

Affordable Housing and Hospitality

Geospatial Suitability Analysis for a Colorado Urban Camp Concept



People experiencing homelessness are camping in urban areas. Photo Credit: Joe Amon, The Denver Post, 2019.

Adison Petti: University of Colorado Denver
College of Architecture and Planning
GIS for Planners: URPL 6250: Fall 2019

Executive Summary

Policy Brief

The American Institute of Certified Planners *Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct* stipulates that planners “shall seek social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration,” and that planners “shall urge the alteration of policies, institutions, and decisions that oppose such needs” (AICP, 2016). Today, numerous laws infringe on poor people’s ability to exist in public space or obtain basic needs such as housing, employment, and equal protection under the law. Some of these laws include Urban Camping Bans (Colorado Public Radio, 2019) and Sit-and-Lie Ordinances (*The Gazette*, 2016). “Homeless Bill of Rights Campaigns stand on the shoulders of social justice campaigns to alleviate poverty and homelessness while protecting homeless and poor people from unjust laws and ensuring all people’s right to exist in public spaces” (Western Regional Advocacy Project, 2016). This paper rejects and responds to laws that: discriminate based on housing status; criminalize acts of survival like sleeping, sitting, and giving or receiving food in public spaces; and/or prevent homeless people’s access to shelter, transit, restrooms, jobs, privacy, voting, or other civic participation and quality of life indicators (Denver Homeless Out Loud, 2019).

Solution Types

“Affordable Housing and Hospitality: Geospatial Suitability Analysis for a Colorado Urban Camp Concept” proposes two solution-types to explore in Front Range cities like Denver, Boulder, Colorado Springs, or Pueblo.

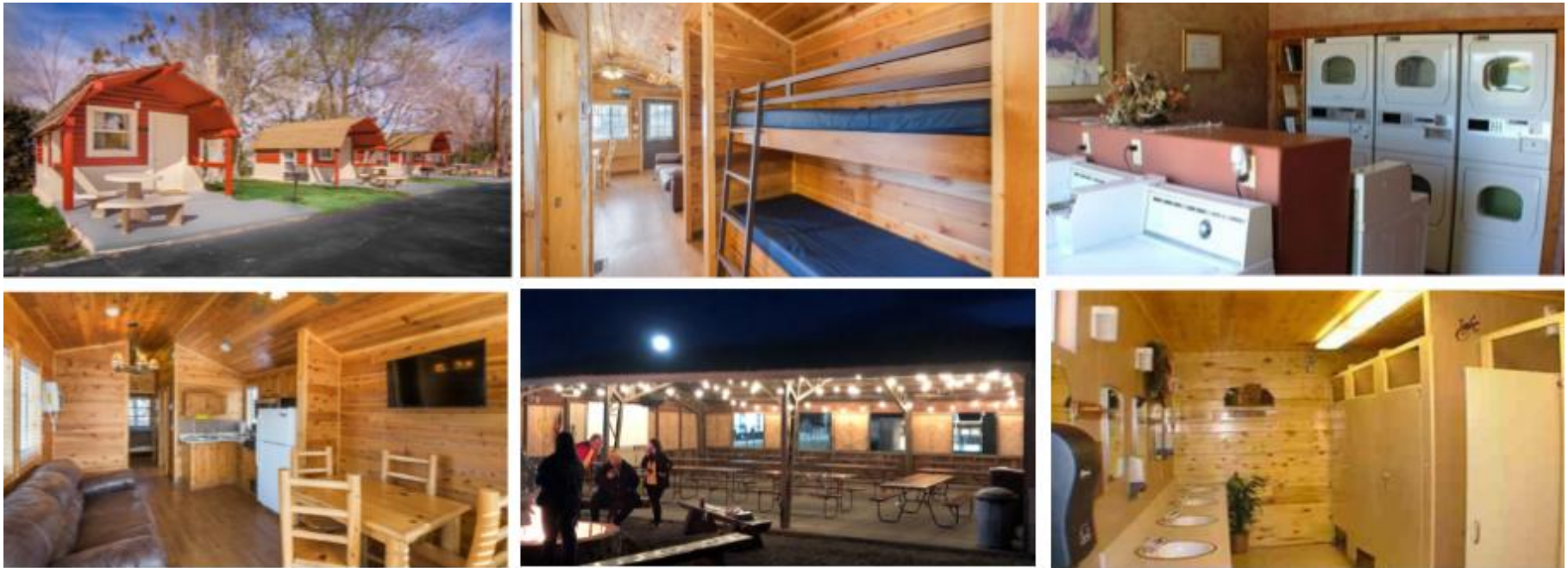
- Micro Camp Sites
- Medium Hostel Sites

Geospatial Methods Overview

Geographic Information Systems are increasingly accessible to planners and everyday citizens. The majority of data for this project was downloaded from public sources, including the United States Census, Denver Regional Council of Governments, Denver Open Data Catalog, and Colorado Department of Health and Environment. Additional data was generated using free and open source platforms. Google Maps provided recent street level data including satellite imagery with high resolution zoom capabilities of up to a 50 feet per inch on-screen. Google Earth Pro advances this technology by enabling users to draw points or polygons (such as buildings or boundaries). The primary data visualizations for this project were produced in ESRI ArcMap.

Introduction

Kampgrounds of America (KOAs) serve as a legal model for a sanctioned urban camp concept because of their integration into a variety of urban, suburban, mountain, and rural fabrics. Surrounding land use was estimated for KOAs utilizing Google Maps to capture screen shots for each location. Determining land use around existing KOAs demonstrates the viability of an urban camp concept by establishing statewide precedent for camping proximity near residential, commercial, open space and other environments. KOA amenities also demonstrate landscape and design strategies for an affordable housing and hospitality concept to better serve Front Range communities. Single and shared-use amenities like sleeping, shower, laundry, kitchen, and recreational facilities could serve travelers or people experiencing homelessness (Figure 1 below: KOA Directory, 2019).



While many Colorado KOAs are situated near open spaces typically associated with recreational camping, many are located in small towns near a variety of local amenities. They are often adjacent to highways and some are located along rivers, lakes, or streams. Of the 28 KOAs in Colorado, 2 are located in the DRCOG region. The Denver West KOA is located in “Open” zoning while the Denver East KOA is zoned for retail/commercial use. The Lakeside and Fort Collins Wellington KOAs are located just outside of the DRCOG region in college town and lakeside environments. In La Junta, the KOA is directly next door to a Wal-Mart shopping center along a highway route and large areas of agricultural land. The Limon KOA borders a municipal airport and other small town amenities. KOAs in Montrose and Steamboat border mobile home parks. The Colorado Springs KOA sits at the edge of urban sprawl across the highway from military land. The Grand Junction KOA borders a residential neighborhood and county fairgrounds. Many of these conditions informed or approximate the conditions for the Denver suitability analysis set forth in this project (Appendix A).

Study Area Methodology

In Figure 2, an original shape file was generated to map the location of 6 homeless camping sites in Denver. Colorado Coalition for the Homeless is a resource agency where camping occurs nearby, so it is listed as a single site. The weighted study area is comprised of a union between the 1.5 mile buffer surrounding these sites, and a .5 mile buffer around 20 of the nearest RTD routes serving these sites. Additional or alternative routes are possible. The RTD routes that serve these locations span several counties including Denver, Adams, Arapahoe, Douglas, and Jefferson with Broomfield county also nearby. Many of these counties report their own problems with urban camping and homelessness. Exploring possible solutions along transit routes shared between counties can help predict migration patterns in urban camping and homelessness, and may reveal creative solutions or resources across these municipalities. Vacant opportunity parcels were extracted from Denver parcels data. Needs area parcels were given additional suitability points.

Affordable Housing and Hospitality Needs Area

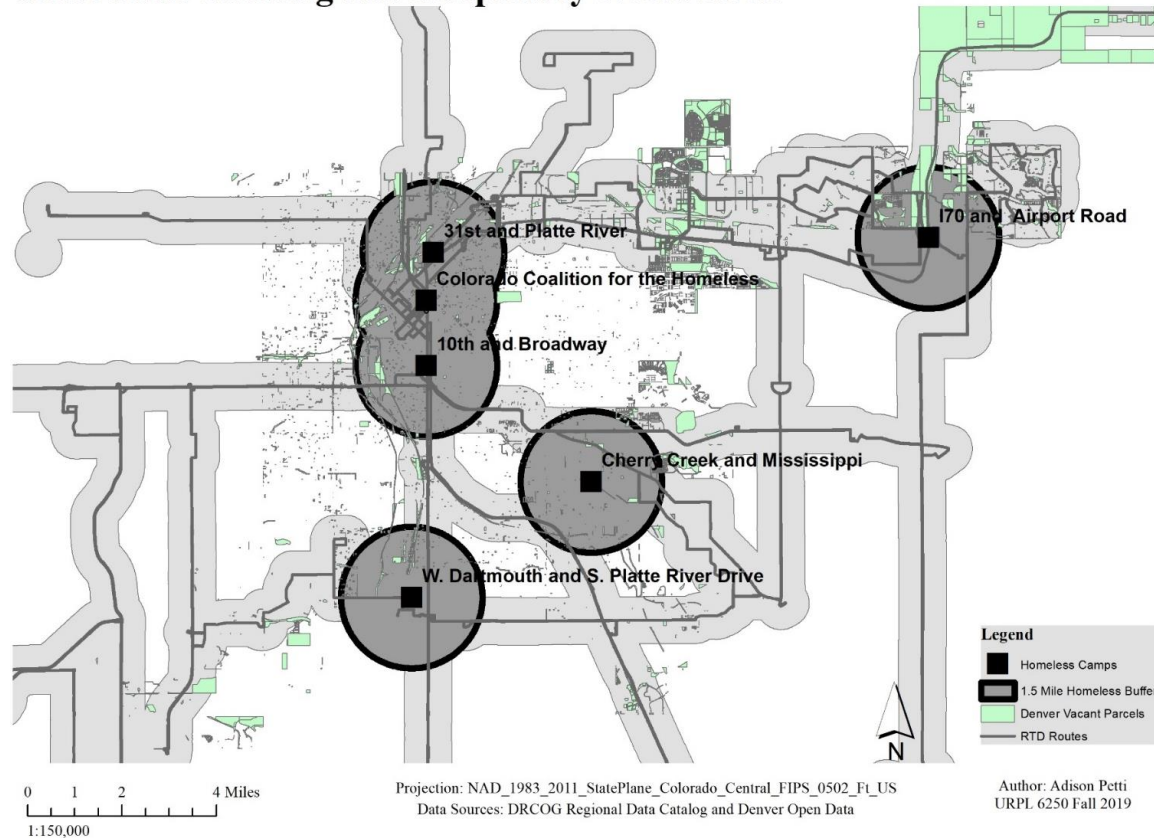


Figure 2

Micro Camp Methodology

The three-camp-cluster surrounding 31st and Platte River, Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, and 10th and Broadway was selected for a micro-camp analysis (Figure 3). Conceptually, sanctioned micro camps serve 2 purposes within this analysis. 1) establish temporary or transitional shelter options for people currently experiencing homelessness and 2) create an integrated camp and recreation site, similar to KOAs, for generating revenue and building community through an urban adventure concept. Micro camp criteria were intentionally minimal to identify low barrier solutions for urban homelessness. Opportunity parcels were extracted by size to include only those measuring 2,500 to 24,999 square feet.

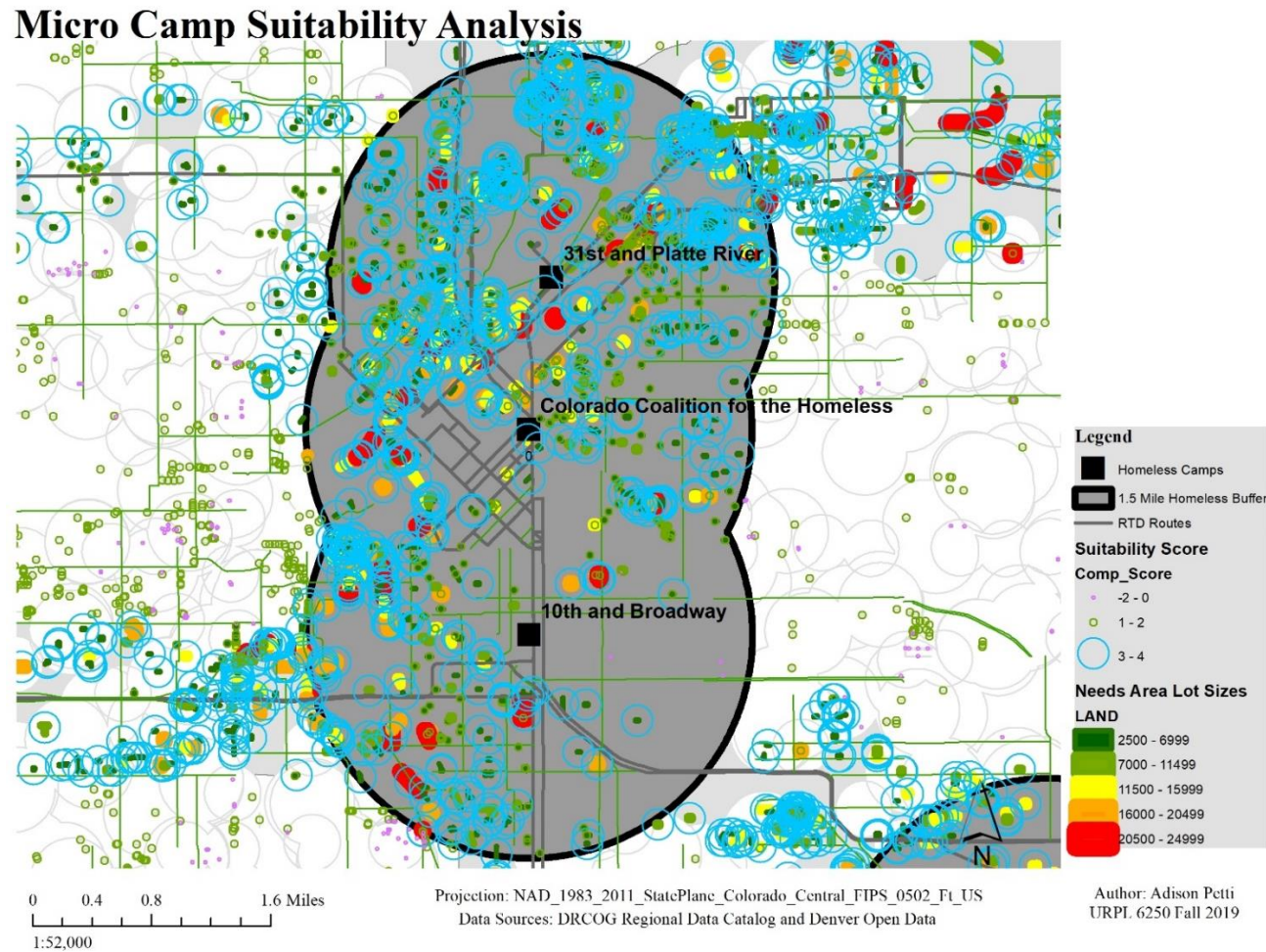


Figure 3

Hostel Methodology

Hostel opportunities were isolated to Denver's 684 vacant parcels ranging from 25,000 to 49,999 square feet. This size is comparable to more stable "small housing" models like mobile home parks or tiny home villages. Parcels within a 1 mile buffer of small housing communities were given additional weight. Conceptually, these parcels were imagined as sites where urban camping could work as one component of a mixed use affordable housing and hospitality concept, to include an urban hostel and/or apartments for example. Additional opportunities included access to family necessities and neighborhood amenities such as K-12 schools, groceries and pharmacies, parks and recreation, and tourist attractions. Proximity to Open Space park types were given additional suitability points. Constraints included serious crime, pollution, and proximity to offensive land uses.

Medium Hostel Suitability Analysis

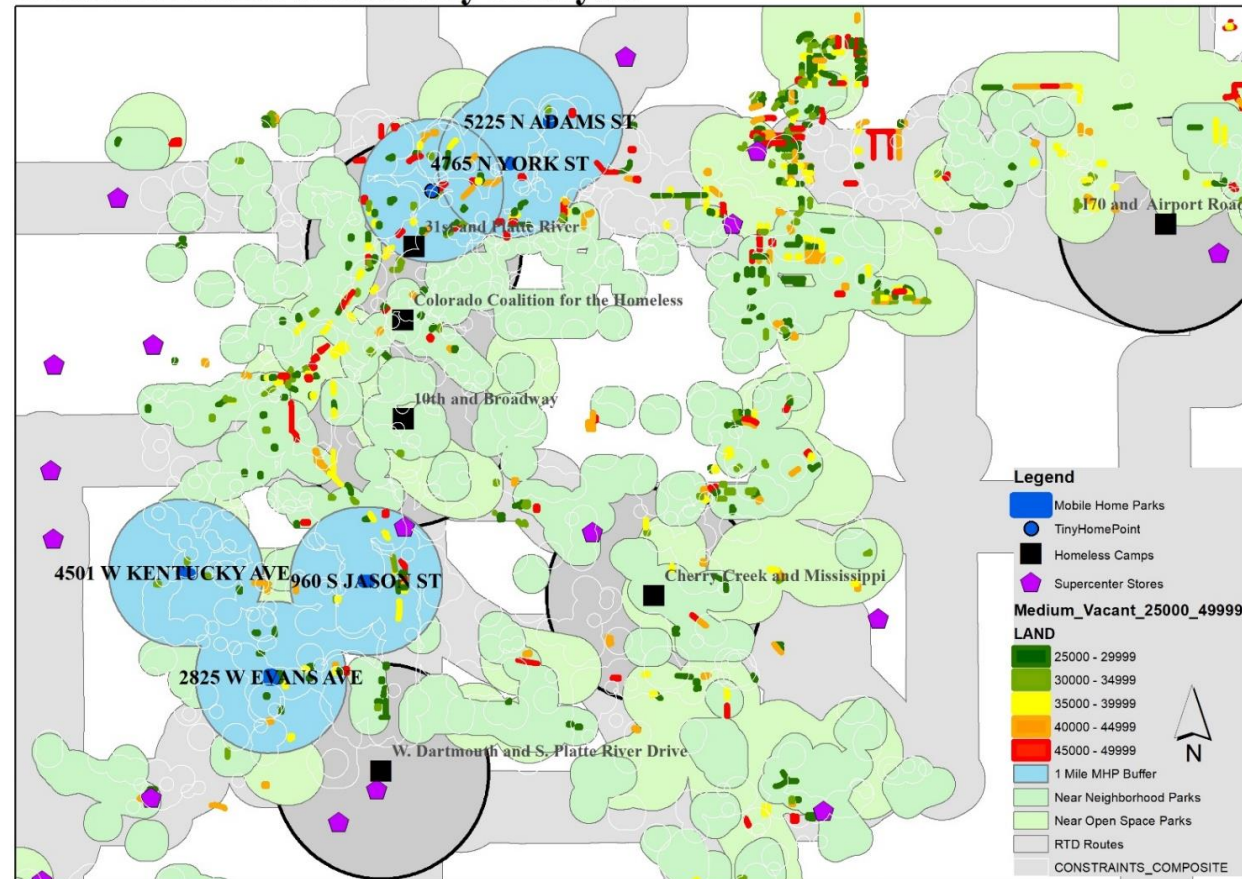


Figure 4

0 0.5 1 2 Miles
1:110,000

Projection: NAD_1983_2011_StatePlane_Colorado_Central_FIPS_0502_Ft_US
Data Sources: DRCOG Regional Data Catalog and Denver Open Data

Author: Adison Petti
URPL 6250 Fall 2019

Hostel Analysis

In Figure 4, Denver's mobile home parks and tiny home village are clustered around the periphery of the needs area already identified. Additional opportunities emerged by adding RTD bus routes outside of the original needs area in Figure 5. One notable site is near Federal and Evans where vacant, high scoring parcels are served by multiple RTD routes and are accessible by bus from the W. Dartmouth and S. Platte River camp in Figure 6. This area is especially interesting given a recent study of RTD Route 31, which also serves the Federal and Evans stop extending north. Intercept interviews conducted by Planning Methods students in that study revealed numerous accounts of homelessness in the Federal corridor.

Medium Hostel Suitability Analysis

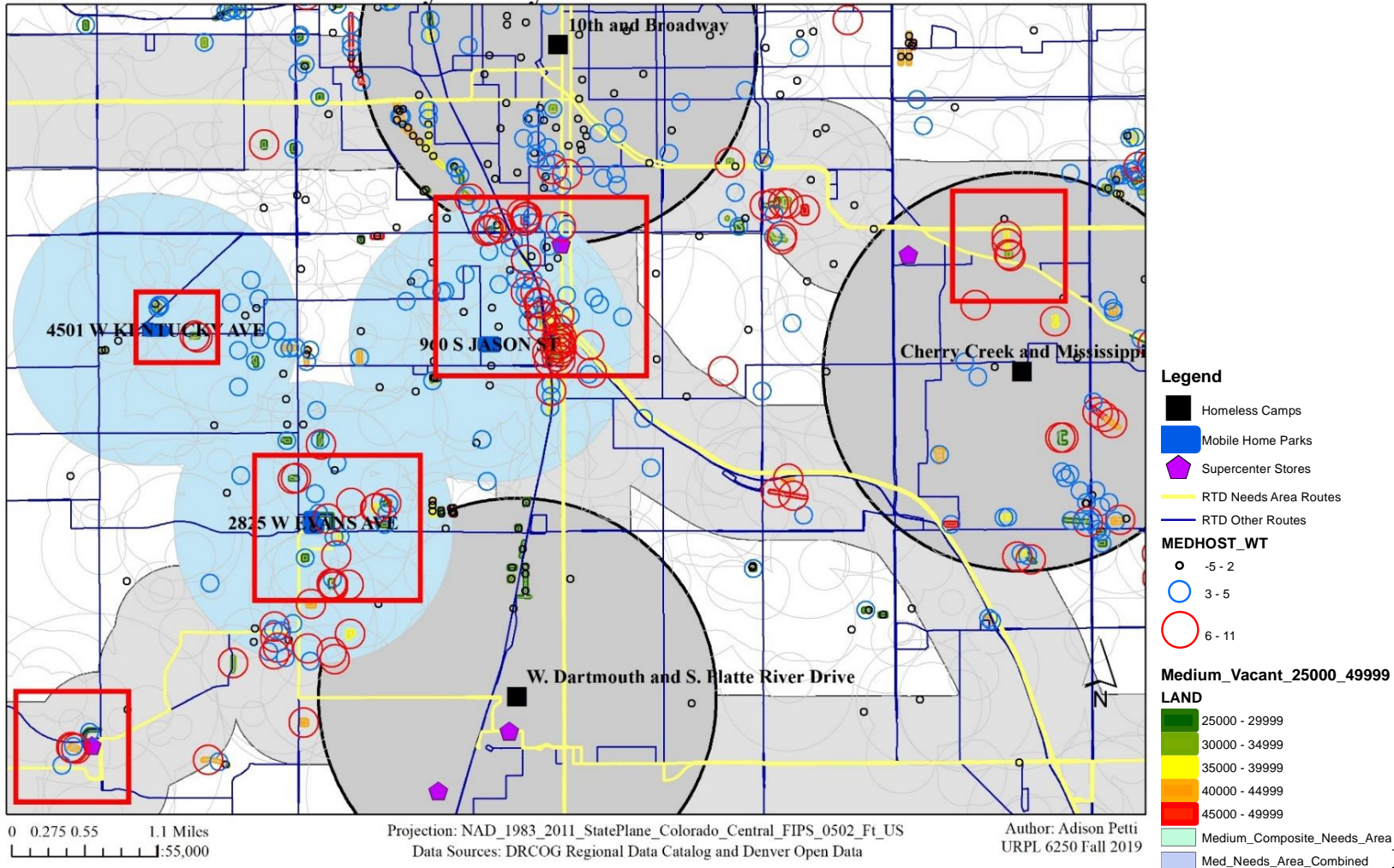


Figure 5

Medium Hostel Suitability: RTD Route 35 Federal and Evans Stop

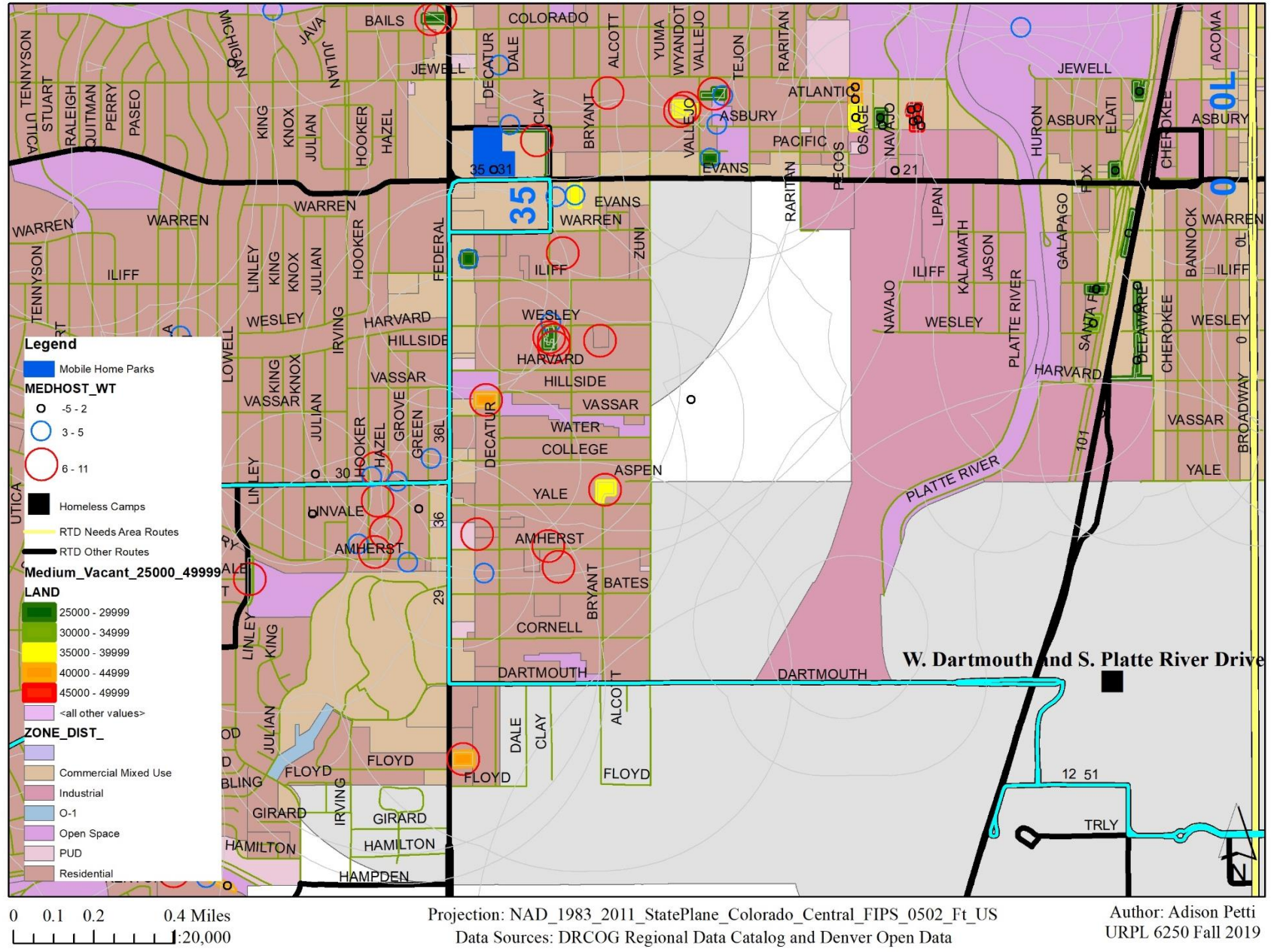


Figure 6

Conclusion

This study identifies a clearly defined needs area to address urban camping and homelessness along popular transit routes. A Medium Hostel solution-type may offer the greatest potential to solve Denver’s challenges. In August 2019, Denver 9 News reported that the Dartmouth camp expected 50-75 people a night, indicating the need for more than a micro camp (Oravetz). Mid-sized parcels offer greater potential for density and suggest a real investment in an affordable housing and hospitality concept. Utilizing a KOA or International Hostel model could serve as a recreational amenity and economic driver in a struggling neighborhood. Attaching such a development to an existing mobile home park seeking improvements such as a playground, laundromat, or Air BNB style partnership could be ideal to provide a mix of urban camping, hostel, and affordable housing amenities within the same site.

The choice to apply KOA or hostel precedent debunks popular objections to urban camping and is rooted in a broader mixed use solution for affordable housing. While hostels, motels, and KOAs are often conceptually limited to tourism and recreational use, this study posits that the success of these models makes a strong case for integrating them into an affordable housing and hospitality concept for transitional shelter, permanent tiny-homes, and/or apartment housing. By extending the concept of “hospitality” to include people experiencing homelessness, as well as those engaged in recreation and tourism, this study illuminates previously unexplored opportunities to serve both people experiencing homelessness their communities.

Creative solutions to urban homelessness require adequate, collaborative resources to achieve in cities like Denver. The Colorado Urban Renewal Law (C.R.S. 31-25-101) delineates the requirements for determining blight. “The Denver Urban Renewal Authority mission is the elimination and prevention of blighted areas through creative redevelopment. Before the authority may get involved in a project, the area first must be found to be blighted. A blighted area means an area which, in its present condition and use, has substantially and adversely affected or slowed the reasonable growth of the community, hindered the provision of decent housing, or constitutes a social liability to the community, and therefore is detrimental to the well-being of the citizens” (DURA, 2019). A visible lack of adequate shelter may constitute blight, particularly when camping equipment and refuse extends into the public right of right of way on sidewalks or streets in front of businesses, within public parks, or along high traffic corridors.

Numerous vacant parcels met suitability tests for the 3 solution-types proposed within this analysis. “If a proposed project has financial, physical, or market driven problems that results in redevelopment being not feasible for the private sector to accomplish on its own, then city leaders, neighborhood groups, developers or others might bring a project to DURA and request assistance. Once DURA has a proposed project before it, the authority follows a structured process to take a redevelopment effort from concept to reality [...] The primary tool used by DURA to finance redevelopment efforts is tax increment financing (TIF). Through TIF, the incremental new tax revenues generated by a redevelopment project are used to fill the gap between private financing and the total cost of a redevelopment project.” (DURA, 2019). This may be one way to finance this project.

Additional research is needed in 5 areas: First, to make a stronger correlation between Census and other socioeconomic indicators to identify struggling neighborhoods that may welcome and benefit from affordable housing and hospitality amenities. Second, to understand the relationship between neighboring counties working to address illegal urban camping and homelessness, such as the I-70 and Airport Road site bordering Aurora and Denver. Third, to understand the ethical implications of mapping urban informalities like homeless camping sites. Fourth, to determine if a partnership with existing KOAs or mobile home parks to improve or extend community services is possible. Fifth, to conduct an affordable housing and hospitality market conditions and feasibility analysis. A community engagement process is also needed.

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