



## Local Matters.

### centennial citizen > news

#### A case study in struggle for power

#### Part 2 of 2

**By Peter Jones**  
**Special to CCN**

Published: 02.17.11

Print Page

*Editor's note: As Centennial marks its 10th anniversary, the city is feeling its growing pains. For the second in a two-part series, Colorado Community Newspapers examines recent conflicts about who is and should be running the home-rule city of 103,000 people.*

Centennial Civic Center Park will not be your garden-variety hangout for skateboarders and picnickers. The 11-acre park will boast an amphitheater, a mountain observation area, a climbing wall, water features and a "destination" playground.

City officials are betting on public interest. Much of the \$5.35 million project will be paid for by grants and Centennial's share of Arapahoe County's open-space tax.

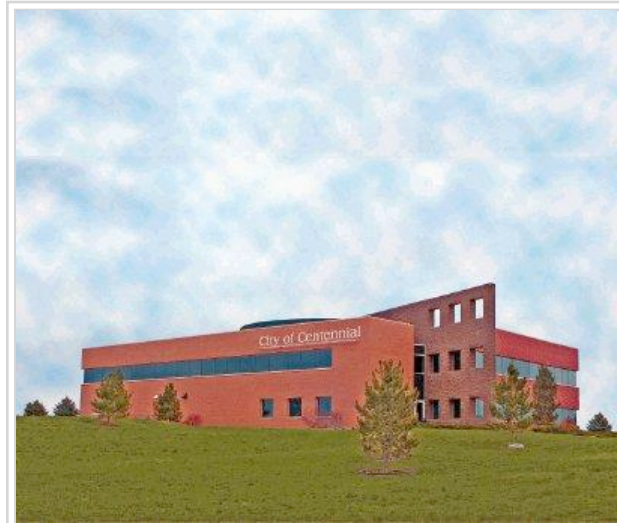
Hopes are for the park on Arapahoe Road to act as a bridge between the east and the west ends of the large barbell-shaped city. Officials say the park will be a signature destination and foster identity and community for 10-year-old Centennial.

But despite involved discussions, heated disagreements and eventual support from most of the city council, there remains some ambiguity about who came up with this concept for a large-scale park in the first place.

According to City Manager Jacque Wedding-Scott, the idea is rooted in such citizen-led efforts as "Our Voice. Our Vision. Centennial 2030" and a long-range plan developed by the city's volunteer open-space committee.

"Both documents came back and said we need a city center. We need to call some place home and we need a place where east can meet west," Wedding-Scott said. "I think both of those documents were very, very strong [in advocating this]."

Wedding-Scott also stresses that the open-space committee gave its unanimous blessing to the park before the city council approved its construction on Jan. 24.



Plans call for turning 11 acres surrounding the Centennial Civic Center into a large park. Many city officials say the park will create city identity and foster community, but some question the \$5.35 million price tag and wonder whether citizens have really asked for such an expansive park. Courtesy photo

Mayor Cathy Noon, founding Mayor Randy Pye and at least six of eight councilmembers from across the demographically diverse city have been strong advocates and agree that the park was born of citizen demand.

Bolstering their point, "Our Voice. Our Vision's" Community Quality of Life/Citizen Engagement Committee concluded that the city should "develop a cultural center with indoor and outdoor activities with ties into the park system."

That's well and good says Sue Rosser, a founding member of the open-space committee. But she is also among those who believe the original advocates for the park's vision were not lay citizens, but city staff members.

"If I had missed a few meetings, I would think, well, maybe somehow this was talked about when I was absent, but I was never absent," Rosser said. "We had a bunch of public testimony and I really never heard an emphasis on a regional park."

Rosser left the committee after it was temporarily dissolved. She did not join a later-reconstituted advisory board because of a perceived conflict of interest after she was elected to the South Suburban Parks and Recreation board. Pye later stressed that involvement when responding to Rosser's criticisms.

Rosser, who also co-wrote the city charter with Noon and others, says those who point to "Our Voice. Our Vision" as evidence of broad citizen interest in a central park are largely reading what they want into the 77-page "visioning" document.

"There are other pages that say people really want smaller neighborhood parks," she said. "You can take any part of that document and spin your argument."

For example, the Quality of Life committee said Centennial should "maintain trails" and "acquire as much open space as possible to provide more recreational space for citizens — connectivity, sports fields, on-street biking for commuters and parks."

Rosser is not alone in her skepticism. Karen Hamilton, who served on both the original and reconstituted open-space committees, remembers the park concept being floated by city staff who, she says, presented it as a city council idea. Original member Malcolm Parks agrees

"The open-space committee did not come up with it," Parks insisted. "It germinated somewhere between the city staff and members of the city council. Hopefully, they're making up their own minds based on citizen input. You'd like to think so."

District 3 Councilmember Rebecca McClellan, the only official to vote against final approval of the park on Jan. 24, also questions Wedding-Scott's version of history.

"I started thinking, wait a minute, whose idea was it to spend nearly \$5 million? I was thinking it came to the city council from a citizens committee, but each of these citizens groups is thinking it came from the other," McClellan said.

Several former members suspect the first open-space committee was dissolved because its members were "too free of thought." But Wedding-Scott and most park supporters on the council stand by their version.

"We met with the open-space committee and the park passed unanimously," the city manager said.

### **Chain of command**

2010 was a year for the City of Centennial to re-evaluate its power structure.

Not only did the city council debate the point broadly before it granted more authority to the city manager, Centennial has found no shortage of other opportunities to rethink the lines between council power and staff autonomy.

Those lines surfaced again last summer when District 2 Councilmember Sue Bosier was stopped by police and accused of unlawfully removing campaign signs for now-Arapahoe County Commissioner Nancy Sharpe.

Although Bosier had been working on the campaign for Sharpe's Republican primary opponent, the councilmember reportedly told police she was an official enforcing the city code when she took down the illegally-placed signs.

Accusations against Bosier, who faces criminal charges and likely discipline from the council, have ranged from inappropriately assuming the role of Centennial's code-enforcement staff to the outright stealing of signs.

According to Mayor Noon, the Bosier incident has been a case study in the clear difference between the roles of the council and the staff — a legal distinction that even affects the city's insurance policies, she says.

"If I just went out and stood in the middle of traffic and blew whistles and got run over by a bus, I can't come back to the city and say you have to pay my medical bills. That's not our job description," Noon said.

But what if the staff arguably assumes a council role? The council is an elected body empowered to make city decisions. Should it be a problem when unelected staff express their opinions before the council votes? District 1 Councilmember Rick Dindinger thinks it is time to redraw the line.

At a council meeting last May, Dindinger addressed his concerns, saying that when staff members address the council at the podium, they should limit their comments to professional expertise and then effectively speak only when spoken to.

"Whoever's up there, they feel compelled to weigh in," Dindinger said to his colleagues. "For some reason, they can't help but respond. ... I think we need to have them sit down and have discussion amongst ourselves."

Dindinger has been known to chastise District 4 Councilmember Ron Weidmann for actively soliciting staff opinion during meetings, typically prompting a pointed rebuke from Weidmann.

Some councilmembers say the staff has made questionable requests outside the council chambers. District 3's Patrick Anderson was taken aback last June when the city manager asked that he not distribute an e-mail soliciting citizen opinion about a controversial public works proposal.

"Since it was in the public realm, I thought this was an unusual request," Anderson said. "I was a little concerned about that. But at the same time, I still shared it with people on e-mail blast and Facebook."

Councilmembers differ on whether the city staff tries to directly influence the council before votes. McClellan says it happens more often than it should.

"I made a phone call to staff members regarding a traffic issue I was concerned about," she said. "Before I got to council that night, at least one of my elected colleagues had been lobbied by staff. That's a problem."

District 2's Bosier agrees. But Noon, Weidmann and Anderson, among others, say they are unaware of any inappropriate attempts to influence elected officials.

"I've never been pulled aside. Maybe it's just me," Anderson said. "But there are times when some of us will go and ask questions."

For Wedding-Scott's part, she says the word "lobbying" is a misrepresentation of the necessary communication that takes place between her staff and the council.

"We have a lot of give and take," the city manager said. "I would not characterize it as lobbying, and quite frankly, I would consider it my obligation to communicate with my city council."

Wedding-Scott says it would be more accurate to say the staff professionals are there to serve the citizen legislators, many of whom do not have broad knowledge of public works, law enforcement or city planning.

"Every one of the council are part-time elected officials that may not have any background or education in government," she said. "The staff are really experts in the field in the services we provide. We're here to do what the council asks us to do."

The city charter was supposed to clarify staff and council roles, but as with the U.S. Constitution, there continues to be some room for interpretation and inevitably, personal, if not partisan wrangling.

Many internal disagreements may be the result of misunderstanding more than anything else, according to Sam Mamet, executive director of the Colorado Municipal League. Mamet has worked with virtually every city staff and council in the state and says Centennial's issues are not unique.

Councils tend to view the world one way, while staffs view it in another, he says. But when all is said and done, according to Mamet, people get involved in city government because of a passion — and sometimes those passions wind up flying across the council chambers.

"It's all a matter of communication," he said. "I had an old-time city manager tell me some years ago, 'You know, son, we communicate, communicate and communicate and then we spend a lot of time talking with each other.' That's how it really does work out in the final analysis."

Copyright © 2011 - Colorado Community Newspapers Online

[\[x\] Close Window](#)