

SUMMARY REPORT

City of Thornton, Colorado

City Council Strategic Planning Conference
(SPC)

January 31 – February 1, 2025



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INTRODUCTION

Ever Strive Solutions was engaged to facilitate the Strategic Planning Conference (SPC) for the City of Thornton City Council on January 31, 2025, and February 1, 2025. This summary report offers brief descriptions of workshop activities and outcomes.

Participants

City Council

Mayor Jan Kulmann
Council Member Justin Martinez, Ward 1
Council Member Jessica Sandgren, Ward 2
Council Member Roberta Ayala, Ward 2
Council Member Tony Unrein, Ward 3
Council Member David Acunto, Ward 3 (Friday only)
Council Member Chris Russell, Ward 4

Staff

Friday and Saturday

Tansy Hayward, City Manager
Brett Henry, Executive Director of Utilities & Infrastructure
Joyce Hunt, Deputy City Manager
Robb Kolstad, Deputy City Manager
Erika Senna, Budget & Operations Director
Tami Yellico, City Attorney

Saturday Only

Todd Barnes, Communications Director
Randy Grant, City Development Director
Gary Hobbs, Deputy Fire Chief
Adam Krueger, Economic Development Director
Chris Molison, Executive Director of Management Services
Kim Newhart, Finance Director
Greg Reeves, Interim Police Chief
Doug Romig, Parks, Recreation, & Community Programs Director

WHAT'S YOUR WHY?

On day one, City Council members were asked to consider the following motivations for their public service:

- What inspires you to do this work?
- What do you hope the City of Thornton will be known for during your time on the City Council?
- What do you hope your legacy will be?

The following common themes emerged:

- 1. Community Connection & Engagement**
 - Building relationships within neighborhoods and recognizing shared experiences.
 - Passion for hearing community stories and helping residents achieve their goals.
 - Desire to serve, listen, and work with others to make a positive impact.
- 2. Commitment to Growth & Revitalization**
 - Vision for a thriving, well-planned city that people want to be part of.
 - Focus on smart growth, revitalization, and strengthening working-class communities.
 - Ensuring affordability and economic opportunities for future generations.
- 3. Challenges & Responsibility of Leadership**
 - Balancing aspirations with the reality that not all problems can be solved.
 - Navigating the complexity of governance while maintaining integrity.
 - Preparing to pass the torch to future leaders.
- 4. Public Service & Local Government Impact**
 - Helping government staff be effective in their roles.
 - Ensuring high-quality services that improve residents' lives.
 - Finding fulfillment in contributing to a well-functioning, community-focused organization.
- 5. Vision & Innovation for the Future**
 - Balancing big-picture ideas with essential services.
 - Embracing challenges, continuous learning, and regional collaboration.
 - Creating a government that runs efficiently so residents can focus on their daily lives.

VALUES EXERCISE

The consulting team reviewed the values statements that the Council established during the 2024 SPC and facilitated a discussion based on the following prompts:

What does this value mean to you?

How do you see this influencing your why statements?

How do you come to the table based on your most prominent value(s)?

The following is a summary of the discussion.

Stewardship

- Caretaking, smart financial planning, and low-cost environmental stewardship opportunities.

Trust

- Importance of trust between staff and elected officials; different but complimentary roles as resource shepherds.
- Trust in staff expertise and teamwork; hierarchy of trust, with government trust being crucial.
- Local trust is influenced by national events.

Collaboration*

- Better ideas and community building through teamwork.
- Engage more people in co-governance (boards and commissions); listen to the community.
- Emphasize internal collaboration and solutions.
- Staff perspective: collaboration between council and staff is symbolized by the strategic plan.

Respect

- Earned and maintained through hard work; facilitates collaboration.
- Staff perspective: listen and help when possible.

Accountability

- Exemplified in satisfaction with basic services and interactions with police and fire.
- Focus on creating quality services for residents.

Excellence

- Linked to quality, integrity, and pride in work.
- Continuously raising standards and investing in the city.

Innovation

- Creative problem-solving and high risk tolerance.
- Tolerance for failure and resilience; innovation rooted in understanding history.

The city manager explained that employees act according to training, policies, and procedures, yet there are always moments that rely on discretion. Values influence how employees exercise discretion, so it is important to build skill sets and culture that reflect organizational values. The organization needs to grapple with clash of values (example: how do we stay accountable while allowing ourselves to innovate and learn through failure?).

Participants were asked to share the top three values that resonate with them and influence their approach to their roles. The top three values were:

1. **Accountability** – Mentioned 7 times.
2. **Stewardship** – Mentioned 6 times.
3. **Collaboration*** – Mentioned 6 times.

Similar themes emerged in the discussions about the impact and meaning of some values including respect and trust; accountability and stewardship; and innovation and excellence. Consolidating some values may provide opportunities to simplify and target communication and training with employees.

*In addition, collaboration emerged as a key theme during the priority-setting portion of the SPC. The Council aims to enhance community engagement and communication, ensuring that residents' voices are heard, respected, and reflected in city decisions. This should be intentionally

integrated into the city's values and woven throughout the strategic plan, rather than being a separate goal or focus area.

DEFINING SUCCESS

The City Council worked in small groups to define success for the five themes that were identified in last year's SPC. Groups were given the following prompts to think about:

1. What does success in this area look like?
2. What do you hear the core audience(s) saying?
3. What actions helped us achieve success?
4. What outcomes are we seeing that excite us?

Groups reported summaries of their discussions, and other participants were invited to ask questions or affirm the conclusions. The following highlights capture the notion of success for each theme.

Service and Operational Excellence

- Measurable Service: Achieve targets within budget, avoiding being over or under budget.
- Customer Service Approach: Consistency, empathy, innovation, efficiency, and elimination of red tape.
- Continuous Improvement: Use metrics to track improvement and adjust targets over time.
- Workforce Engagement: Engage front-line employees in decision-making without fear of retribution.
- Technology and Innovation: Leveraging technology for service improvement.

Sustainability and Resiliency

- Transit: Plan and implement a city shuttle system with sustainable funding.
- City Buildings and Public Facilities: Innovate and maintain city spaces, including new city hall and Carpenter Recreation Center. Foster community pride in public assets.
- Housing: Focus on actionable steps for first-time homeowners, innovative walkable communities, and mixed-use development.

Innovation

Embrace creative problem-solving and high-risk tolerance.

Strategic Partnering

- Partnerships: Think bigger with partnerships and position the city as a regional convener.
- Leadership Engagement: Encourage council and senior leadership to take on leadership roles and reward risk-taking.
- Community Appeal: Build attractive places within the city to foster partnerships.

Engagement

Engage and listen to the community, ensuring their involvement and addressing their needs.

THOUGHTS FROM THE CITY MANAGER

City Manager Tansy Hayward shared early observations from her first three months in the position, and the consulting team facilitated discussion with the City Council to respond to her insights.

City Council Communication and Support

Key Observation: Staff communicates a high volume of information to Council. Information sharing is decentralized and may not be strategic or conveyed for clear understanding (i.e., dense data instead of storytelling).

Response:

- The Council Action Request (CAR) is a good concept, but the system and process should be evaluated for improvements. Responses are not as timely as in the past.
- Council appreciates one-on-one access to the city manager. Some recommend holding time immediately before council meetings and work sessions for informal conversations with members who only have availability in the evenings.
- The Council desires more timely information on public safety issues that are likely to generate questions from the public and media.
- Quarterly reports responded to a community request and not the Council. They could be refreshed to convey information in a different/concise way or to be focused on metrics.
- The Council appreciates the Colorado Municipal League training for newly elected officials but needs more training about Thornton-specific Council rules and procedures. It would be nice to get the entire body together after an election so they are not interacting for the first time on the dais.

Position as leader/convenor (local and regional)

Key Observation: Thornton is one of the largest cities in the state and may be underrepresented in regional planning and decision-making.

Response:

- The City should be more assertive about announcing and celebrating its accomplishments.
- Recognition and participation in regional and state convenings are disjointed.
- Thornton staff should be supported to stay visible in relevant committees and professional organizations related to their subject-matter expertise.

Growth Vision, Strategy and Risk Tolerance

Key Observation: Staff perceive high expectations for community buy-in for development and little willingness to implement changes that will garner constituent criticism. This contrasts with the Council's stated desires to foster more and different types of development.

Response:

- Council members expressed a high tolerance for risk for new approaches to support development.
- Risk can be mitigated with communication and transparency. The city should be more intentional about public education, outreach, and engagement to counteract naysayers.

Budgetary and Financial Planning

Key Observation: The Council has made strategic investments in programming and capital improvements despite financial constraints. With community pressure for new services, it is hard to prioritize internal technology upgrades and other investments for foundational capacity.

Response: In the interest of time, the discussion was deferred to the staff budget presentation the following day.

Internal Leadership and Capacity

Key Observation: There is stable leadership and strong relationships within staff, and there are opportunities to build leadership capacity among managers. Department business plans can be created to align with the strategic plan.

Response: In the interest of time, the discussion was deferred. The conference session convened for the evening walking tour and dinner.

CONTEXT FOR THE CONVERSATION

Prior to the workshop, EverStrive Solutions conducted one-on-one interviews with City Council members and conducted a survey of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Summarized information from the advance insight gathering was shared with the City Council in this presentation to set a common foundation of knowledge prior to goal setting.

Celebrating Success

Council members were asked for examples of times when the City of Thornton really got it right. Almost everyone mentioned the importance of securing the city's future water rights. There was strong recognition of the value of visionary, generational leadership. That prompted a challenge for the group: What is the next big visionary "water rights" issue for Thornton? Other successes mentioned include purchasing Thornton Shopping Center, quality open spaces and parks, support for public safety, and hiring good leadership.

Priority Themes

Council members were asked to share their top two priorities for the City. Staff were asked to share what excites them for the next 3-5 years in Thornton. There was strong alignment on two issues:

- Opportunities around development – diversifying amenities
- Addressing transportation/traffic congestion

The Council also elevated youth services, housing affordability (development related), and planning for aging infrastructure. Staff responses were more operational – strategic planning, department reorganization, and innovation in services.

Other impressions:

- Almost every Council member expressed a desire to accelerate and improve the development process, yet staff needs time to prepare thorough recommendations and engage the public.
- Trust is improving among the Council but may be surface deep and difficult to sustain on divisive issues.
- There may be a disconnect between budget reality and service expectations.
- Several Council members mentioned disparities between the North and South sides of Thornton.

The facilitator asked Council to respond to affirm the information or to voice any surprises:

- The North/South divide is more about tactical resourcing issues rather than big picture differences, with different needs in each ward.
- Risk tolerance discussions should focus on creating an easy process for developers, balancing strategic ideas with tactical execution, and improving customer service without cumbersome policies. Council members acknowledged that risk tolerance will require doing what is right for the community despite opposing voices. Council members collectively have a high risk tolerance and support staff taking bold actions but also need to educate and involve the community.
- Vision Endurance: A community-supported vision will endure over time, allowing the Council and staff to make necessary tactical decisions.

POTENTIAL STRATEGIC PLAN FOCUS AREAS

The facilitators introduced the strategic plan framework that was previously developed by city staff:

- Focus Areas – high level themes that reflect how the organization prioritizes to achieve its mission and vision.
- Goals – specific, measurable outcomes tied to each focus area that provide clear targets for tracking plan progress.
- Actions – plans or tactics that the city must implement to achieve its goals.

Council members completed a brainstorming and prioritization process that is described more fully in the rest of this report. Based on the ideas generated and discussion during the SPC, the consulting team recommends the following four key focus areas as a starting point for the strategic plan.

Connected Communities

Reduce traffic congestion and enhance safe multi-modal transportation options, including transit, cycling and pedestrian pathways, to support active lifestyles and expand meaningful connections between neighborhoods and activity centers.

Vibrant and Purposeful Development

Promote mixed-use and walkable development and redevelopment that include diverse housing choices. Attract commercial development with appealing amenities and economic opportunities that offer destinations for the community and visitors. Maintain inviting public spaces and facilities to inspire community pride and enjoyment.

Organizational Excellence

Foster a culture of accountability and continuous improvement that leverages technology, innovation, a focus on customer service, and intentional community engagement to respond to the evolving needs of the community.

Safe, Supported and Livable Communities

Build a safe, resilient, and sustainable community through exceptional neighborhood and public safety services, meaningful collaboration with social service partners, engaging community programs, and outstanding utilities.

PRIORITY SETTING

The Board worked individually and in small groups to brainstorm ideas within the strategic framework. Duplicates were identified and suggestions were grouped into these broad categories. The facilitation team also incorporated departmental goals and initiatives that were suggested by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) prior to the SPC. The Council used a preference exercise to identify top priorities, as follows.

Category	Ideas	Priority Preferences
Sustainability	Urban Garden Partnership	0
	Complete several master or long-term planning efforts to include Environmental Sustainability Master Plan, Fire Department, and Parks Department	
	Improve City environmental performance including water conservation education; curbside compost program; PFAS Treatment investments	
	Environmental Sustainability	
	Curbside Compost Program	
Community Engagement & Communication	Intentional and realistic engagement resources and protocols	2
	Finding ways to enhance citizen input and feedback	
	How information is provided to council and public	
	Identify structural improvements and implement organizational change strategies to position the City to address current and future opportunities and challenges as identified in the 2025 organizational assessment	
Housing Development & Housing Services	Citywide strategy to promote affordable housing	2
	Cold weather sheltering and homeless outreach	
	Incentives and financing for income restricted for-sale housing	
	Broader partnership and leadership to help address homeless issues	
	Clarity around housing role, strategies, and level of resources	
	Safe parking lot program for people living temporarily in their cars	
Smart Infrastructure and Technology	Improve internal systems and support including fleet management service, purchasing efficiencies, performance evaluation, and pay	0
	Implement smart infrastructure investments including red light and speed camera programs (including support systems in multiple departments), traffic signal timing optimization, and advanced water metering	
	Fiber broadband infrastructure throughout the city	
	Smart city features initiatives	
	Robust performance measurement system with meaningful measures	
Smart Infrastructure	Improve data analysis and visualization, data-informed decision-making, and resource planning and prioritization in several key areas including financial	

and Technology, cont.	reporting and forecasting; budget development; organization-wide deployment of GIS; data driven approaches to crime and traffic safety; and use of social media	
Customer Service/City Operations	Continue to make training and workforce development improvements, including the North Metro Police Academy	3
	Enhance employee engagement opportunities	
	Robust coaching and training that empowers staff to be problem solvers and leaders	
	Robust CRM and customer service protocols	
	Accelerating permitting and permit fee reduction	
	Review overtime trends and drivers to identify any appropriate changes to policy, operations, or staffing levels	
	Implement 2025 org assessment	
	Complete a city-wide strategic plan with key performance indicators. Implement and operationalize.	
	Plan for and make strategic IT investments including CAD/RMS, cybersecurity, and ERP replacement	
	Document processes, implement cross-training and identify opportunities for process improvement in multiple departments including Parks, Finance, Management Services, and Human Resources	
	Improve council/staff process to align resources to priorities	
More self-service access to records		
Safe & Connected Transit & Transportation	Maximize resources we already have available	5
	Make Quebec Street make sense – 120 th to Hwy 7	
	Transportation network focused on moving people and not just vehicles (safe, multi-modal experiences)	
	Continue to build on Vision Zero strategies including proactive traffic enforcement	
	Highway 7 Corridor build out (maybe development)	
	Work cross-departmentally to improve roadway congestion and safety, cyclist and pedestrian safety, and work to strengthen the viability of alternatives to single occupancy vehicles	
	I-25 fixed (100 years?)	
	Promoting higher densities around transit stations	
Safe & Connected Transit & Transportation, cont.	Strengthen viability of alternatives to single occupancy vehicles	
	Roadway congestion & safety	
	Last mile/micro transit solutions that are financially sustainable	
	Transit	
	Bike/walkability improvements on 88 th between original Thornton Station & Thornton Shopping Center	

Infrastructure & Facilities	Complete key capital projects including Fire Station #8, Fire Museum, Washington Corridor Improvements, and the Thornton Water Project+	4
	New city hall	
	PFAS treatment investments	
	Growth – managing pace of keeping up with services	
	Thornton water project	
	Skyline Ranch Park – On 2025 schedule Parks Master Plan	
Public Safety & Emergency Management	Explore innovation in EMS delivery models, low-acuity patient care, and community paramedicine	4
	Develop pilot programs and cross departmental collaboration efforts such as accelerated permitting and permit fee reductions for priority commercial investments.	
	Improve coordination among departments and with community organizations on homeless outreach, co-responder programming, emergency management, cold weather sheltering, and opioid response	
	Expand regional Fire Department collaboration including training, CAD-to-CAD, technical rescue, dive rescue, hazardous materials, fire investigation, and other areas of opportunity	
	Grow community policing efforts to include community liaison officers, public education campaigns, Business Watch and Thornton Alliance for Business Safety	
	Regional innovation & investments to increase creativity and financial sustainability of Fire/EMS	
Community Programming	Dishwasher for kitchen at active adult center	4
	Continue wrapping traffic control boxes – many new since program ended	
	Continue investments in inclusion including digital accessibility	
	After school program for teens	
	Provide more access to youth services	
	More robust programming at community connections	
	South Thornton Mural Project	
	Promoting/expanding neighborhood services programs	
Walkable Community Walkable Community, cont.	Small districts that people can go to for shopping, recreation, and entertainment	3
	A large city but with a small town feel	
	Walkable, transit-oriented project at Welby station	
	Walkable community (neighborhood grocery, bike to school, etc.)	
	Very walkable – trails that connect to interesting things	
	Trails	
	Build out % industrial, commercial, business, residential	
	Walkable full service communities	

Destination Development	Type of businesses to attract – incentives	5
	Evaluate and refine budget prioritization and development; economic development strategies, including recruitment of restaurant and retailtainment investments; and identify opportunities to generate additional revenue	
	Mixed use development	
	Destination (resort?)	
	Restaurant and retailtainment development	
	Food truck court or food hall	
	Lots of restaurants, breweries, distilleries	
	Taking advantage of location near DIA – Downtown	
Commercial Development and Redevelopment	Eastlake into a walkable downtown+++	6
	South Platte River development	
	Planned growth in Weld County	
	Washington Corridor improvements	
	Optimize redevelopment opportunities for city owned parcels: Thornton Shopping Center, Eastlake Grain Elevator, and Gateway District	
	TSC Redevelopment – ripple effect	
	Optimize Thornton Shopping Center redevelopment+	
	Continue to increase jobs and corporate presence	

ROADMAPS

Staff and Council were assigned into small groups to complete an exercise to provide more context for the categories with the strongest council preferences:

1. Safe and Connected Transit/Transportation
2. Commercial Development & Redevelopment
3. Destination Development
4. Community Programming
5. Public Safety and Emergency Management with Infrastructure & Facilities
6. Walkable Communities

Small groups discussed the following prompts for each category:

- What information is needed to get started?
- Who needs to be at the table?
- What does success look like if this priority is implemented?
- What else do we need to keep in mind?

A summary of the key insights is included below:

Safe and Connected Transit/Transportation

- Rely on data to understand greatest needs and opportunities
- Focus on better utilizing what we have
- Success = reliable ways to move around without a car

Commercial Development & Redevelopment

- Create a vision for commercial buildout success
- Analysis of development that we have and what is missing
- Success = something unique and different; more local – fewer chains

Destination Development

- Create a clear vision of the development we want
- Need to balance desires with market realities
- Success = safe, inviting developments; variety of scale; neighborhood compatibility

Community Programming

- Need a baseline – current programs, spaces, and resources available
- Public engagement about needs and public communication about what's available is crucial
- Focus on supporting youth and disadvantaged populations
- Success = positive feedback; anecdotes about usefulness of programs; utilization metrics; current assets are maximized

Public Safety and Emergency Management (Grouped with Infrastructure & Facilities)

- Police and Fire Department planning for residential growth
- Catalog existing assets and conditions; determine priorities for residents
- Service expectations are ever-growing and need to be managed
- Success = well-developed, full-staffed public safety departments that are connected to the community.

Walkable Communities

- Define what we mean by walkable – transportation vs. recreation

- Think about end users – need signage, safety, lighting, etc.
- Success = connections

FINANCIAL STRATEGIES

The City's Finance team presented a financial outlook to orient the Council to the City's finances, current financial position and the assumptions that drive the outlook in future years. The presentation included the assumptions for expenditures, revenues, and the Fund Balance Reserve Policy, highlighting the tools for the Council to influence budgetary decisions. A facilitated discussion followed to capture the Council's feedback.

In general, the Council did not identify any immediate direction to adjust policy assumptions without more discussion and understanding of the long-term impacts, but the most curiosity to learn more was expressed about:

- Revenues: targeted land use changes and development to generate more sustainable revenue growth.
- Fund Balance: further consideration of the alignment of TABOR and General Fund Reserve
- Capital Planning: consider opportunities to increase strategic investments in capital priorities.