

SOUTH PEARL STREET DESIGN OVERLAY STRATEGY

Prepared by Platt Park People's Association and the Denver Department of Community Planning & Development



September 4, 2019



OPEN

THE BARKLE

South Pearl Street is the commercial and cultural spine of the Platt Park neighborhood. Developed as a traditional “main street” along a historic streetcar line, the corridor has served as a community hub for the neighborhood for decades. With increasing development pressure on the corridor, neighbors, business owners and other stakeholders have become concerned that the existing zoning regulations that govern land use and design for properties with mixed-use zoning on Pearl Street do not adequately ensure compatibility of new development with South Pearl Street’s architectural traditions and character. Informed by significant community discussion around these topics, this document clarifies compatibility issues, identifies a vision for compatible development and recommends zoning solutions to implement the vision.

What is a Design Overlay?

A design overlay is a regulatory mechanism available in the Denver Zoning Code that allows modification of otherwise applicable zoning to enhance context sensitivity and/or achieve a desired design outcome. As such, a design overlay modifies and/or adds design standards to a property’s existing (or “base”) zoning requirements. A design overlay can change design requirements for specified properties, but it cannot change which land uses are permitted and not permitted.

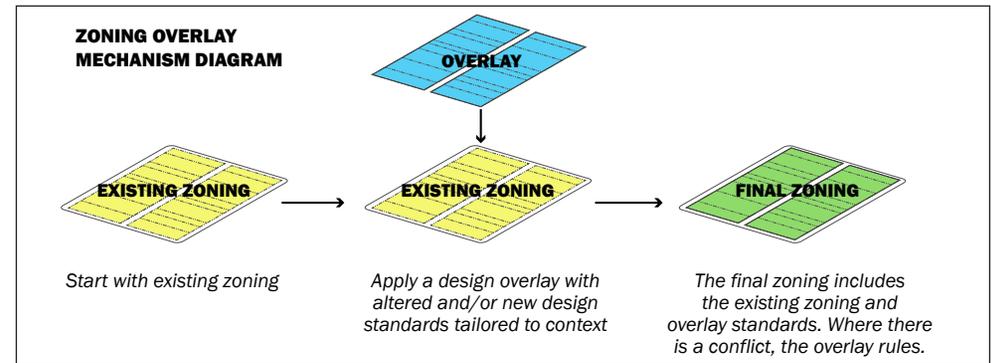
Background

Early neighborhood stakeholder concern about the compatibility of new development started informally, and then broadened to include formal discussion by Platt Park Peoples’ Association (3PA; Platt Park’s officially Registered Neighborhood Organization (RNO)). After securing grant funding from Historic Denver, 3PA engaged a planning consultant (Otak) to help facilitate a community design discussion on the potential for a design overlay, perform technical analysis and ultimately develop recommendations. Since February 2018, 3PA and their consultant have facilitated numerous community meetings, stakeholder discussions and brainstorming sessions to help identify an appropriate path forward. Key community touchpoints are listed to the right.

Existing Zoning

Properties allowing mixed use and commercial development on South Pearl Street are zoned as Urban – Main Street (U-MS). This zone district is used throughout the city for neighborhood-scale commercial districts, but it is not specifically written in response to South Pearl Street’s unique design characteristics. For reference, the same U-MS zone district applied to Pearl Street properties is applied to properties along Tennyson Street in Berkeley and Gaylord Street in Washington Park. There are three types of U-MS zone districts applied within the corridor as indicated on the maps on the next page. The number at the end of the zone district name indicates the maximum allowed building height (in stories), but otherwise all U-MS zoning regulations are identical.

9.4.19 - South Pearl Street Design Overlay Strategy

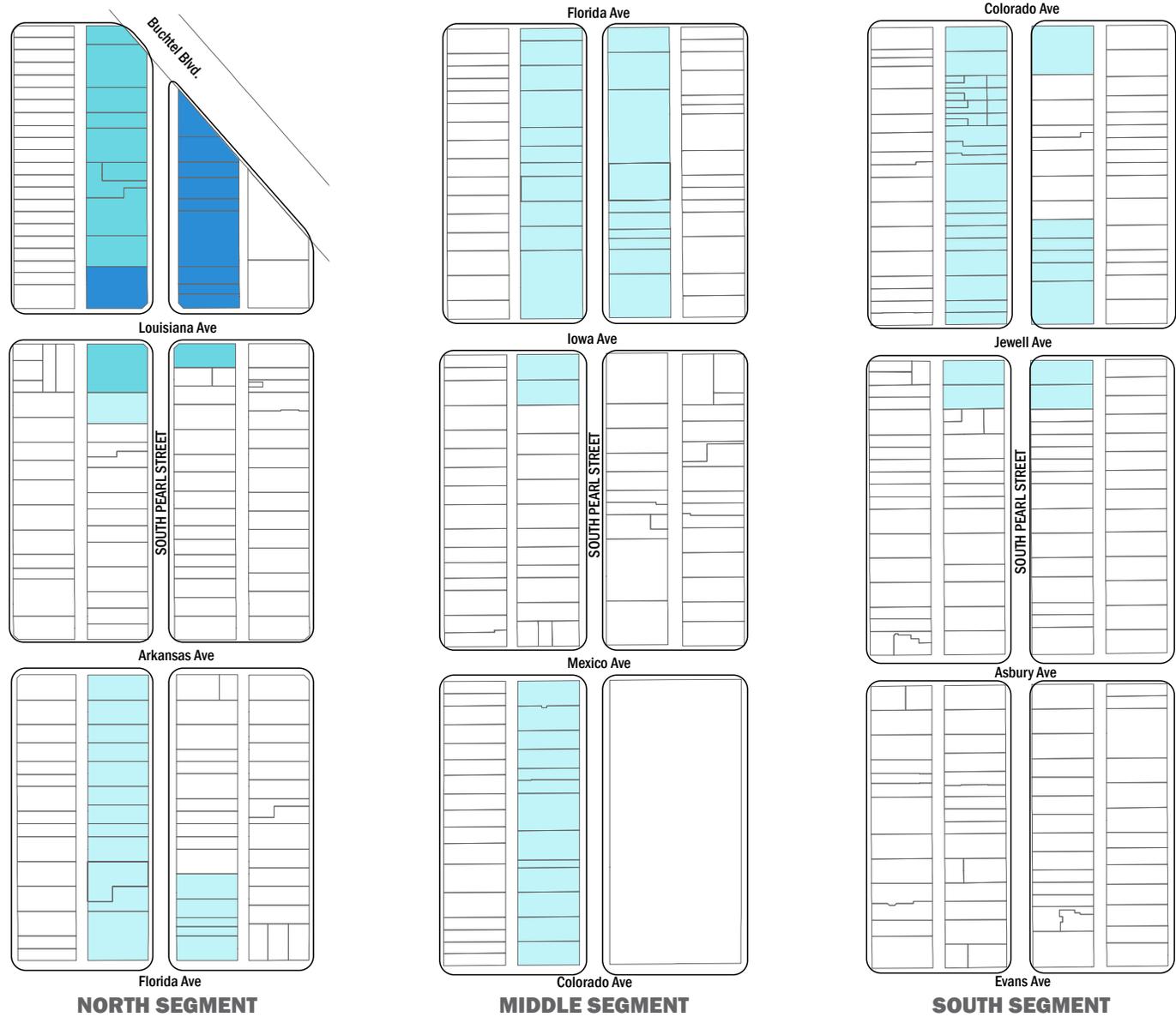


Summer 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concern rises by Platt Park neighbors over significant redevelopment of the corridor, notably demolition of historic buildings and the quick rise of 100% residential developments. A conversation begins with 3PA and concerned community members to explore options to address this. A Design Overlay is identified as a potential tool.
Fall-Winter 2017 - 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A subcommittee of 3PA is formed to explore the Design Overlay. The subcommittee files for a grant from Historic Denver to obtain professional support in this endeavor. 3PA is awarded a \$5,000 grant in September 2017. The first informational meeting to discuss a potential Design Overlay is held on October 17, 2017. Letters are mailed and hand delivered to property and business owners on the street. Via RFP, Consultant Otak is selected to support the Design Overlay work in December 2017. The subcommittee works with Otak to explore options for the Design Overlay to present to the community. On February 6, 2018 a second community meeting is held on the Design Overlay to explore ideas and options for the street. Invitations are once again delivered via mail and hand delivered to business and property owners on the corridor. Overall interest in the overlay is expressed.
Spring-Summer 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taking feedback from the public meeting, the subcommittee continues to work with Otak to refine the proposed elements to the Design Overlay. Subcommittee members continue outreach to concerned stakeholders via one-on-one and small group meetings. A presentation is made to the Platt Park Merchants Association and a few articles are written to get out the word.
Fall-Winter-Spring 2018 - 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First in-depth meetings are held with CPD to outline process to move overlay through legal steps. CPD begins work of breaking down proposed Design Overlay elements and exploring what is possible through zoning. The proposed Overlay is streamlined through this effort and meetings with subcommittee members.
Summer 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final review of Design Overlay with property and business owners via public information session in June 2019.
Fall 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final outreach to affected property owners on the street via one-to-one meetings; presentation is made at 3PA Annual meeting. Councilman Clark formally indicates to CPD his intent to proceed with preparation of the Design Overlay.

Table: Design overlay process summary.

Area of Focus

Neighborhood discussions have focused on the area between Evans Avenue and Buchtel Boulevard (see map to the left). The maps below shows properties with U-MS zoning that allow mixed use and commercial development. These properties have been the focus of the neighborhood's discussion.



U-MS-2 Zoning
 U-MS-3 Zoning
 U-MS-5 Zoning

Overlay Objectives

This section identifies the high-level objectives for a potential overlay that emerged from community discussion. These objectives serve as a baseline for the specific recommendations that follow.

Maintain a Vibrant South Pearl Street

South Pearl Street’s vibrancy is a big part of what makes it special. Traditional commercial and mixed use buildings and the activities that occur within their ground floors provide an inviting presence, generate activity on the street and establish a physical and visual relationship between the street and adjacent buildings. All development should maintain and enhance the level of vibrancy on South Pearl Street.

Promote Compatibility with Design Traditions

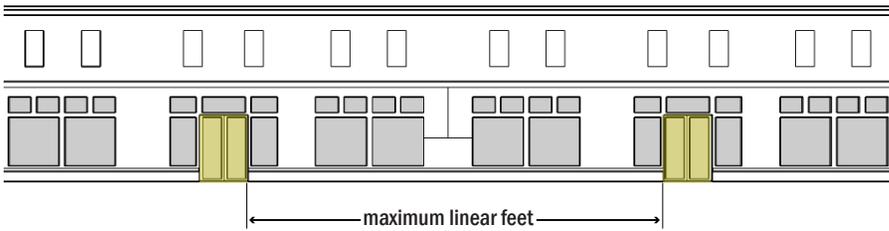
The fundamental design characteristics of traditional commercial and mixed use development along South Pearl Street significantly impact one’s experience. While variety in architectural design is part of what makes South Pearl Street unique, visual continuity is created through fundamental design elements that are shared among traditional buildings. Development should be compatible with the fundamental design character of South Pearl Street, however flexibility should still be permitted to allow for contemporary design and creativity. The siting of buildings, composition of street-facing façades and the use of masonry materials are all key elements that visually tie the street together.

Overlay Components

This section provides specific recommendations for design overlay components intended to achieve the objectives described above. The overlay components are broken down based on design intent. Under each component, this document identifies key issues to be addressed, the design intent that is sought and a recommended regulatory solution. This document is intentionally written at a qualitative level to minimize complexity and solicit feedback on a preliminary approach. Accordingly, it does not include specific measurable standards or proposed units of measurement. In most cases, design overlay components are intended to address the interface between a building or site and the public street. As such, design standards contained in an overlay often apply to “street-facing façades.” Since corner properties have an interface with both Pearl Street and an intersecting side street, further discussion and analysis of the proposed overlay components will be required to determine the extent to which they apply to edges of a property along a side street.

Note in some cases it is recommended that a design overlay tool should be “explored.” This indicates that significant coordination with Denver’s Zoning Administrator is likely to be needed to ensure that a tool can be feasibly implemented.





As shown on the diagram above, the design overlay would establish a maximum distance allowed between street-facing building entries.

South Pearl Street Vibrancy

As discussed above, human activity is the number one factor that contributes to a vibrant street life on South Pearl Street. New development should locate uses and accessible entries such that they generate activity on the street. The street-facing ground level of a building should be designed to maximize visibility of activities inside a building from the street.

Issues

- Current zoning allows a building's ground floor adjacent to the street to be composed largely or entirely of residential uses, which does not generate the level of vibrancy of retail activities typical of traditional commercial and mixed use buildings on South Pearl.
- A building constructed on South Pearl Street is currently only required to provide one entry facing the street, which for a longer building, would allow a gap between street-facing entries far longer than the traditional spacing of entries seen in commercial and mixed use properties.
- Windows are currently required on a street facing ground floor, but they can create a significant amount of reflectivity, making it difficult to see interior ground floor building activities from the street.

Intent

- Ensure a highly active, engaging and commercial oriented street that maintains and enhances vibrancy on South Pearl Street.
- Ensure visual continuity along South Pearl Street and a high level of activity and accessibility through a consistent rhythm of publicly visible entries from the street.
- Maximize the visual relationship between the street and a building by ensuring clear visibility to interior uses through ground floor windows.

Proposed Overlay Tools

- Require that all buildings provide non-residential active uses, such as shops or offices, abutting South Pearl Street.
- Set a maximum distance allowed between building entries on a South Pearl Street-facing building façade, as shown in the diagram to the left.
- Explore potential tools to minimize reflective windows and ensure visibility to interior uses.

Traditional Siting Patterns

The way buildings are situated on South Pearl Street lots impact the character and experience of the street. Traditional commercial and mixed use buildings are generally sited within a moderately narrow range from South Pearl Street. However, within that range there is variation from building to building. Some buildings are sited right at the property line and others are set back to allow for outdoor seating areas, patios or green space. Horizontal spacing between buildings is also a key characteristic. Traditional commercial and mixed use buildings generally fill the abutting street frontage with a building, which results in a consistent built edge along South Pearl Street with few gaps between buildings.

Issues

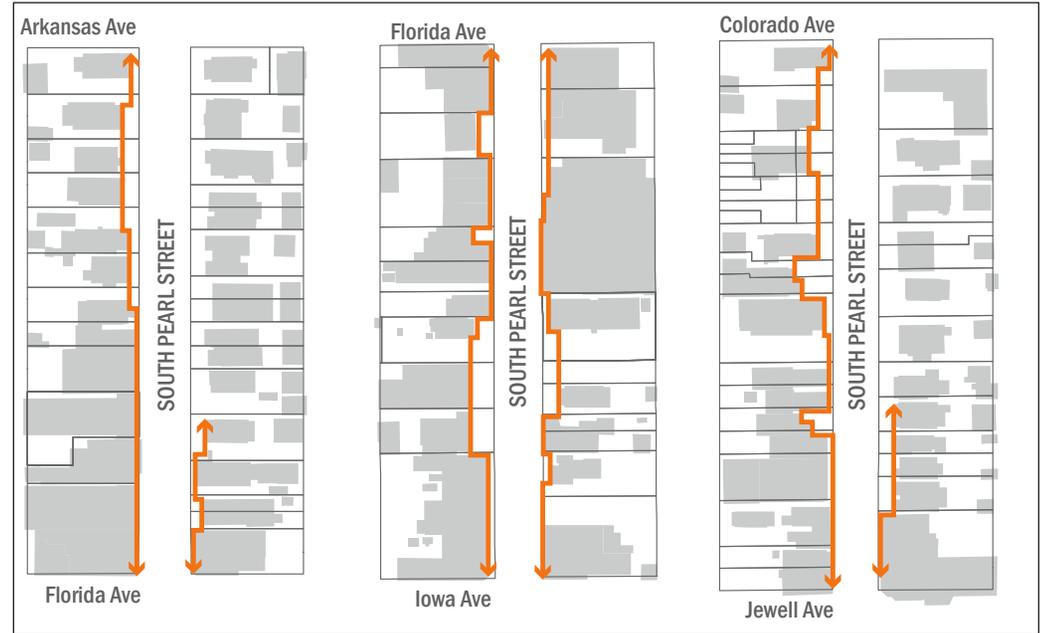
- The current zoning requires buildings to be sited within five feet of the lot line abutting and parallel to South Pearl Street, which is inconsistent with the more varied pattern of building setbacks seen along the street.
- Current zoning allows for significant gaps in the street wall permitting buildings that do not fill a lot's South Pearl Street frontage.

Intent

- Encourage flexibility in the placement of buildings relative to the street to maintain consistency with the variety seen in traditional development and provide opportunities for outdoor amenity space.
- Ensure a very consistent building edge with limited gaps in the street wall along South Pearl Street.

Proposed Overlay Tools

- Moderately increase the range within which a building is required to be sited relative to the street.
- Increase the minimum percentage of a lot's frontage that is required to be occupied by a building.



As shown above on three South Pearl Street blocks zoned for mixed use, there is a generally consistent range of building setbacks from the street, but there is variation within the range.



As shown above on three South Pearl Street blocks zoned for mixed use, buildings are typically tightly spaced with small or no side setbacks. Exceptions to this pattern typically include properties where surface parking has been introduced to the side of a building (P) or a lot is vacant (V).





Façade Composition Compatibility

The arrangement and design of street-facing façades heavily influences the character of South Pearl Street. Spacing and orientation of windows on upper floors creates a visual rhythm of vertically oriented openings. Windows on traditional commercial and mixed use architecture are typically “punched” into a building’s façade. The resulting recess of windows from the surrounding structural façade creates a visual richness through the creation of shadow that helps break down the perceived scale of the building and adds visual interest.

Issues

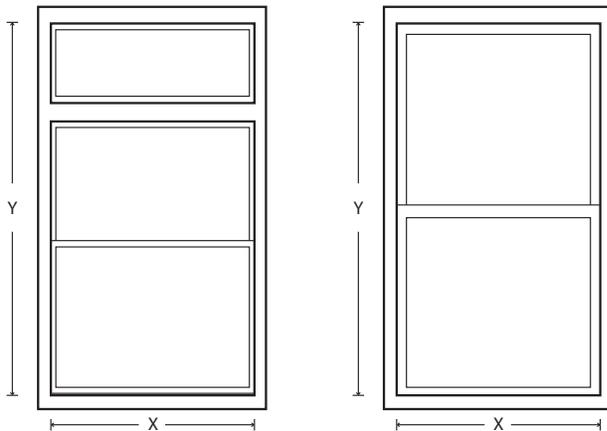
- Current zoning allows an upper floor window or a group of windows to be horizontally oriented, which is inconsistent with the vertical orientation typically seen on traditional upper floor windows.
- Current zoning permits a street facing window to be designed with little or no recess from the building wall that surrounds it, resulting in a visually flat or “pasted on” appearance that lacks the shadow, scale and level of visual interest created by traditional window elements.

Intent

- Create a sense of visual continuity along the street by ensuring that all upper floor windows or groups of windows are square or vertically oriented.
- Create visual interest, depth and shadow by ensuring that street-facing windows are recessed from an immediately surrounding building wall.

Proposed Overlay Tool

- Explore tools to promote square or vertically oriented upper-floor street-facing windows, such as requiring the vertical dimension of a window or a tightly grouped set of windows to be equal to or greater than its horizontal dimension.
- Explore tools to promote windows that appear “punched” into the façade, such as requiring a street-facing window or a tightly spaced group of windows to be recessed by a minimum distance from the immediately surrounding building wall.



Maintaining compatibility with traditional facade composition patterns is related in part to the orientation of upper floor windows. One potential approach in the design overlay would be to ensure that all upper floor windows and tightly grouped sets of windows are vertically oriented. Per the diagram, for all upper floor windows on a street-facing facade, Y would be required to be greater than or equal to X.

Traditional Building Materials

Masonry materials, and particularly brick, are typically utilized on traditional commercial and mixed use buildings on South Pearl Street. Brick provides a depth of detail and visual interest that contributes to the visual character of the neighborhood. Stone is another masonry material that exhibits these visual qualities.

Issue

- Current zoning allows unlimited use of stucco, synthetic stucco, metals, wood and other materials that may be incompatible with the visual character of traditional brick commercial and mixed use buildings on the street.

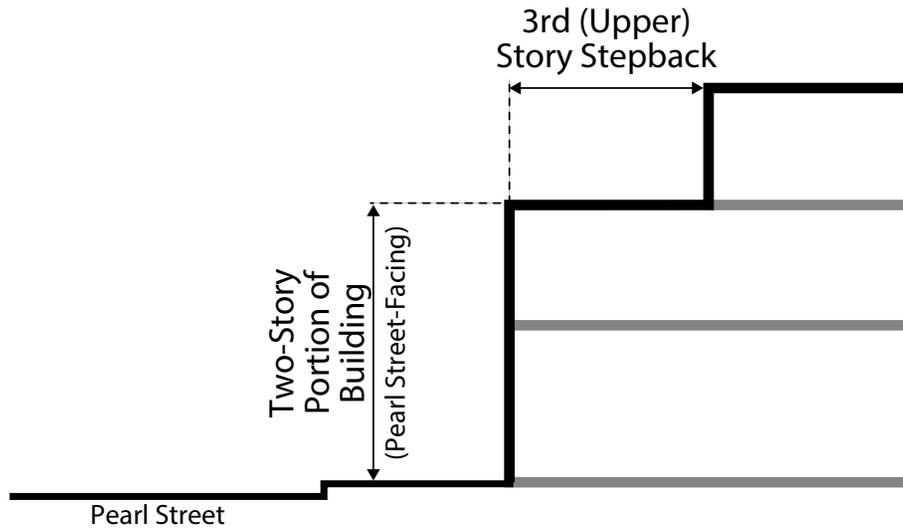
Intent

- Maximize visual continuity along the street by ensuring compatible masonry materials for the majority of a street facing façade, but also flexibility for additional secondary materials.

Proposed Overlay Tool

- Explore tools to promote compatible building materials, such as requiring a minimum percentage of a street-facing building façade (exclusive of windows) to consist of brick, stone or select panelized masonry materials.





As shown on the diagram above, any component of a building above two stories would be required to “step back” from a two story Pearl Street-facing wall by a minimum horizontal distance.

Traditional Building Scale and Roofline Compatibility

The scale of traditional commercial and mixed use buildings fronting South Pearl Street is 1 to 2 stories. This neighborhood scale is a key factor in the street’s character. As demand for rooftop space and taller floor heights has increased in recent years, desire to extend rooftop features well beyond the traditional two story scale has increased. Furthermore, the base zoning on some properties on Pearl Street allows three story buildings that could exceed traditional scale along Pearl Street.

Issues

- Current zoning allows specified rooftop features like elevator penthouses, stair enclosures and mechanical equipment to extend beyond the maximum allowed height. When not adequately set back from a street facing façade, these features are highly visible, thereby creating an incompatibility with the established two-story scale.
- Current zoning allows up to three stories on some priorities. A three-story scale directly abutting the Pearl Street edge would be incompatible with traditional scale.

Intent

- Ensure features that exceed the maximum allowed building height are sufficiently setback from a street-facing façade such that they do not interrupt the two-story visual scale along the street.
- Ensure three story buildings maintain a perceived two-story scale near their interface with Pearl Street.

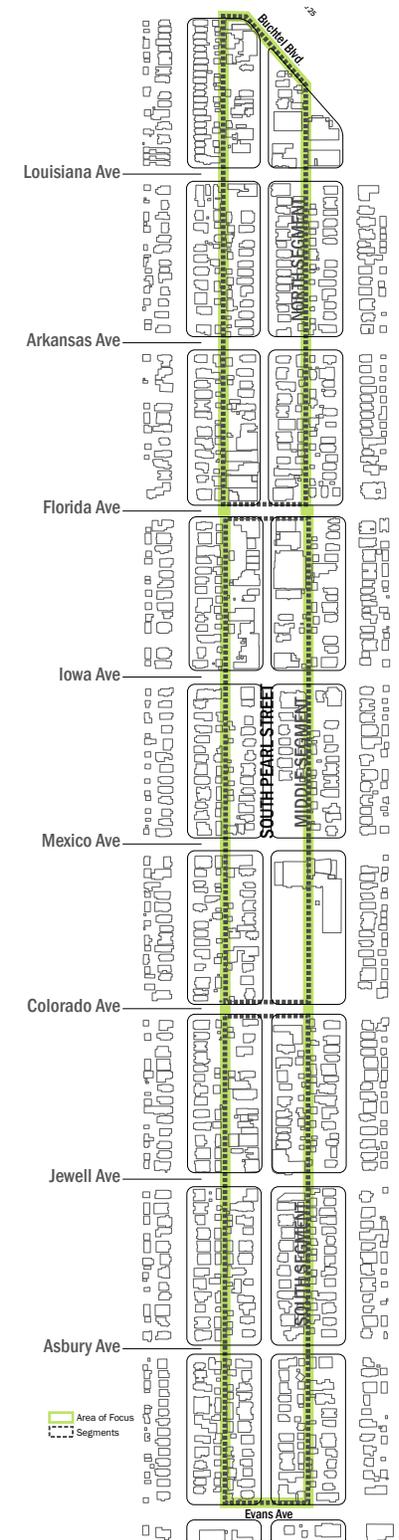
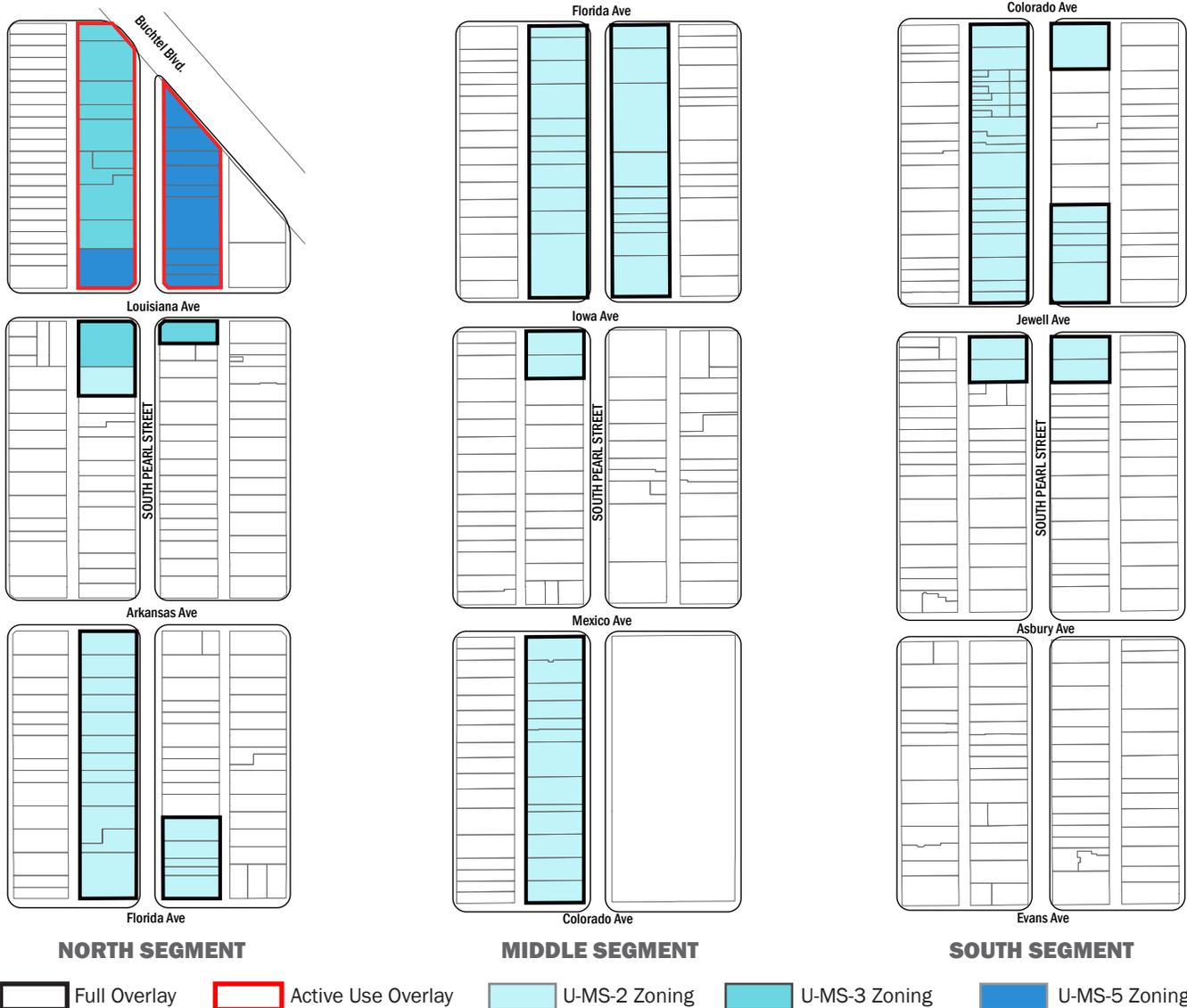
Proposed Overlay Tool

- Increase required setbacks from a street facing façade and establish more restrictive height allowances for rooftop features allowed to exceed the maximum building height.
- Require any portion of a building above two stories to be “stepped back” from a Pearl Street facing façade, as shown in the graphic to the left.

Applicability

3PA seeks to apply a design overlay as follows and as indicated on the maps below:

- All components of the design overlay applied to U-MS zoned properties fronting South Pearl Street from Evans Avenue to Louisiana Avenue.
- Modified Street Level Active Use requirements only (described above under South Pearl Street Vibrancy) applied to U-MS zoned properties fronting South Pearl Street from Louisiana Avenue to Buchtel Boulevard.





Next Steps

This section identifies the critical next steps required to establish a design overlay for properties fronting South Pearl Street.

1. Share the Strategy

3PA and their consultant will collect feedback on the proposed overlay strategy identified in this document.

2. Refinement of Strategy

3PA and their consultant will refine the concepts in this document in coordination with Denver Community Planning & Development (CPD) to refine the recommendations to a level of detail needed for incorporation into the City's zoning code.

3. Official Rezoning Proposal

In coordination with 3PA, the District 7 City Councilmember will file an official rezoning proposal (application) with CPD to initiate the overlay drafting process.

4. Design Overlay Drafting

Working in coordination with 3PA and the District 7 council office, CPD will prepare technical design overlay language and graphics using the legal terminology, format and rules of measurement required for integration with the existing Denver Zoning Code document.

5. Community Review

CPD will share draft design overlay language for community review.

6. Adoption Process

After revising the draft design overlay materials as needed based on community input, CPD will prepare final draft design overlay language for the official adoption process with sponsorship by the District 7 City Councilmember. The process will include notification to affected and surrounding property owners, notification to RNO's citywide, notification to all city councilmembers, review by the Denver Planning Board and adoption by City Council.



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