

Lewis at the heart of many civic projects in metro Denver

By Mark Harden

Go almost anywhere in Denver, and you'll run into a major project or civic amenity that Harry T. Lewis Jr. played a major part in creating or shaping.

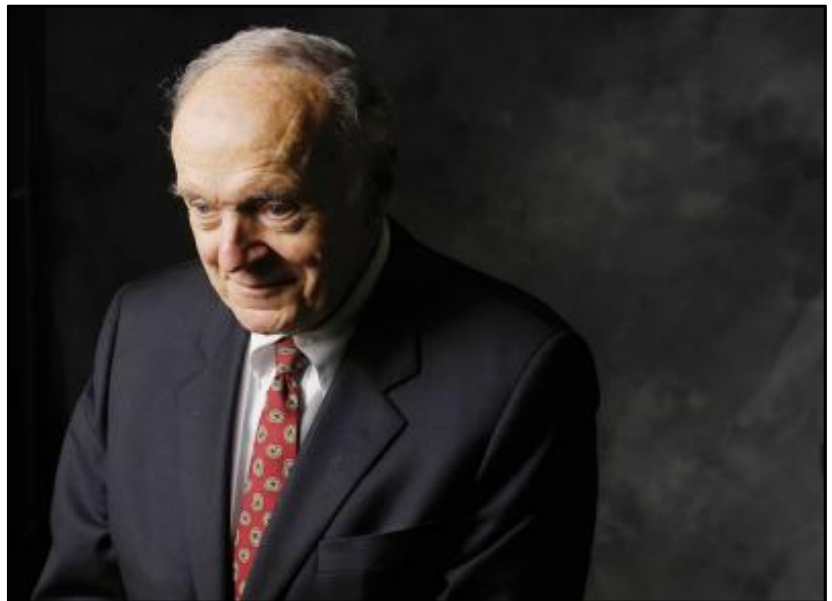
It's no wonder that the longtime investment banker received the annual Bonfils-Stanton Foundation Award for Community Service on May 2.

Throughout his business career, Lewis has never been too busy to shoulder a civic task:

- Starting in 1967, he served on the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce task force that helped create the Regional Transportation District (RTD). He later served as the chamber's chairman.
- He guided the growth of the Denver Museum of Nature & Science as a trustee starting in 1979, and established the DMNS Foundation.
- As a leader of what is now the Downtown Denver Partnership, he worked on the conversion of downtown Denver's 16th Street into a transit and pedestrian mall.
- He joined Rex Morgan and others to establish the Scientific & Cultural Facilities District (SCFD), which helps fund cultural services throughout metro Denver with a one-tenth of 1 percent sales tax. He then led "Citizens for Arts to Zoo," the SCFD's political arm, in the campaign to extend the program.
- At the request of then-Mayor Federico Peña, he and Tim Sandos led a committee that identified vital capital-improvement needs for the city and then helped to get passed a quarter-billion-dollar package of bond issues in 1989 to shore up the city's crumbling infrastructure.
- And for several years, Lewis guided plans to convert Stapleton Airport into a mixed-use neighborhood of 12,000 homes.

Born in Cincinnati in 1933, Lewis moved as a toddler to Denver's Park Hill neighborhood when his father -- an MBA who briefly turned to farming during the Great Depression -- came here for a job. "I always consider myself a native because I don't remember living anywhere else," Lewis said in a wide-ranging interview.

After graduating from East High School and earning an M.B.A. degree at Dartmouth University, Lewis served in the Navy, then took his CPA exam in 1960 and launched a long financial career in Denver.



Kathleen Lavine | Business Journal

Harry T. Lewis Jr. was recognized this month with the annual Bonfils-Stanton Foundation Award for Community Service

Hired at Boettcher & Company by E. Warren Willard, the man he considers his business mentor, Lewis worked at the finance firm for 18 years, eventually becoming a general partner. He then served for seven years as regional senior vice president for Dain Bosworth (now RBC Dain Rauscher). He established his own firm, Lewis Investments, in 1989.

Lewis talked with the Denver Business Journal May 5 about his life of community service.

Q: How is Denver different now from when you were growing up?

A: It's different in almost every way you can think of. [laughs] It was a wonderful place to grow up. There were no high-rise buildings except the D&F Tower.

In World War II, when my father enlisted in the Army, we would take street cars on Colfax or all the way downtown to see movies. And every weekend almost, we would ride our bicycles down to City Park to [what was then] the Denver Museum of Natural History to hear Dr. [Alfred] Bailey, the head of the museum [from 1936 to 1969], deliver a lecture, and we'd run around the museum and look at all the dioramas.

My last year at East High School, I started working in construction. My friend Mark Murray, the auto dealer [Murray Motor Imports], and I joined the local hod carrier and laborer's union. Our first job was wheeling cement buggies at a five-story building United Airlines was putting up at Stapleton Airport. Later on I worked on this building [the DBJ offices, at 1700 Broadway].

Q: When did you first get involved in community service?

A: [At first] I didn't. You get started at a job and the last thing you think of is civic activities. I thought only rich guys did that for self-aggrandizement.

But [in 1967] Warren Willard asked me to go down to the metro chamber of commerce because the Denver Tramway Corp. [the metro area's bus operator] was going bankrupt and they wanted to put together a task force [to continue transit service].

And in the group of about eight of us that was headed up by [attorney] Jack Kelly at Holland & Hart, we came up with the concept of RTD. There were only about two or three regional transit districts like that in the United States at the time.

That was really my first experience in how collaboration in the private sector and the public sector can make good things happen. Warren Willard really inculcated that in me.

When I went to work for Dain Bosworth, they had the same sense of values that Warren Willard had. They really believed in community activism.

Q: How did you become involved with the Denver Museum of Nature & Science?

A: In 1979, I was asked by Dick Davis of [law firm] Davis Graham & Stubbs to go on the board of the museum. And that was a eye-opener for me.

It was a free museum, but [in the early 1980s] the city imposed an admission [fee] at the museum when federal revenue sharing dried up. But the city wouldn't even put up the money for a ticketing process, so we had to scramble to raise a couple hundred thousand dollars for that.

But that was the best thing that ever happened because it put them on a business-like basis.

Q: After you joined the Denver Museum as a trustee, you helped create the SCFD and in 1988 pass the 10th-of-a-cent sales tax to support the museum and other cultural institutions. How did that come together?

A: [Pollster/consultant] Floyd Ciruli, who was advising us, really deserves a lot of the credit for the concept.

The other large cultural [centers], like the art museum, the botanic gardens and the zoo, had been arguing with each other when they went to the Legislature about who ought to get what from this [proposed] special tax district, so of course it got thrown out. So we sat down with them and came up with a concrete [plan]. We all got on the same track. And [the tax surcharge] passed, and we're the envy of most major metropolitan areas because of it.

Q: You also were involved in the conversion of the 16th Street Mall into a transit-pedestrian mall.

A: That's when I was on the board of the Downtown Denver Partnership. We wanted to do something because the department stores were starting to abandon downtown.

It was very controversial, the idea of taking all the automobiles off a street in the core of downtown. But thanks to [then-partnership President] Dick Fleming and others, it went, but it wasn't easy.

It's worked out very well in making downtown retail much more viable, and it's really going to tie in well with the redevelopment of Union Station as the main focal point of RTD.

Q: Speaking of RTD, there's been some controversy over FasTracks, the longterm project to expand rail and other transit, concerning its rising cost and whether it will reduce congestion. What's your view?

A: I've always been in favor of FasTracks. When I look at other large communities, like Chicago, New York and San Francisco, there systems work, but some of the best examples [of metro rail transit] are in European cities. And, thanks to the rising price of oil and gasoline, RTD has already seen an increase in patronage, and I think we'll see a lot more as time goes by. It goes back to my childhood days with street cars running back and forth, even to the suburbs, and those street cars were always pretty packed.

We've become so addicted to the automobile, but now we're beginning to wake up to global warming, greenhouse-gas emissions and the price of fuel. And I know a lot of executives who ride light rail because they can get a lot of reading and work done. They're a lot calmer when they get to the office then when they were driving through all the traffic.

Q: What's the one civic project you've been involved in that you're most proud of?

A: Working on Stapleton was it. That was really challenging, the biggest infill [development] in North American history.

Right after Federico Peña announced the city was going to have to build a new airport, [oilman and Piton Foundation founder] Sam Gary said, "I wonder what they're going to do with the old one?"

So several of us started meeting two or three times a month and came up with a concept for Stapleton as a mixed-use development, with affordable housing mixed in and about 1,900 acres of open space.

And a lot of families are moving there because they get more house for their money than they get anywhere else.

Q: What advice would you give to young people pursuing a business career who are thinking of getting involved in civic activities?

A: I'd encourage them to get together with a group like the Downtown Denver Partnership or the chamber or other organizations that have the basic infrastructure and commitment to working in that field.

And start out with one that really piques your interest, and where you can learn something -- and be prepared to listen a lot. And the sooner you do it the better.