

Real-estate group hires activist leader

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After nearly four years of quietly doing charitable real-estate deals, the Urban Land Conservancy is ready to raise its profile.

The group has hired a seasoned community activist as its executive director. After nine years as executive director of Thistle Community Housing, Aaron Miripol will start the job May 14.

The Urban Land Conservancy was formed in 2003 by a loosely affiliated group of real-estate professionals. Its mission is to acquire land and buildings to be developed for community needs, such as affordable housing, early-childhood programs, senior care and charter schools.

Gary-Williams Energy Corp. put up the bulk of the conservancy's seed funding. With \$15 million in assets and cash, it now works on behalf of and in partnership with local organizations to acquire, develop and dispose of land and buildings.

"The challenge is that people have great ideas and no assets, or have resources but can't move through the process rapidly," said Tom Gougeon, chairman of the organization. "This can do it."

For example, the conservancy is looking for second-tier sites near planned light-rail stations that are under the radar for most developers. Market-rate developers already know about the prime sites.

"This way, at least we have a seat at the table," Gougeon said.

The organization's structure enables it to hold land for future development.

Conservancy board member Susan Powers, president of Urban Ventures, said that's the key to preserving sites for development of affordable housing along the rail line.

"If it isn't a conscious decision now, then we'll end up with very dense TODs (transit-oriented developments) that are very high-end and (don't) meet the needs of people who need access to transportation without relying on a car," Powers said.

The conservancy already has undertaken several projects, including buying the Budget Motel at 40th and Colorado on behalf of the Colorado Center for the Homeless, which now operates it as transitional housing. Gougeon said he expects the site will be redeveloped into more- permanent affordable or transitional housing.

The organization also purchased and preserved the Tennyson Center for Children at 29th Avenue and Tennyson after the organization went into bankruptcy. It bid on the Children's Hospital site that ultimately was awarded to Cherokee Denver.

"The real story is about the need for somebody to be out there in the land-and-development arena that is advocating for and working for the community benefits that are usually just tacked onto market-rate development," said Tim Howard, vice president for special projects at Gary-Williams Energy Corp. "It's more about need in the community."

Miripol said he was attracted to the organization because of its entrepreneurial spirit.

"It's a unique situation," Miripol said. "There are not many nonprofits nationally set up like this."

The Urban Land Conservancy is a supporting organization to the Denver Foundation, which provides it with administrative services.

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