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### Aurora still reeling from Gaylord development pull-out, but Pueblo's rolling

By Patricia Calhoun Thu., Feb. 14 2013 at 8:59 AM  
Categories: Calhoun: Wake-Up Call

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This morning the Colorado Economic Development Commission will hear an update on the Regional Tourism Act award made to Aurora last May, two weeks before Gaylord Entertainment pulled the plug on an \$800 million convention/hotel complex, sending the city scrambling for a replacement that's yet to appear. But Pueblo, the other RTA prize recipient, is moving ahead on expanding its riverwalk/convention center, complete with a Professional Bull Riders University.



In fact, Pueblo is on a roll right now.

In January, the governor's office announced that Aspen and Pueblo will be the recipients of the 2013 Governor's Arts Awards, to be handed out at the end of the second annual Colorado Creative Industries Summit in April -- which will be held in Pueblo. "In Pueblo, art is the cord that ties us to our past and links us to our future," says Pueblo City Manager Sam Azad.

And last week, the Governor's Award for Historic Preservation went to the City of Pueblo and Historic Pueblo Inc. for the Pueblo Neighborhood Heritage Enhancement Project. "It was absolutely amazing," says Pueblo Urban Renewal Authority spokeswoman Kristi Alfonso. "Fifteen to twenty community members went to History Colorado for the awards ceremony. We were completely honored to receive that award. The Pueblo Historic Preservation Commission is really, really passionate about preserving Pueblo's past."

And the entire city is passionate about Pueblo's future. "There's been a lot of balls rolling, and now it seems that they're all coming together and heading in the same direction," Alfonso notes.

One of those balls is the project that got the nod from the RTA last May; Pueblo and Colorado signed off on the plan November 8, and PURA expects the first check from the state in March or April. It will be used to "pull together some seed money for architectural fees, land acquisition needs," explains PURA head John Batey, with construction hopefully starting in 2014.

The three-phase project should total \$136 million, and "we've only budgeted \$14.8 million

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from the RTA," Batey says, adding that while Pueblo would likely have gone forward even if it hadn't won the bid, "the RTA gave us an opportunity to accelerate our plans."

Although Professional Bull Riders will use the facility, Pueblo will own it, Batey says. "We think this is going to be a great addition to Pueblo's downtown."

There's a secret to Pueblo's success, and one that Aurora and future applicants for the RTA awards should note. This project "does not have a single penny of RTA money going to a private developer -- 100 percent of our RTA money goes to public improvements," he says. "This is in no way corporate welfare."

That was definitely one of the knocks against the Aurora/Gaylord project, which was awarded \$81.4 million in sales-tax rebates over thirty years by the RTA. (Aurora itself had offered to provide up to an additional \$300 million in incentives to Gaylord.) The language of the Regional Tourism Act specifies that the incentives should be awarded to projects that demonstrate or state a capacity to bring out-of-state visitors and new tax dollars to the state, and are "extraordinary and unique."

A bull-riding school definitely qualifies. But a giant hotel complex with an out-of-state company reaping the benefits? Sounds like so much bull.

*More from our Calhoun: Wake-Up Call archive: "Gaylord deal signaled dawn of new Aurora...until the deal went dark."*



Patricia Calhoun

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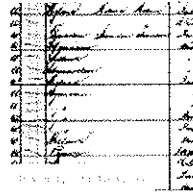
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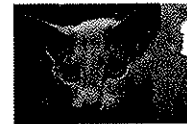
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