

Commerce City goes through industrial evolution

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Subdivisions, some with million-dollar homes, have expanded north and east toward DIA. (Nathan W. Armes, Special to The Denver Post)

When rival cities Denver and Aurora played a softball game in 1985, the then-mayor of Aurora joked that the loser had to annex Commerce City.

Times have changed.

New U.S. Census Bureau estimates show the city long known for its refineries has grown since 2000 through annexation and new development into something of a suburban mecca.

"Who would have thought we would be selling million-dollar homes?" said Mayor Paul Natale.

The changes between 2000 and 2008 include:

- Incomes rising by two thirds, the highest increase in the metro area. At the same time, the overall poverty rate fell from 19.4 percent to 12.6 percent . Only one other city in the metro area saw a decline in poverty during the eight years.
- Surging homeownership rates from 60 percent to 72 percent.
- An influx of married couples with children. They now make up about 35 percent of all households. The state average is 22 percent.

"It's not what you would consider traditional Commerce City," said state demographer Elizabeth Garner.

The transformation comes at a time when many established suburbs in the metro area are becoming poorer, older and less family-oriented, according to census data.

For years, Commerce City was a collection of mostly small, bungalow-style homes surrounding a downtown core near East 72nd Avenue and Monaco Street. Oil refineries lined the west side of the city, and the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, deemed the most polluted place in the U.S. during the 1970s, was on the east side. Lifelong resident Denver Black, 89, said the original town hit its peak in the 1950s and 1960s. But gradually, residents moved away and businesses closed. In the 1990s, the city attracted immigrant families drawn by the abundant rental property. By 2000, the city had the highest poverty rate in the metro area. But development near Denver International Airport and the cleanup of the arsenal saw the city's fortunes begin to change.

Natale said home construction on annexed land as far north as East 120th Avenue and east to Chambers Road started to take off in 2001. It hit a peak in 2004, when the city issued 1,800 building permits, he said.

Reunion stoked growth

The growth accelerated with the opening of the Reunion development near East 104th Avenue and Chambers Road by Shea Homes, developer of Highlands Ranch. Natale said about 1,200 homes have been built so far in Reunion, with room for as many as 25,000 eventually in the northern section. The mayor said homebuyers are attracted to the large homes in the new subdivisions with lower prices than other parts of the metro area. Prices range from \$200,000 to \$1 million. The city also is now home to Dick's Sporting Goods Park next to the 3-year-old city hall. Natale said he gets a thrill seeing Commerce City's name flash across the screen while watching Colorado Rapids soccer results on ESPN sportscasts. The complex also hosts the Mile High Music Festival each summer.

The city planted fir trees to separate railroad tracks from homes, installed street lights on Colorado 2, which connects the new and old parts of the city, and widened East 104th to two lanes in each direction to accommodate future commercial development. It helped pay for new railroad crossings where the tracks meet major intersections so trains don't have to blare their horns in the middle of the night to warn motorists. "The residents really appreciated that," said Mayor pro tem Tracey Snyder.

In eight years, the city's population doubled to about 42,500 people, according to the census estimate. The city projects it will hit 68,000 in five more years. "It's a totally different city," said Cristie Jophlin-Martin, program director for Community Enterprise, a nonprofit group that works with the older city neighborhoods. The growth bucked the trend among other older, similar-sized suburbs, such as Englewood, Northglenn and Wheat Ridge. All three got older and poorer, according to census figures.

In Englewood, on Denver's southern edge, homeownership dropped below 50 percent, and only about one in nine households are married couples with children. Michael Flaherty, deputy city manager, said the city, unlike Commerce City, has rigid boundaries and must rely on redevelopment for expansion. "It is more complicated and more expensive and, in this financial market, very, very difficult," Flaherty said.

Commerce City still has plenty of poverty within its traditional boundaries. A low-income city core still exists next to middle- and upper-middle-class new subdivisions to the north. "It's a tale of two cities," said City Manager Jerry Flannery. Commerce City schools serve the older part of the city. About 80 percent of children are eligible for free and reduced-priced lunches. Brighton schools serve the new part of the city. About 30 percent of the children there are low-income.

Not much interaction

"The city, to its credit, is working hard to provide equal services to both parts of the city, but you do have that big divide," said John Albright, spokesman for Commerce City schools. Elizabeth Schmidt, therapist for the Community Reach Center mental-health program at Adams City Middle School, said there is a long waiting list for subsidized housing in the older part of town and that families, many of them immigrants, struggle with health care.

Jophlin-Martin said there is not much interaction among the two halves of the city. For northern residents, the closest full-service grocery store and shopping are in Brighton. "When you go up north, you don't feel at all the same or connected," she said.

Two years ago, one of the City Council members representing the new part of town put a measure on the ballot to drop the Commerce City name for one that he said fit its growth. It was handily defeated.

Snyder said connecting the two halves has been a "challenge." The city has tried to entice residents to the old part of town with festivals and business redevelopment. She said she grew up in Commerce City when it had its own small-town flavor, and the bowling alley was the social center. She saw its decline and the bowling alley's closure along with other businesses. Now, she said, she is witnessing its transformation. "I've seen what it was, what it became and now what it will become."

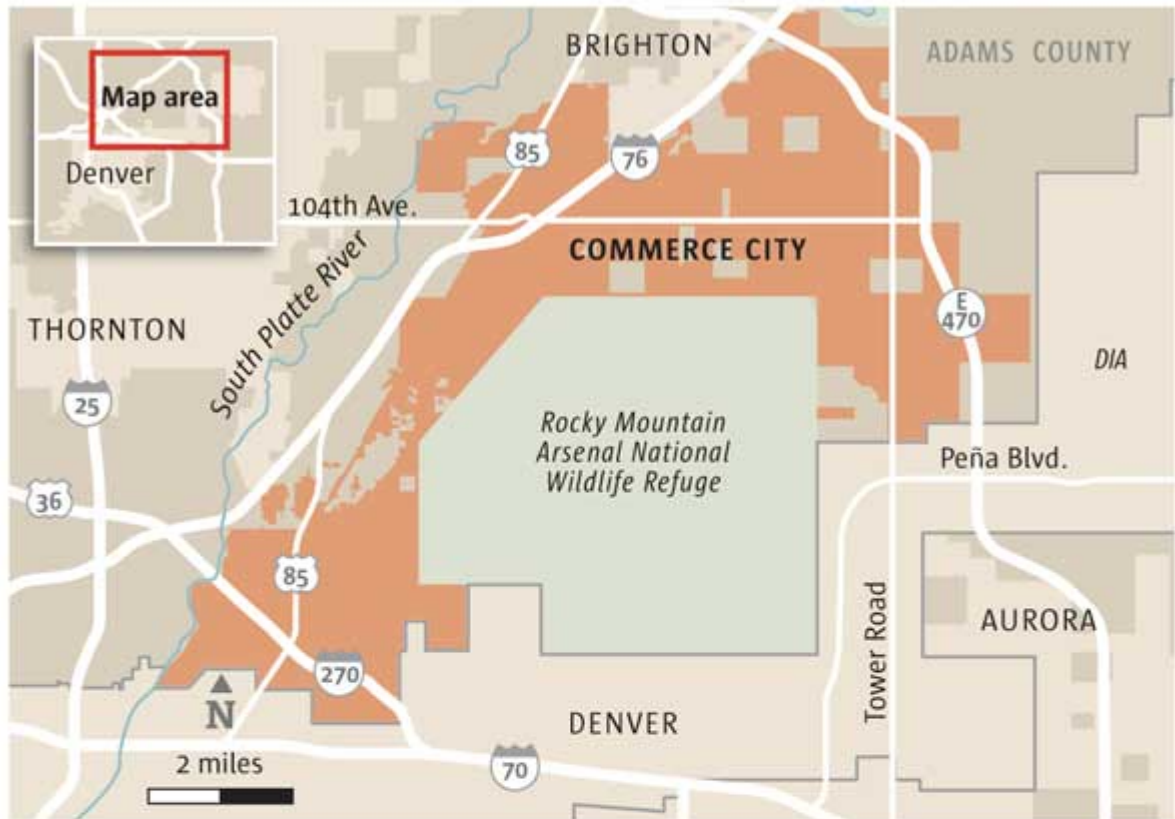
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The west side of Commerce City is peppered with oil refineries, framed here by the mountains. (Matt McClain, Special to The Denver Post)

Commerce City's transformation

Commerce City has evolved from a poor Denver suburb into a suburban mecca during the past decade, with surging incomes, an influx of families with children and falling poverty.



	2000	2008	Change
Total population	20,991	42,473	+102%
Median age	29.8 years	29.4 years	-0.4 years
Median household income	\$33,680	\$55,827	+66%
Median home value	\$112,700	\$205,500	+82%
Poor residents	19.4%	12.6%	-6.8*
Children in poverty	22.5%	17.1%	-5.4*
Married couple households:			
With children	24.8%	34.7%	+9.9*
Homeowners	60.3%	72.5%	+12.2*
High school degrees	57.8%	75.3%	+17.5*
College degrees	3.7%	19.7%	+16.0*

*Percentage points

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

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