines and saving money. Part of that is accomplished by giving local governments more control.

"That puts Denver in the driver's seat of project delivery and the Army Corps in the approve-review role, which is a complete role reversal," Grace said.

Moving 'would turn my life upside down'

In the Barnum West neighborhood, Caroline Cordova has had a portion of the concrete channel of Weir Gulch as a neighbor for 25 years. She knew her home on Quitman Street was on a map of potential acquisitions for the waterway project after attending some community meetings about it a few years ago, she said.

Her takeaway from those meetings was that officials hoped to avoid using eminent domain to acquire properties to make way for the work.

But Cordova has no interest in selling her home and moving. She said she'd never been affected by flooding, even when the water was high in the channel next door. In the high-priced Denver housing market, she's not even sure where she would go. Her house has tripled in value since she bought it.

"It would turn my life upside down if I had to move," Cordova said. "As far as I am concerned, I am there until the day I die."

City Councilwoman Jamie Torres, who represents west Denver neighborhoods, said improving Weir Gulch is going to be a very challenging project that will require "potentially scary conversations."

She emphasized that discussions about home acquisitions, should any be necessary, could still be years in the future.

But Torres has already advised one homeowner who lives near the gulch not to build an accessory dwelling unit on her property, at least not before the city has provided more clarity.

"I hate to think of my residents taking on additional real debt when we don't exactly know what's going to happen in this gulch area," Torres said. "At the end of the entire process, though, we want to help create a much safer corridor. We want to help utilize this open space so it can be a better park system for residents (and) a better trail system for residents.

"So we're just trying to make sure that we're very honest and very careful about that conversation."

Grace, from the city, said the city's increased authority over how the project is run is already netting some benefits.

The section of the Weir Gulch that the city will get to work on next year in Sun Valley was eyed for a long box culvert in the 2019 study. Denver instead will build a bridge over an open channel at Decatur Street, a design change that Grace says will improve safety during high-water events and provide more accessible open space the rest of the time.

"One of the strengths Denver brings to the table is we know our community," Grace said. "We're in the midst of updating what was understood to be the conditions in 2019."

Barnum and Barnum West have been identified by the city as neighborhoods vulnerable to economic displacement. After looking at the Army Corps' map, Ean Thomas Tafoya couldn't help but notice all the Latino last names listed on the properties identified for potential acquisition.

Tafoya is a former Denver mayoral candidate and the Colorado director of Green Latinos, which advocates for environmental justice issues. He also grew up in Barnum and remembers catching crawdads in Weir Gulch.

Tafoya said he supports projects that protect water quality and reduce flood risks. But he has seen Denver's minority neighborhoods bear the brunt of the impacts of other large infrastructure projects, like the recent Interstate 70 expansion in northeast Denver.

He expressed hope that city leaders could find solutions that don't uproot residents along Weir Gulch.

"In the middle of a housing crisis and a climate crisis, we think the solution is to displace historic Latino communities?" Tafoya asked.

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