

## A REPRESENTATIVE VIEW

# Denver Parks Vital To Our Neighborhoods And Spirit

by Mayor Michael B. Hancock

**I** grew up in Denver. I am the person I am today because of Denver schools, Denver neighborhoods, and the Denver spirit.

Throughout my childhood, my family and I lived in several neighborhoods, but the one major constant we had was this city's amazing parks and recreation system.

**When our children have healthy environments and when our residents have a recreational, inspirational and essential respite from the hustle and bustle of city life, we uplift our entire city.**

As I look back, it is indisputable the role that Denver's parks played in my life. I remember playing ball with my friends at Hiawatha Davis basketball courts, and barbecues with our neighbors at City Park.

Today, Denver's urban park system encompasses nearly 3,000 acres of traditional parks and parkways, 2,800 urban natural acres and 154.9 square miles of urban forest. When you add our mountain parks, Denver's park system spans nearly 20,000 acres.

As the proud mayor of my hometown, I have ensured that our parks and recreation system is accessible and growing to help shape the future generations in Denver that we will never meet. Over the past two and a half years, the city has taken great steps to fulfill this mission.

We've made significant investments to enhance existing parks. Some \$25 million has been earmarked to improve the South Platte River corridor, including the park

areas along the river.

I personally lobbied to have Civic Center designated a National Historic Landmark – a status it achieved last year – and we have cleaned up and activated the park recently with more ranger patrols, additional HALO cameras, more planned events and fitness classes. In partnership with The Trust for Public Land, we also installed fitness zones in Silverman, Swansea, La Alma/Lincoln, Huston Lake and Sonny Lawson parks.

As of last month, we have designated and protected 460 acres of park land. By 2017, we expect to add an additional 142 acres to our urban park system, with new parks, open space and natural areas planned around the city, including in the Montbello, Sun Valley and Globeville neighborhoods.

This newly protected acreage throughout the city includes designating an additional 16 acres of the Hampden Heights Open Space as Hentzell Park, increasing the size of this park from 62.7 to 76.7 acres.

During this recent action to grow Hentzell Park, the City and Denver Public Schools also exchanged 11.5 acres of the adjacent 26 acres of Hampden Heights Natural Area and a 46,000-square-foot building near downtown Denver to house the city's new Rose Amond Domestic Violence Center. The 11.5 acres, now the Hampden Heights school site, will soon be home to an early education center and elementary school for our youngest students.

The reality is, DPS simply does not have space for more students in schools that are already severely overcrowded in southeast Denver. Too many children are learning in makeshift classrooms propped

up in school libraries and temporary buildings.

After an exhaustive two-year search was conducted, this site was determined to be the only viable option to optimally serve the more than 750 elementary-age children who live within one mile of the proposed site.

The decision to swap the natural area for the downtown building was not an easy one. But as mayor, I am tasked with listening to our neighbors, weighing the challenges and opportunities of every issue and making the best decision on behalf of the entire community.

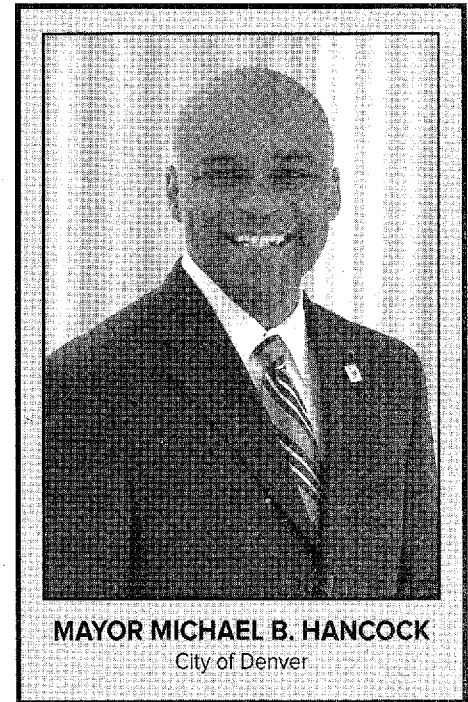
Do I believe this was the right decision to best serve this neighborhood and its families? Absolutely.

Will this set a precedent for future actions related to our natural areas? Absolutely not, as evidenced by the city's steps to designate park land.

Our parks and recreation system is critical to providing and maintaining Denver's high quality of life. As our population grows and our urban city becomes denser, it is important to protect the park spaces that exist, grow parks where we can and maintain parks at the highest level possible.

Low income, minority and immigrant neighborhoods are especially lacking access to good parks. Our most steadfast commitment is for equitable distribution of our wonderful park space, and we are working hard to bring new parks so that every neighborhood can become a vibrant, thriving community where residents can experience nature and refresh their spirits.

When our children have healthy envi-



ronments in which to play and when our residents have a recreational, inspirational and essential respite from the hustle and bustle of city life, we uplift our entire city. This is the power of parks in a major growing metropolis like Denver.

Denver's forefathers understood the value of preserving as much of our pristine land as possible while also setting out to build a vibrant, world-class city in the Rocky Mountain West – and I aim to continue on that path.

We've accomplished a lot within our park system over the past two years, and I look forward to continuing that momentum as we head into 2014.