

[Home](#) > [Opinion](#) > [Editorials](#)

A stadium district foul

The push to create a view plane would ruin couple's nestegg

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If you wanted to take a first-time Denver visitor to see a stunning urban view of the Rocky Mountains, Club Level Section 222 of Coors Field would not be our first choice - or our 101st, for that matter.

And yet the Denver Metropolitan Major League Baseball Stadium District (the folks who operate Coors Field) thinks the vista from those seats is an integral part of the game-watching experience. So irreplaceable that it has asked the Denver City Council to pass an ordinance to protect those views.

The ordinance, which may face a hearing before the city's Planning Board later this month, would establish a "view plane" for Coors Field and cap the height of nearby buildings at 72 feet.

But if a narrowly drawn ordinance passes, it would be the equivalent of an unlawful taking of Bill and Paula Leake's property, the Light Bulb Supply Co. at 20th and Delgany streets, since nearby owners have been allowed to build higher.

For that matter, if a bill with wider boundaries gets past the council it could also jeopardize an essential component of Denver's economic plans: the revitalization of the area around Union Station. Developers and other downtown businesses have gotten antsy once they've learned that an ordinance is in the works. And we don't blame them.

The city has aggressively promoted high-density, infill development in that part of town for years. Why would Denver potentially risk those projects to protect the views of a handful of baseball fans for a few hours each year, when the Rockies are playing a home game and the sun is above the horizon?

The Leakes have owned their business for nearly 30 years, long before LoDo was a tony address. Their company has grown, so they're moving to Stapleton.

They also want to sell the 26,000 square-foot property where the building sits. To do that, they need a zoning change that would allow a buyer to build a mixed-use commercial/residential structure on the site that could reach 140 feet. That would be consistent with the zoning of other parcels close to the stadium.

Two potential buyers balked, however, when they learned that a Coors Field view plane ordinance would crater the value of the property.

Why? A developer would have a tough time finding tenants or owners for a structure that's no higher than 72 feet; the HOV on-ramp to Interstate 25 runs alongside the property, above street level. Just try to get top dollar for a condo or an apartment with motorists constantly zipping beside your residents' living rooms. The developer of a taller building would have more leeway to design a structure that minimizes traffic disturbances.

Last month, the Planning Board urged approval of the Leakes' application for the zoning change; meantime the businesses in the Downtown Denver Partnership have also asked why the city would consider protecting mountain views that you have to purchase a ticket to enjoy.

You could argue that the stadium district is the greater offender here. When the Rockpile was placed in center field, the scoreboard was moved to the left - which over the years has blocked an unobstructed view for probably hundreds of thousands of fans, not just those in Section 222.

Since the Rockies aren't likely to raze the Rockpile, nor should they, let's hope the council sends the stadium's view plane proposal to the showers.

[Back to Top](#)

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