

Denver rezones over 31 acres for LGBTQ senior housing development



City and County Building on August 23, 2023, in Denver.

Seth McConnell | Denver Business Journal

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A rezoning effort approved Monday night in north Denver opened the doors for creating Colorado's first LGBTQ-affirming affordable housing development for seniors.

The Denver City Council voted 9-2 to rezone almost 31.5-acres off North York Street and 39th Avenue, in the Clayton neighborhood, at the request of [developers proposing the project](#).

The new zoning allows residential buildings of up to seven stories on the property, home to the York Street Yards, an adaptive mixed-use industrial and commercial campus. The only development currently planned is the addition of affordable housing units on a 1-acre parcel at the northeast corner of the site.

Philadelphia-based real estate developer Penrose and Oregon-based SKB, owners of York Street Yards, plan to build 75 units that will serve the aging LGBTQ population with an average income of 30% to 80% of the area median, speakers at the public hearing said.

The LGBTQ population is statistically more likely to face housing discrimination and harassment, said Fred Glick, the applicant behind the project and owner of some of the rezoned property. A study cited by Glick stated that 48% of LGBTQ couples experience adverse treatment when seeking out senior housing options, something he believes the residential project would help address.

“Our queer elders have had to endure so much between the AIDS crisis, legalized discrimination, and rejection of family and peers,” said Bryant Mehay, the coordinator of elder and disability services of The Center on Colfax. “You here, tonight, have the power to not add homelessness to that list.”

The center, Colorado’s largest LGBTQ community center in the Rocky Mountain region, will have a dedicated space in the area to provide services to residents.

Penrose has developed three LGBTQ-affirming senior housing developments on the East Coast.

The project at York Street Yards received over 100 letters in support. The 23 speakers who signed up for the public hearing unanimously spoke in favor, despite what city planners called a “complex rezoning application.”

The project, according to Milo Halpern, who spoke at the hearing, would set a precedent in the state for how people care for seniors in what he called “a historically vulnerable community.”

“It doesn’t make sense for the project to stop because of something as inconsequential as a change in zoning,” Halpern said. “The proposed rezoning addresses the concerns of existing tenants, provides more land to a valuable cause and has minimal impact on the surrounding community.”

Some council members expressed concern about the entirety of the land being rezoned despite the proposed project taking up a small portion of the area.

Rezoning the entire property would move it from the “antiquated” former Chapter 59 zoning, into the city’s current zoning process, allowing for flexibility on permitting, said John Olivier, a principal with SKB

But that didn’t quell concerns raised by several councilors who said the rezoning bypassed the large development process that usually applies to parcels of at least 5 acres.

Council member Shontel Lewis supported the housing project, but said the larger rezoning sets a bad precedent.

"It's really inconsistent with zoning procedures, and I worry ... about what that means for the future," Lewis said, ultimately voting against the rezoning.

Council President Amanda Sandoval cited similar concerns and voted no.

For city councilor Darrell Watson, the project is personal.

"We call it LGBTQ-affirming, but in every other state, in every other city that has one of these spaces, it's a beacon," Watson said, noting he has been married to his husband for 20 years. "It's a North Star for elder queer folks, with the services provided by organizations like the center that we trust, that we rely on, that we know, that fight for us and our families on a daily basis."

Rank	Prior Rank	Business name
1	1	Food Bank of the Rockies
2	2	WellPower
3	3	Colorado Coalition for the Homeless

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