

Johnson: Empty lot is full of promises

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Talk is always the easy part. It costs not a dime and requires no real investment.

I wrote this down as I stood where Holly Square Shopping Center in northeast Park Hill used to, listening to the mayor and assorted others vow that a charter school, much-needed retail stores or the like would rise in the place of the decades-old Denver landmark destroyed one year ago by angry Molotov cocktail-wielding gang members.

Count me as a skeptic. I have lived long enough in poor, mostly black neighborhoods laid low by violence to never believe a politician until the first bulldozers arrive.

Goodness, it took the city a full five months just to clear away the Holly Square rubble. Northeast Park Hill is a neighborhood that knows about unfulfilled promises. It deserves better.

Travel a few blocks to Dahlia Street where the Dahlia Square shopping center once stood, the one they have been promising for more than a decade to rebuild, and tell me what you see.

Such inaction would not be tolerated in most any other neighborhood in the city.

So I watched and I listened.

John Hickenlooper spoke of a "new day at the Holly," of the city scratching together the \$200,000 that allowed the Urban Land Conservancy to purchase the lot. He urged residents to tell the city of their "dreams" for the property.

I was a step ahead of the mayor.

Karen Holland, 35, and her husband, Derek, 42, were on a walk with their dog. They listened.

"You know, it's frustrating," she finally said. "You would think we should be able to get something done with this lot a lot quicker. I understand things often move slowly."

There is a weariness to folks in the neighborhood. They know, however, what they do not want, having banded together this year to keep a liquor store, the scourge of low-income communities, from rebuilding.

The Hollands, like so many people on this day, perhaps predictably, are now simply content with what is not on the property.

"I know it is a vacant lot," Derek Holland said, "but what used to be there — a liquor store with all the thugs hanging out — wasn't good, either. I want a school, but right now I'll settle for hope."

Terrance Roberts says he grew up at Holly Square, stalked it as a youth in a street gang and nearly died in a shooting just up the street.

"I felt like I lost a friend," he said of the firebombing last year. He long ago renounced the gang life and now runs the Prodigal Son Initiative, a grass-roots youth mentoring program in the city.

He is pushing for a charter school, believing "we can turn this from something that was consistently a blight on this community into something that is extremely positive."

He knows, too, about broken promises. The ones made on this day, he said I think to convince himself, will not be among them.

I walked up to Aaron Miripol, president and chief executive of the Urban Land Conservancy, which is negotiating with businesses and others that would build at Holly Square.

"Granted, this is the easy part," he said.

Come back in a year, he added. You may not see bulldozers, but a plan will be in place.

"I do know that this is a community that deserves to be treated with respect," Miripol said. "Keep my feet to the fire. I welcome it."

I promised him I would, indeed.

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