

The Battle Over the Future of Park Hill Is About More Than a Golf Course

Sara Fleming



[EXPAND](#)

Former mayor Wellington Webb speaks in favor of preserving the conservation easement his administration put on Park Hill Golf Course.

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For the past few months, most of the *Westword* headlines that have to do with the Park Hill neighborhood in northeast Denver have centered on a certain 155-acre stretch of land and a [seemingly endless trove of historical and legal questions about it](#). The battle over the future of Park Hill Golf Course heated up when developer Westside Investments bought it in July, and [it's not likely to settle down for years](#). Westside is trying to figure out a legal route to remove a conservation easement that currently prohibits development, to the chagrin of a group of residents who would rather see the land remain open space.

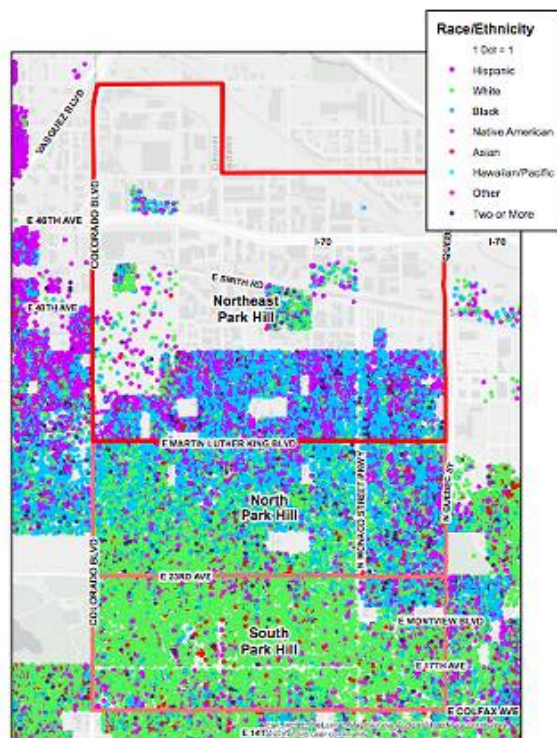
But the future of the now-defunct golf course is not the only question facing this historic Denver neighborhood. Park Hill (which is really three [statistical neighborhoods](#) as defined by the U.S. Census: northeast, north and south Park Hill) is experiencing rapid gentrification and displacement, especially impacting African-Americans. The debate over the golf course has

brought out tensions over what it means for the community to have a voice in its future.

James Roy II is the executive director of the [Park Hill Collective Impact](#), an organization that aims to help children in the neighborhood thrive. Roy helped organize a community meeting on Monday, December 9, at the Hope Center to discuss how to engage Park Hill residents who may not have their voices heard. "There's obviously some strong opinions being expressed on open space. I think that's valid," he says. But, he continues, "there should be an effort to really understand what the community that has been most marginalized and is closest to the golf course would actually think."

The golf course sits squarely in northeast Park Hill, the historically black part of the neighborhood. So far, [Save Open Space \(SOS\) Denver](#) has been the loudest grassroots group taking a side on the course, opposing any development on the land. But many of its members are not from the immediately proximate neighborhood, leading some northeast Park Hill community leaders to distrust SOS. Imam Abdur-Ahim Ali is the director of the Northeast Denver Islamic Center, a mosque just a block south of the golf course. "For [SOS Denver] to be where they are and to have this much concern kind of raises your eyebrows," he says.

Park Hill [has long presented itself as a beacon of racial harmony](#) — a diverse, integrated and accepting neighborhood, touted as an example for the nation. Martin Luther King Jr. even visited the neighborhood to speak at Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church in January 1964. Through the community organization Park Hill Action Committee, residents fought "blockbusting" practices (in which real estate developers sought to profit off of "white flight"), seeking instead to become an integrated neighborhood. But Park Hill's integration was not equal throughout. The southern part of the neighborhood has always been whiter and wealthier than the rest.



Park Hill is often praised as an integrated neighborhood, but households are still largely distributed along racial and ethnic lines. Blue dots represent black residents, green dots represent white residents, and purple dots represent Hispanic residents. (Dots on the golf course land are a computer error.)

Park Hill Collective Impact

Northeast Park Hill, meanwhile, was for decades a middle-class majority-black neighborhood with a strong community, where children would play on the sloping lawns and black-owned

businesses thrived. Constance Ross's family was one of many black families that began moving farther east in Denver during the '60s and '70s after redlining became illegal. The family ended up in northeast Park Hill, in a house across from the golf course. "My brother used to steal over there during the night, jump over the fence, collect all the abandoned golf balls and have them in a bucket, bring them back over, wash all them, polish 'em up, go over there to the parking lot and sell them to the golfers," she remembers. The northeast Park Hill neighborhood became a primarily middle-class black one, and a great place to live, she says.

Jonathan McMillan also grew up in northeast Park Hill, during the '70s and '80s. He remembers walking to friends' houses just blocks away, going to the recreation centers and the strip malls to play games. "The neighborhood was so close-knit, if you didn't know somebody, you knew someone who did," he says.

In the late '80s and early '90s, the crack epidemic hit Denver, and with it came West Coast gangs. Northeast Park Hill and parts of north Park Hill became the home base of the Denver Bloods. While it retained a close community, it also became more violent.

Now, though the three statistical neighborhoods in greater Park Hill have each developed their own demographics and identities, they are all becoming whiter. Since 2000, north Park Hill has gone from being 56 percent black to 30 percent black. And northeast Park Hill has gone from being 68.5 percent black to only 43 percent black. (Hispanics are the next biggest demographic in the area, making up about 25 percent of northeast Park Hill residents.) The statistics tell an all too familiar story: Park Hill is gentrifying. Though many black residents of Park Hill are homeowners, not renters, they still may be vulnerable to displacement. Roy says he's heard it over and over again: An elderly black family who has lived there for decades gets an offer that makes turning over their property instead of passing it down seem worth it. Homes are flipped or scraped and remade. Young white families often move in.

Whether or not development happens on Park Hill Golf Course — which sits squarely in northeast Park Hill — could have implications for how that story unfolds. Some think the potential of affordable housing on the land could ease the pressures of rising rents and property taxes elsewhere in the neighborhood, and it could also be a place for long-sought amenities like a grocery store. That's something Westside principal Kenneth Ho, who is leading the Park Hill Golf Course efforts, points out often during community meetings and to the press.

"No one will be directly displaced if the golf course is developed," he says. "Our vision is to create a true mix of housing types to the lowest incomes to the missing middle and market rate, and hope that we can create a diverse socioeconomic mix to create a complete neighborhood."



At a community meeting held at the Hope Center for Adults on Monday, December 9, people discussed how to include more voices in the changes happening to Park Hill.

Daniel Archuleta

In addition to leading a mosque, Imam Ali is also president of the Northeast Park Hill Coalition, an RNO that tends to engage a more diverse population than the Greater Park Hill Community, a sixty-year-old RNO that also publishes the *Greater Park Hill News*. In his view, affordable housing is a much larger need than a giant park. "We're just trying to have some place for people to stay in the community and not be pushed out," Ali says. "We don't want to be displaced."

Still, he is wary of trusting Westside to fulfill that promise. "We have to have something in writing from Westside that they won't make this housing that will be out of the price range of the average citizen."

Leslie Twarogowski, the Park Hill area representative to the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, agrees, pointing out that the city could have bought the land and developed public housing on it instead. "What's being proposed now is a for-profit developer going in and giving a handful of affordable apartments when really we need thousands," she says. "I think a lot of us on the east side have gotten very jaded by that promise [of affordable housing]. If the city were truly committed they would have taken hold of that land and built affordable housing."

Woody Garnsey, a resident of south Park Hill for decades, helped start the SOS Denver group. Garnsey would like to see the course become a regional park, to fight against the decline of green space in Denver. Denver fell from 13th in 2012 to 29th in 2019 on the Trust for Public Lands Park Score for the 100 biggest cities in the country. "Once the first square foot of concrete is put down as part of a development, it will never see the light of day again," he says.

"We just hope that doesn't become viewed as a racial issue. It shouldn't be," Garnsey says. "We have a broad coalition of people from diverse backgrounds that support the land being open space."

Trust in Denver developers is low these days, and even some people who might support affordable housing are fearful that other development could help jack up surrounding real estate prices and contribute to the threat of displacement. But turning the entire expanse into a park may not exactly ease gentrification: Urban planners have also identified a phenomenon known as

"green gentrification," which occurs when large parks are created in historically marginalized urban areas.

Greater Park Hill Community, an RNO covering the whole of Park Hill, set out to try to figure out what everyone else thought of the issue. According to its president, Lana Cordes, "We didn't have enough outreach from our constituents to be able to formulate a position."

So Greater Park Hill Community contracted with the Boulder-based National Research Center to survey 2,000 randomly selected Park Hill households. Three hundred and eight survey requests were returned, and [the results were published in the *Greater Park Hill News* last month.](#)

But Cordes says the results could be interpreted in a variety of ways. One question asked whether the land should either "be developed in part or in full with housing and retail" or "remain entirely some kind of green space/park or golf course." Twenty-three percent chose the former; 77 chose the latter, which would seem to indicate that the majority of respondents oppose development on the land. But another question asked what respondents' preference was for how much of the property would be developed. This time, only 48 percent said they wanted it to be 100 percent open green space; 24 percent said they wanted to see 75 percent remain open; and 25 said they wanted about 50 percent, or a park about the size of Cheesman Park.

The households that returned the survey were still disproportionately reflective of the kind of demographic that is already more engaged with the Greater Park Hill Community: homeowners, white and from south and north Park Hill. Only 13 percent of survey respondents were non-white, for example, though Park Hill is 45 percent non-white according to 2010 Census data; and only approximately 25 percent of respondents lived in the northeast part of Park Hill, despite those districts making up 39 percent of Greater Park Hill's statistical population (though it should be noted that the boundaries used by the Greater Park Hill Community are slightly farther south than the Census boundaries).

The survey "weighted" responses from underrepresented households in an attempt to balance out the discrepancy. But it still doesn't answer the question of what the residents most vulnerable to displacement want to see happen with the golf course. Even the attendees at the community meeting at the Hope Center in northeast Park Hill were mostly from outside of the neighborhood.

Another missing voice is the Clayton neighborhood, which is not part of Greater Park Hill but lies just west of the golf course (northeast Park Hill is east and south of the golf course, and Commerce City lies to the north of I-70 and a mostly industrial area). But that neighborhood seems to have similar struggles getting people out to participate: Erin Strub, president of the Clayton Neighborhood RNO told *Westword* in an email that it held a meeting in November about the golf course but didn't have a large enough attendance to make a statement.

"We're talking about a demographic that has been intentionally excluded in what government and municipalities do, and so they don't feel very empowered to share their voice, and don't feel that their voice matters or has any asset in creating and implementing changes," northeast resident McMillan says. A meeting on a Monday evening isn't going to draw them, he adds.

His fear is that gentrification will destroy the character of Park Hill, even if those moving in have the best intentions of joining a diverse neighborhood. To McMillan, their attitude often seems to be, "'We want to be part of this community but only up to how comfortable we are, and that's usually up till our front porch.' If they're not embracing intentionally and deliberately engaging in the culture, traditions and values that exist in the neighborhood that they're moving in — it's actually becoming more invasive and more colonized."

"Beyond the Park Hill Golf Course, the reason why I think this community-voice piece is so important is to have a community that knows what's going on, that knows how development is changing the neighborhood, that knows the wealth that they do have in their possession, and that they can use that asset to benefit their families for generations to come," Roy says.

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