

Let's talk about I-70 and Kipling

In December 2019, during my interview for the position as Chief of Police for Wheat Ridge, I was asked a very specific question. "What are you going to do about I-70 and Kipling?" As I researched the topic further, I discovered a long history of concern and focus on this part of town, and found that many community members have a very negative perception of the area. Changing community perception will require real intervention and results that are demonstrated by all departments of our municipal government. Our reputation as a city should not be based solely on the conditions at I-70 and Kipling but sometimes it is.

Addressing the issues occurring in that area is also not the sole responsibility of the police department. In Wheat Ridge, we are working across all departments to implement policy change and we are collaborating with our regional partners to establish permanent improvements.

Here are projects the City and WRPD are currently engaged in:

- More frequent clean-up in the area to include CDOT, city staff, contractors, and community volunteers.
- A Homeless Navigator position has been added to help connect our those experiencing homelessness with resources. Our Homeless Navigator connects people with services and builds relationships and trust with persons experiencing homelessness.
- Mental health co-responders who provide support to our police department as we encounter people in crisis.
- A dedicated crime prevention officer who is assigned to the area and works with our Homeless Navigator to provide safety, and better understand the community that lives or transits the area. An additional three officers will be directly assigned to that area in the next month.
- This summer we will increase our Park Rangers to patrol the greenbelt. We will use a mix of bike patrols, foot patrols, and vehicular patrols, by Park Rangers and patrol officers to improve safety for those using our parks.
- A coordinated regional program, "Heading Home." This Jefferson County program helps to coordinate resources in creating a plan that does not just push people from one jurisdiction to another.
- Proposed legislation to modify lodging regulations and hold hotel ownership accountable is in the works with the goal of ensuring that those who stay at our hotels do not negatively impact the community. The City is in direct communication with the business community in the area, especially our hotels.
- The Wheat Ridge Crash and Traffic Team will supplement police presence and focus on improving pedestrian safety.
- Continuation of our Crossroads Project to work directly with local businesses and address their concerns.

The City of Wheat Ridge and City Council also continue to work on solutions for affordable housing, landscape design, improved data collection, and economic investment in the area. WRPD, is collaborating with other City departments to address

the concerns around I-70 and Kipling in particular, and in the meantime, we will continue to fight crime and disorder in that area as we do throughout the City. However, we are bound by the constitution and state law regarding homelessness and those constraints may not be well understood by everyone in our community. I find myself frequently reminding community members that it is not illegal to be homeless, however, we continue to try and help those in need even though some people decline assistance.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the populations living and staying in the area have grown significantly, including those who are homeless or transient and attempting to camp outdoors or stay for extended periods in budget hotels. What is still unclear is whether the rise in numbers is temporary and will wane post-pandemic or if the surge will be longer-lasting.

We understand that the area of I-70 and Kipling is attractive to many marginalized people, especially those experiencing homelessness and some of those individuals engage in illicit or illegal activity including drug use. Hangouts are also often littered with trash. Inexpensive lodging facilities bordering the corridor act as gathering places for those who are essentially homeless or transient, and therefore contribute to the safety and health concerns of Wheat Ridge community members and local business owners. Officers in regular contact with people in that area tell us that Wheat Ridge feels safer than metro Denver. We are a compassionate city and as your Police Department, we try to balance enforcement within our compassion. However, we know that some of the people who make up these struggling segments of our society right now are creating some of the problems and it is important to take action to keep everyone safe, to prevent crime whenever possible and respond when criminal activity is taking place. We will help those who need it and want our help and we will hold accountable people who commit crimes.

While City leaders continue to work to understand the ever-changing factors that impact the area, we recognize the need to act expeditiously and boldly. There are stumbling blocks in the path toward meaningful change, however. Jefferson County has implemented jail restrictions that make it difficult for us to remove some of the criminal element, and a lack of available resources has reduced area services that support homelessness, mental health, and addiction. We also stay current with programs around the country that address homelessness. Nationally there are mixed results when dealing with homelessness, but we want to do better here in Wheat Ridge.

Working together as a community, I believe we can reimagine and change the sense of place found within the I-70 and Kipling corridor. I hope our efforts will change your perception as we continue to push hard to find solutions to the problems around I-70 and Kipling.