

5 Reasons the Denver Metro Area Will be a Post-Pandemic ‘Winner’



Josh Gould
Vice President,
Stantec

We’re going to be OK. Really. Despite the pandemic-induced anxiety, things are going to be OK. It is virtually impossible to visualize the serene river float that will occur 5 minutes beyond the rapids that are actively trying to swallow your raft when all your senses are focused on being present. Part of navigating the choppy waters we are in today requires a vision of what lies ahead, and I am convinced that the Colorado Front Range will fare far better than most any other place in the U.S. when it comes to post-COVID-19 recovery.

For months, our communities, our nation, and the world have hit an unprecedented pause. The full economic impact has yet to be felt and for some sectors – retail and hospitality in particular – the COVID-19 shutdown has already been highly damaging.

Many businesses are left wondering: Will this get worse before it gets better? What is the long-term impact? How do we plan for the future? Naturally, many businesses are strategically putting big decisions on hold for six months or longer. But there is some good news amid all the uncertainty. Here are five reasons why I am confident we will be one of the winners in the post-COVID world:

- **Flight from the coasts.** The fundamentals that have fueled the growth of our region over the past decade will continue to pull youth, talent, and business leaders here at a rate that far exceeds most other states. There is today a vast exodus from cities like San Francisco and New York where for many, career opportunity and earning potential no longer outweigh the high rent and safety concerns.

CEOs often select their companies’ office locations based on personal living preferences and those of their leadership team. In pre-COVID days, it was easy to work on the East or West coasts and fly to Vail or Beaver Creek for a long ski weekend several times a year. Since the coronavirus outbreak, many execs as well as lower level tech workers have parked themselves in our mountain communities to find safety and Zoom calls with a view.

More long term, why pay NYC or Silicon Valley office rates when you can be in Denver and work from the mountains three days per week? Why spend a summer in Chicago, D.C., or literally any other city in the country when your goal is to be outside enjoying the weather, socializing, and being active? And why stay in L.A. where you must spend a high percentage of your life in a car?



The Lakehouse townhome project sits at the edge of Sloan’s Lake in Denver as part of Block One of the St. Anthony’s Hospital redevelopment.

- **Vision and leadership.** Denver has become a vibrant, multidimensional city with a diverse employment base, a walkable and bikeable network, and a brand that matches what many value – energetic minds, energetic bodies. By keeping quality of life and the overall health of our communities at the forefront of urban planning, we have the right mix of ingredients to attract the workforce we need to compete.

Our evolution has been intentional. Metro area leadership groups travel annually to cities across North America to discover what others are doing that we can deploy here as best practices. Workforce training/mentorship, multimodal transportation, parks and cycling networks, arts and diversity. Quite simply, Denver is what people want from a live-work-play perspective. From the community’s health and wellness focus to our world-class airport, the city has everything.

We have invested in some major projects over the years – small and large – that grew out of a vision and are foundational to where we are today.

Denver International Airport’s airlines provided (and some still provide) global flights and connectivity pre-COVID and the airport is well positioned to keep pushing the region forward. We are doing a lot more virtually these days, but face-to-face interaction will always be critical to business. And more business and vacation travel will spike once a vaccine is in place. During the pandemic, the airport is going through a major renovation of the Great Hall. It is a very strong engine for the region and is getting an upgrade at the right time.

Redevelopment of the Platte Valley including the pedestrian bridge that opened up LoHi, mixed-use destinations like Union Station, Dairy Block, and the next



The Brighton Boulevard Redevelopment project in the River North District in Denver, where input was sought from the local arts community. The project includes 1.7 miles of protected cycle track.

major LoDo experience – McGregor Square – reinvesting in the 16th Street Mall. These all represent developments that will keep our city vibrant, walkable, and alive with activity that we'll once again crave when the risk of large gatherings are a thing of the past.

• **Denver's draw for young talent.** Denver – and really the entire Front Range – was a magnet for young talent pre-COVID. The city's draw is not diminishing because of the pandemic. Yes, we are all doing things differently today, but a young, creative workforce still wants to live in Denver.

For the past six years, Denver has consistently been one of the top destinations for workers aged 25 to 35. They are attracted to the outdoors, the entrepreneurial culture, and the diversity of employment opportunities. Our economy is not reliant on a handful of Fortune 500 companies. It is driven by a balance of start-ups and mature companies representing sectors from energy – traditional and renewable – to aerospace and financial services.



Interior of Zero's Denver office

• **Livability at multiple scales.** Do you want to be in the heart of downtown, skip car ownership, walk to three major sports venues, enjoy a diverse food scene and world-class theater? Would you prefer suburban living with the option of taking the train to the action? How about mountain living or a home in a lower-density town like Erie with easy access to Denver, Fort Collins and Boulder?

Today's workforce is diverse and demands multiple lifestyle options. The Front Range offers them all. If we experience a post-pandemic hangover that shifts more of us to lower-density living, we have well planned exurban communities that can accommodate decades of additional growth.

• **The reimaged office.** One thing we have learned from the pandemic is that many office workers can easily work from home. Does that mean an end to the corporate office? No. But we'll reimagine what the office looks like and how it functions.

All that "heads down" work can be done from home. What the post-COVID office will offer even more than today is the social connection and collaboration space that teams need. We are social beings who crave interaction. Even with the effectiveness of virtual communication tools, there is no substitute for impromptu interaction, unscheduled collaboration, and the chemistry that grows from working together in a project room and going out to lunch with a colleague. A few tech companies have said they will go 100% virtual from here forward. Many others like Google, which always has valued "in-office" presence over virtual, will double down on its core philosophy.

Increased telecommuting and hoteling is likely to drive an overall reduction in demand for office space in the next 12 months, but the Front Range continues to grow – estimates say 7 million people by 2050 – so there will be a pent-up demand for new and renewed office space as soon as this pandemic is behind us. And even if that date is still a year off, now is the perfect time to embark on a new development project. Those who are positioned to take advantage of the upcoming reduction in construction prices will benefit greatly by being positioned for the rebound.

• **Conclusion.** Metro Denver has a decades-long track record of civic leadership where business, nonprofit, and government leaders have focused on advancing the essential ingredients that make a region great, balancing quality of life with economic prosperity. It is a refreshing antidote to the partisan gridlock that is all too common today. As we transition from prepandemic, through the coronavirus time, and out the other side, that willingness to engage is critical. And it is welcomed. If you have civic pride and want to make a difference, in the Denver area your engagement is invited.

We cannot minimize the challenges we are facing today. As a community, we need to pull together to help those who will suffer disproportionately. And for those who can see beyond today and recognize the fundamentals that will drive a very healthy rebound, there is much prosperity ahead.\\

josh.gould@stantec.com