Sun Valley Business Outreach & Support
Findings and Policy Recommendations

Final Report
December 18, 2013
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INTRODUCTION

The Sun Valley Business Outreach and Support project seeks to assist the Mile High Connects (MHC) Job Access Initiative stakeholders in better understanding how small businesses in Denver’s Sun Valley neighborhood might be strengthened to provide access to good jobs within the transit corridor. The project was led and conducted by the Mile High Business Alliance (MHBA) in partnership with stakeholders from the MHC Jobs working group, including the Denver offices of Economic Development and Planning and Enterprise Community Partners.

The Denver City Council adopted a new 20-year redevelopment vision for the Sun Valley neighborhood on April 22, 2013 – *The Sun Valley Neighborhood Decatur-Federal Station Area Plan* (Station Area Plan). The Decatur-Federal LRT Station, part of the new West Light Rail Line, opened soon after, increasing the convenience of transit. In addition, there are several opportunities in Sun Valley that will likely help shape its transformation, including:

- Denver Housing Authority (DHA) has targeted Sun Valley Homes, a 33-acre public housing site, as “next” for development of a high quality mixed income community and has recently received federal grant money for the planning phase.
- The nearby Auraria Campus is home to 40,000 students from The University of Colorado-Denver, Community College of Denver and Metropolitan State College of Denver who need additional housing near the campus.
- The potential availability of up to 100 acres of land for redevelopment within a half-mile radius of the new Decatur- Federal LRT Station.

Given these opportunities, the MHC Jobs working group wants to better understand how small businesses might also contribute to the transformation of the neighborhood and drive new job growth. Specifically, the Sun Valley Business Outreach and Support Project seeks the following outcomes:

- To better understand the current strategy, capital, talent and agency realities of the businesses of Sun Valley, as well as understand their future needs in these areas, with an eye to expanding and strengthening these businesses
- To better understand the perceptions of and need for transit
- To develop a proactive model for engaging and supporting small businesses in order to help them thrive, especially by providing good jobs to middle skilled workers.

MHBA has conducted outreach to 98 businesses in Sun Valley and completed data collection with 53 businesses. The data was collected through a survey developed in partnership with project stakeholders and obtained by speaking to business owners or managers in-person or via telephone between mid-September and early December 2013.
OVERVIEW OF SUN VALLEY BUSINESSES

Sun Valley is home to many stable, family-owned businesses with considerable longevity in the neighborhood. Fifty-one percent of the businesses surveyed have been in Sun Valley more than ten years – American Clay Works has been in the neighborhood more than 100 years, Gordon Signs, 60 years, and Ready Foods, Frontier Fire Protection, Dana Kepner Company and UHAUL all have at least 40 years at their current locations. Forty-percent of the Sun Valley businesses surveyed characterize themselves as “family-run” and the majority are owned locally.

1. How many years has your business been at this location?

By contrast, InkMonstr and Spotlight Studios moved to the neighborhood in 2013, both citing the presence of the new LRT station as one factor for their move.

Sun Valley businesses are diverse, but of the 53 surveyed 16 are affiliated with home and/or commercial construction, including concrete, flooring, electrical and engineering firms. Seven of the businesses surveyed are food or beverage-related and approximately eight are retail businesses. The neighborhood is home to a music and dance studio, a craft brewery with tasting room, an eye glass manufacturer, a wholesale provider of greenhouse supplies, office and home furniture stores, a neon sign builder, and a commercial satellite installer.

Of the businesses surveyed, the highest concentration is in the area-zoned industrial bordered by 6th Avenue on the south, Federal Boulevard on the west, 9th Avenue on the north and I-25 on the east. Additionally, the sample includes businesses from Lower Colfax, Federal Boulevard, and Holden Place.

The largest non-government employers are Ready Foods and Sports Authority Field at Mile High Stadium. Both have more than 100 employees.
The vast majority of businesses, 57 percent, have only full-time employees. Of those who do hire part-time, 35 percent hire only 1-5 people.
The estimated wage data collected through the survey suggests that many, but not all jobs in Sun Valley pay wages that would allow their employees to support a family. The “self-sufficiency standard” for a family of one adult and two children in Denver County is $23.79 per hour. Owners and managers were asked to estimate their average hourly wage for all full-time and part-time employees for both exempt and non-exempt positions. More than half – 58 percent – estimate that their average hourly wage exceeds $15 with 28 percent estimating the average hourly wage exceeds $20. The survey did not ask employers about health care or other benefits.

A third of businesses preferred not to share their annual sales data, but among the two-thirds who did, 50 percent report annual sales over $1 million and more than 25 percent have annual sales over $5 million.

![Pie chart showing approximate annual sales](image)

Seventy-percent of Sun Valley businesses sell primarily to other businesses and their central location is important because 80 percent are serving customers in Metro Denver and the surrounding areas. Thirty-eight percent are also serving customers in greater Colorado and 21 percent have customers around the U.S.

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1 The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Colorado 2011, Prepared for the Colorado Center on Law and Policy, by The Center for Women’s Welfare at the University of Washington School of Social Work, p. 10
KEY FINDINGS

Conversations with the 53 business owners and managers in Sun Valley reveal several emerging issues. These help us understand why businesses locate in the neighborhood, challenges they face, and the landscape in which greater synergy between employment, transit and business growth would occur.

Location
The proximity of Sun Valley to I-25 is a significant factor driving the location of businesses in the neighborhood. Businesses strongly value the neighborhood’s central location, proximity to downtown, and the easy access to I-25 to reach their customers in the metro area and beyond. The prevalence of relatively inexpensive space is also an important factor for the majority of businesses who choose to locate in the neighborhood.

“The great thing about this neighborhood is the access and proximity to downtown. It’s so handy if you have business anywhere in the metro area.”

Given the importance of access to I-25, several business owners, particularly those along Sixth Avenue are concerned about construction on the nearby I-25 Santa Fe Drive interchange and its potential impact on access by customers, employees and shippers.

Connection Between Neighborhood Businesses and Residents
The majority of Sun Valley residents – 1500 reside in properties at Denver Housing Authority’s Sun Valley Homes, where over half are under 15-years old and the median household income is $8000 a year, Denver’s lowest. Sun Valley Homes is adjacent to the industrial area. There are a handful of other single-family homes in the neighborhood and almost all have businesses as their neighbors. The proximity of homes and businesses in the shadow of a major sports facility contributes to the lack of a clear identity for Sun Valley. In fact, it was not uncommon for managers and owners to express surprise at learning that the area is known as “Sun Valley.”

Nonetheless, there are connections between residents and business. Almost half of Sun Valley businesses have residents of Sun Valley or adjacent neighborhoods among their employees. Typically, this means 1-2 employees, however one of the larger businesses estimates that almost half of its employees are from surrounding neighborhoods. At least two of the families that run small businesses in the neighborhood also live in the neighborhood and several businesses express a willingness to hire neighborhood residents who are qualified for open positions.

A few businesses are also engaging in community-based projects that involve local residents. For example, American Clay Works collaborates with residents and youth at Sun Valley Homes to run a neighborhood garden and farmers market and The Improve Group does events and provides financial support to the Sun Valley Youth Center.
Redevelopment

Only a few of the business owners and managers knew about the redevelopment vision for Sun Valley at the onset of MHBA’s outreach. A handful were involved in the meetings held to gather community input prior to drafting the plan and others knew about it from articles in The Denver Post. Once alerted to the existence of the plan, particularly the vision for significantly more housing and retail in the neighborhood, the majority feel the redevelopment would be positive. More restaurants and retail stores in the neighborhood where employees could eat lunch, grab coffee or do shopping on their way home would be particularly welcome.

“We really like the neighborhood from an accessibility standpoint and we were aware of the redevelopment plans and are excited about the potential there. If they can pull off the mixed use development, that’s really positive for the culture.”

A couple of businesses owners who lease space in the neighborhood are concerned about whether the redevelopment will drive up their facilities’ costs, forcing them to move. On the flip side, two business owners who own their facilities are interested in possibly selling their properties if land prices rise or in developing the land themselves, if zoning ordinances change to allow it.

Safety

While specific experiences of crime are rarely mentioned by businesses, a perception of poor safety exists in the neighborhood. It is one reason given for why employees do not use bus and LRT to commute. More than one business owner/manager reports that people did not feel safe walking in the neighborhood after dark to reach the transit stops. According to crime statistics provided by The Denver Police Department, employees’ fears are not without basis. From January to October 2013, 142 property crimes and 113 personal crimes were reported in Sun Valley.

In addition, a few businesses, especially along Zuni, have problems with homeless people who gather adjacent to their properties, causing employees and customers to feel uncomfortable. One business owner also expressed the fear that the diminishing nighttime truck traffic due to the recent closing of Robinson Dairy would create more opportunities for crime in the neighborhood.

Transit

Sun Valley has benefited from bus service and adjacent bike trails for many years. The recent addition of the new Decatur-Federal Station and improvements to bike trails enhance the potential for alternative means of transportation to and from the neighborhood. Most businesses are aware of the new LRT station and 43 percent view it as “positive” or “very positive” while 56 percent view it as “neutral.” A couple business owners say they

“We love it [LRT]! We wish the stop was closer though. It’s a pretty decent walk in cold weather...We benefit from it all the time, not only during Broncos’ games. It’s marketing for us because they see us on the ride by.”
themselves or some of their employees use the adjacent bike trails to commute to work. Other businesses note that they see growing bike traffic in the neighborhood.

As you would expect, those with the most enthusiasm for LRT are those who feel it has a clear positive impact on their business. Those businesses tend to be within relatively short walking distance of the Decatur-Federal Station and to benefit from fans using LRT to get to and from Denver Bronco’s games at Sports Authority Field. One such business says that the West Line helps with their marketing, as the track runs by their building giving the business visibility it would otherwise not have.

Of the thirteen businesses that say they’ve seen an impact or expect LRT to impact their business, 69 percent say it would improve customer access.

Some of those businesses and a few others – 19 total – also have employees who use public transit to get to work. Of those using public transit, 58 percent believe they have employees who commute via bus and 42 percent via light rail.

However, the majority of businesses in Sun Valley, 74 percent, expect the presence of the light rail line to have no impact on their business and 64 percent say their employees are not using public transit (bus or LRT) to commute. The most common reason for employees not to use public transit, according to their managers, is the distance of the LRT station and bus stops from the workplace. Several managers also mention the common feeling that the neighborhood is not safe for walking, particularly after dark. The map below shows the location of Sun Valley transit stops.

Another common reason for the lack of transit ridership is the need for employees to have vehicles available to travel to work sites.
This is particularly common among the many construction-related businesses in the neighborhood and those who rely on sales people to sell their products and services. Free parking is also the norm for most businesses in the neighborhood, creating a disincentive for many to use public transit.

A couple of the Sun Valley businesses say they would like to offer their employees incentives to use public transit, but do not find it financially viable at this point.

**Marijuana Industry Presence**
Recently, at least four marijuana production operations have moved to the neighborhood and their presence raises concerns, especially among their nearby neighbors.

Business owners cite two current issues. First, the smell emanating from the grow houses is viewed as disruptive. Second, the frequent purchasing or renting of remaining low-cost warehouse space by marijuana operations makes it unavailable to other businesses that would like to expand in Sun Valley.

“Our biggest concern is that we’re surrounded by grow houses. The smell coming out is not something people should have to put up with. This is not a great part of town as it is, but now we’re surrounded by grow operations and when businesses leave, grow houses are coming in.”

A couple of business owners also express the fear that the presence of the marijuana industry, and the large amounts of cash they handle, could escalate the level of crime in the neighborhood.

**Strategy, Agency, Talent and Capital Framework Findings**
The MHC Jobs working group utilizes Next Street’s Strategy (business development/growth), Agency (marketing, branding, online presence), Talent (recruitment, retention, diversity, etc.) and Capital (finances, facilities, equipment) Framework as domains of analysis for its work at the intersection of business, job growth and work supports.
(affordable childcare and workforce development). The following section examines Sun Valley data in the context of this framework.

**Strategy**

The story of recent and anticipated job growth in Sun Valley is cautiously optimistic. Businesses surveyed experienced modest job growth in the past two years and at least 28 businesses expect to add jobs in the next two years.

Most businesses say that job growth is tied closely to the performance of the economy in general or the economy of the industry they depend on. The success of a significant number of the businesses in Sun Valley – 16 – is linked to the construction industry and/or government spending on capital projects, both of which began declining in 2008, but rebounded strongly in 2011-12.

Sun Valley businesses have seen modest increases in workforce levels in the past 2-5 years - 45 percent added 1-5 full-time jobs, six percent added 6-10 full-time jobs, and 12 percent added more than 10 jobs. Reinforcing the strong preference for full-time employees, 75 percent of businesses surveyed added no part-time jobs in the last 2-5 years.

Looking forward, over the next two years, the majority of Sun Valley businesses – 58 percent – anticipate some full-time job growth, but most add the caveat that it ultimately depends on overall economic industry-specific growth. The majority of those – 44 percent – hope for job growth in the range of 1-5 employees. Eight percent anticipate adding more than 10 full-time employees.
In addition, the central location of Sun Valley, its proximity to I-25 and the current ease in accessing it is a strategic imperative for the majority of businesses in the neighborhood. Any impact to that access due to I-25 construction or implementation of the redevelopment plan could negatively impact business performance, especially given the strong reliance of businesses on vehicle transportation for employees and commercial truck access for vendors and customers.

Agency
A significant number of businesses in the neighborhood, 36 percent, are very small with only 1-5 employees, thus limiting their capacity and resources for marketing, branding and creating a sophisticated online presence. In fact, a few of the businesses have no employees outside their family.

At least ten businesses cite competition as a barrier to business growth and several also say that marketing their products and services is a challenge. Some businesses in Sun Valley are benefiting from government contracts and a handful of others express a desire to learn how to compete for them.

No businesses mentioned online sales, Internet advertising or the use of social media, however the survey did not ask specifically about marketing activities or plans of any kind. Of the 53 businesses surveyed, 45 have websites, but only 12 of those are transactional and allow purchases online. Less than one-third of Sun Valley businesses are selling directly to consumers so this limits the return on investment for creating transactional websites and marketing through social media.

Given the high number of construction-related businesses in the neighborhood, there may be opportunities to expand revenue through referrals or partnerships among some businesses. While a few of the Sun Valley businesses may be competitors, providing products such as
concrete and carpeting, this does not appear to be a significant issue overall and there may be opportunities for joint marketing.

**Talent**

One of the biggest challenges facing nearly 60 percent of businesses in Sun Valley is difficulty finding qualified employees. While 40 percent say they are always able to find qualified employees, 18 percent say they almost never do and 40 percent say they find qualified people most of the time, but have particular difficulty finding certain skill sets and experience. Eight businesses say the lack of qualified employees is a major barrier to growing their business and several others identify it as a significant challenge.

Several business owners and managers express ongoing difficulty finding entry-level employees who are reliable, punctual and possess a strong work ethic. Some businesses only find the right people after heavy, time consuming screening of applicants. The majority of businesses train entry-level employees on the job.

Finding employees is a challenge for many mid-skilled and high-skilled openings. Sun Valley businesses need drivers with CDL-HazMat licensure; experienced electrical foremen, sales people, mechanics, and flooring installers; and people with skills in greenhouse growing, accounting, screen printing, welding, construction, home weatherization, appliances, and photo developing.

When they do have openings, Sun Valley businesses use the typical mechanisms to find qualified employees. Sixty percent use word of mouth, especially through existing employees and more than half use online advertising through Craigslist, Monster.com and/or their company websites. The non-profit business Veterans Green Jobs relies heavily on a network of veteran’s organizations to find employees with regular success, while one other business says they’ve tried everything to find qualified employees, including veteran’s organizations with almost no success. Only three businesses report using workforce development agencies in the past and three said they’ve also tried working directly with higher education institutions and specialty training schools to find qualified applicants.

Sun Valley businesses have a preponderance of full-time employees and generally seem to prefer not to hire part-time. In addition, some businesses hope to hire their own employees instead of using temporary workers for certain positions in the future. Employee retention is not an issue overall and businesses identify no major neighborhood barriers to retaining employees, despite the concerns about safety and a desire for more amenities, such as restaurants.

The terms “entry-level,” “mid-level” and “advanced” in a survey question about skill sets were not defined, and thus open to interpretation by respondents. For example, “entry-level” positions at Burritos Tacos do not equate to positions characterized as “entry-level” at Belfay...
Engineering where engineering degrees are required. Many businesses would benefit from more help finding qualified applicants for the openings that arise. Sustained job growth in Sun Valley to some extent depends on progress in this area.

Capital
The facilities of Sun Valley businesses are relatively evenly split between leasing, 55 percent, and owning, 45 percent. Of those who lease their space, 61 percent have multi-year agreements. A few businesses are concerned that the redevelopment and/or demand for warehouse space by marijuana businesses will drive up leasing costs. As noted above, a couple of business owners are potentially interested in selling or redeveloping their properties if values rise as a result of redevelopment.

A few businesses in Sun Valley identify lack of access to capital, land and equipment as key barriers to growth. One small business needs additional space to expand their production capacity, a local branch of a national company needs more equipment and land, and a third say they could double their operation in Colorado in the next two years with additional access to capital. At least one business says that they have “outgrown the neighborhood” due to the lack of additional space to expand and so sited a new facility elsewhere in the metro area.

The recommendations in the Station Area Plan reinforce many of these findings and also extend to land use and design of the built environment. The plan calls for supporting existing businesses in the industrial area by improving access to technical and capital resources, identifying opportunities for infill development and recruitment of new businesses; providing employees with indoor and outdoor “active collaboration spaces” and walkable access to the transit system; and minimizing the visual impact of parking and loading areas by locating them behind buildings; and providing vehicle and truck access through alleys.

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

The data collected by MHBA suggests several policy opportunities in Sun Valley that could support job growth, boost transit and trail use, and ensure that businesses have a voice in, and ability to benefit from, the future redevelopment of the neighborhood. Below are six policy ideas for Mile High Connects and its stakeholders to consider in support of these goals:

1. **Be intentional about creating stronger linkages between residents, businesses and developers/land owners as the redevelopment of Sun Valley unfolds**

   As noted above, it is a time of unprecedented opportunity for Sun Valley. As the redevelopment unfolds both public officials and developers should be intentional about creating an approach that includes all stakeholder groups in each phase of planning
An integrated plan including housing, employment and transit can help alleviate the concentrated poverty, economic distress and isolation that is common in the neighborhood. Such an approach will benefit Sun Valley businesses by creating a more desirable environment in which to work, affordable housing opportunities for employees closer to their jobs, and greater connectivity with the Denver metro area.

This approach received a recent boost when U.S. Housing and Urban Development notified DHA that the agency will receive a $500,000 Choice Neighborhoods Planning Grant to create a Sun Valley redevelopment plan over the next 18-months. The Denver Office of Economic Development is matching the federal grant with $250,000. The Initiative calls for a comprehensive approach to transforming distressed areas of concentrated poverty into viable and sustainable mixed-income neighborhoods. It links housing improvements with services for the people who live there, including schools, public transit and employment opportunities.

The Station Area Plan makes several recommendations that can be incorporated into the development plan. It calls for mixed income housing proximate to transit and neighborhood amenities, greater access to education and training opportunities for Sun Valley residents, and forging stronger relationships between businesses and the community through “hire local” programs.

The City should also build on MHBA’s outreach to current Sun Valley businesses to more fully assess which ones could benefit and grow with greater technical, strategic and capital assistance. In addition, the City could provide assistance recruiting new and more diverse businesses with a commitment to hiring locally from the neighborhood.

Denver has current experience with this kind of comprehensive development approach through DHA’s Mariposa Redevelopment in the La Alma/Lincoln Park neighborhood. The redevelopment is underway and will unfold in six phases that are targeted for completion in 2016. The project spans several city blocks and includes 900 mixed income housing units, workforce development programs, and a focus on health and sustainability that will improve bicycle amenities, transit access and use of alternative forms of energy such as solar.

DHA’s experience with the Mariposa redevelopment and a deliberate effort to incorporate lessons learned while engaging all stakeholders throughout the process will be important as more specific plans for Sun Valley are developed.

Action on the five other recommendations below will also contribute to strengthening linkages and engagement among Sun Valley businesses, residents, developers/land owners and other stakeholders, such as RTD, throughout the redevelopment process.
2. Create a pilot program to better connect Sun Valley businesses with qualified employees and neighborhood residents by partnering with workforce development, education and non-profit partners.

The lack of qualified employees is a challenge for a significant number of Sun Valley businesses and stronger support in this area has the potential to boost business and job growth. A pilot project that brings together Sun Valley businesses with City and community workforce development organizations, non-profit and higher education partners, could not only mitigate this challenge in Sun Valley, but also provide lessons learned for other neighborhoods.

Such a project should also include interested Sun Valley residents so they are better able to learn about and compete for job opportunities in the neighborhood. This only happens very occasionally now when managers take the initiative to call Sun Valley Homes or Mercy Housing to alert residents about openings. Adult literacy courses would need to be a component of job training for many Sun Valley residents, as well as work-life services that help new employees overcome barriers to staying at work, such as child care.

There are three primary models for such a pilot:

- **Neighborhood-focused** – A neighborhood focused pilot could train prospective employees in foundational life and job skills for possible work at a broad range of Sun Valley business who are having difficulty finding qualified employees for entry-level positions. In the majority of these cases, employees are trained on-the-job and do not need special training to be hired. A neighborhood-focused model could also provide existing employees with the skills needed to advance at any number of neighborhood businesses.

- **Industry-focused** – An industry-focused pilot would be tailored to the needs of a limited number of Sun Valley businesses who are working in the same or very similar industries. In this model, training would focus on the kinds of skills required for that industry. Locally, the WIN Program at Community College of Denver provides a successful example of this model. WIN also has somewhat of a neighborhood focus in that the program does priority recruiting in neighborhoods impacted by Fastracks’ construction. Sun Valley is one such neighborhood.

The most obvious industry for such a pilot in Sun Valley would be construction-related businesses. However, it’s not clear that these businesses are the ones most in need of qualified applicants, as the industry is only recently rebounding after the 2008 recession and may be benefitting from a large pool of qualified applicants. More outreach to construction-related businesses in the neighborhood should be conducted to assess their employee needs.
• **Employer-focused** – An employer-focused pilot would focus on the needs of a particular employer and provide training to prospective employees based on the employer’s specific skill needs. The model might involve more than one employer if the needed skills were very similar, such as for the multiple carpet and flooring businesses in Sun Valley who need qualified installers.

In order to determine which model would be most effective in addressing Sun Valley businesses’ workforce challenges more information is needed about the scope of the problem, specific training needs and possible partnerships. A logical next step would be for the Westside Workforce Development Center to host a meeting between interested businesses and community and education partners who might be involved in a pilot.

3. **Organize an alliance of Sun Valley businesses to address key issues, enhance business growth and provide a strong business voice throughout the redevelopment**

More cohesion and communication among Sun Valley businesses could help businesses be more influential on issues both large and small. A stronger alliance could provide a shared voice and more power to address everyday issues such as safety, zoning, and the recent concerns about marijuana grow houses.

More cohesion and contact could also give businesses a more powerful voice in the redevelopment of Sun Valley as it unfolds over the next 10-15 years. The relatively small resident population and the longevity of Sun Valley businesses suggest that the business community could have inordinate influence in shaping the redevelopment. A business community that speaks with a unified voice can help ensure that the redevelopment contributes to their stability and sustainability through strong partnerships with other stakeholders, access to major roads and highways during and after construction, robust public transit, growth of neighborhood retail, and the availability of a strong workforce.

It’s also possible that more collaboration and communication among Sun Valley businesses would create a forum for shared recruiting of new employees, competing for public contracts and even growing revenue by sharing knowledge about potential customers. This kind of collaboration may be especially relevant for the many construction-related businesses in the neighborhood that need employees with similar skill sets and to some extent sell complementary services to both commercial and residential customers.

An alliance among businesses could be informal or formal, such as the formation of a 501(c)(6) business association. Mile High Business Alliance would be a logical convener for an exploratory conversation among Sun Valley businesses to gauge their interest in working more closely together.
4. Enhance last-mile connections and promote neighborhood transit opportunities.

Most Sun Valley businesses are aware of LRT’s new presence in the neighborhood, but do not view it as impacting their business and say it’s not being used by their employees or customers. One of the major reasons communicated is lack of convenience in connecting with transit in both the neighborhoods where they live and in Sun Valley, as well as a lack of outreach by RTD about the transit options that do exist.

In order for ridership to increase in Sun Valley and across the system, last-mile connections must be improved. Recent trail enhancements, new bike lanes on neighborhood streets, and the addition of B-Cycle stations could provide last-mile connections for a limited number of residents and employees who are willing and able to ride bikes. Educating interested residents and employees about how to take bikes on light rail and buses could also help.

Last-mile connections by bicycle are limited to a fairly small population of people. To be effective, last-mile connections must take into account all the places people need to go before and after work such as picking up children from childcare, visiting health care providers, and buying and transporting groceries. For low-income, elderly and disabled people who depend on public transit to get around, last mile connections that serve these needs are essential.

Circulator buses focused on a particular neighborhood or district are a very effective way to help riders get where they need to go and could be a good solution for Sun Valley, which is relatively compact. The City of Englewood provides a good model for circulator bus connections with its “art shuttle.” Originally, conceived as a way to view public art in Englewood, the free shuttle jointly funded by RTD and the Englewood City Council, is also serving transit riders with mobility issues, seniors, and people with small children who ride public transit. The shuttle makes 19 stops within a compact district, including the LRT station, grocery stores, medical centers, banks and RTD bus stops. A circulator bus in Sun Valley could include stops at Sun Valley Homes; the industrial, Federal Boulevard and Zuni business districts; the rec center, human services offices, the LRT station and bus stops, among others. A circulator bus would also alleviate the safety concerns that many riders have about walking long distances.
In addition to improving last-mile connections, a business-focused education effort by RTD about transit schedules and fares could modestly enhance ridership among people who work in the neighborhood and do not require vehicles to do their jobs.

The MHC Jobs working group includes 9 to 5, FRESC, MHBA and other stakeholders keenly interested in improving last-mile connections in Metro Denver. By working collaboratively with RTD and leveraging each organization’s strengths the group is well positioned to advance last-mile solutions over the next couple of years.

5. **Create a fare structure that is affordable for small businesses to provide transit benefits to their employees**

In Sun Valley, and throughout Denver, many businesses and residents, especially small businesses and low-income residents, do not find public transit affordable. This is especially true of LRT, which can cost up to $8 round-trip. Outreach by 9 to 5, showed that only 20 percent people in the West Corridor say they can afford to take transit.

Small businesses interested in subsidizing transit ridership for their employees find the current EcoPass fare structure cost prohibitive. RTD’s EcoPass rate structure is designed for large corporations with hundreds or thousands of employees who either fully cover or share the cost of the pass with employees. The program requires that all full-time employees be included. The RTD fare structure for small businesses must be re-examined before new investments in public transit can be fully realized.

For small businesses, a more viable fare structure could be based on revenue or neighborhood, allowing businesses to buy passes in bulk and pass those savings on to employees. RTD currently has a Neighborhood EcoPass, but it is based only on the number of homes and usage by residents. It does not include business usage. Transit passes could also be included in employee benefit packages and be made available not only to employees, but also to their spouses and dependents in order to generate more volume.

Another possibility is to create a fare structure based on individual income to improve access for low-income people who need it most. 9 to 5 has launched a grassroots campaign to encourage RTD to look at this alternative, which is utilized in other states around the country.

Along with work on improving last-mile connections, the MHC Jobs Working Group is a logical place to develop a plan for working with RTD on a fairer and more affordable fare structure for small businesses and low-income residents.
6. Continue public and private sector investments that make Sun Valley more bike and pedestrian friendly.

The Station Area Plan makes several recommendations for enhancing walkability and bikeability in Sun Valley that should be implemented for the benefit of current and future businesses and residents. The plan calls for completing an “integrated system of bicycle routes” that creates more intuitive links to the citywide bicycle network, transit, destinations and regional trails. The highest priority bicycle improvement for Sun Valley is 13th Avenue, which is currently the main point of access for bicycles to the neighborhood. In 2014, the Denver Public Works Department will be doing a feasibility plan for realignment of 13th Avenue, which currently dead-ends at Decatur Street. Improved bicycle connections along 14th Avenue and Lower Colfax are also high priorities for Sun Valley and the Station Area Plan suggests more study is needed about the feasibility of 8th Avenue given its constrained right of way and significant truck traffic.

As the integrated system of bicycle routes grow, a map of the new system with Sun Valley entry points could encourage more use by employees and residents. The addition of bike racks and lockers by the City or local businesses are needed to increase more bicycle commuting to Sun Valley.

An improved pedestrian environment in Sun Valley is also an important component of increased transit use, livability and safety. The Station Area Plan designates “Pedestrian Priority” streets that offer, “enhanced features that create an inviting and active public realm.” However, these streets are largely within the vicinity of the Decatur-Federal Station, the stadium and along the riverfront park. In order to encourage more transit use and pedestrian traffic by the people who work in Sun Valley, it is important that some streets within the core industrial business zone also be designated as “Pedestrian Priority” so they receive pedestrian-friendly improvements, better lighting and way-finding signage.

All of these improvements can be realized through investing in implementation of the Station Area and related plans in the years ahead. It will be important for businesses to be engaged to ensure that these investments happen in a way that meets businesses’ needs in addition to those of residents and visitors to the neighborhood.