

**BUSINESS**

# Here's why some of the world's biggest retailers, and many others, are flocking to north metro Denver

\$350 million in new commercial projects broke ground along I-25 in Thornton this year

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By **JOE RUBINO** | [jrubino@denverpost.com](mailto:jrubino@denverpost.com) | The Denver Post

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At the groundbreaking event for its forthcoming outlet mall in the city, officials with Simon Properties — which claims to be the largest owner of retail real estate in the world — endeavored to answer the question “Why Thornton?”

“Frankly, it’s not really a difficult answer,” said Danielle De Vita, Simon’s executive vice president of real estate. “Aside from this amazing site, ... Thornton and the Denver metro area are truly noteworthy on a national scale in regards to economic growth.”

De Vita listed a population that has boomed since 2000, strong job growth and the availability of a blockbuster site right at the Interstate 25-136th Avenue interchange as nuggets that convinced Simon that the north metro city was the place for its 330,000-square-foot Denver Premium Outlets, set to open late next year and bring 800 jobs to the city.

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Simon isn't the only notable company that recently has been attracted to Colorado's sixth-largest city. [Amazon is building a 855,000-square-foot fulfillment center](#) at I-25 and 144th Avenue, just one highway exit north of the outlet mall. Thornton was able to land that center, expected to bring 1,500 full-time jobs by late 2018, without offering the e-commerce giant a single dollar of financial incentive. The city did grant Amazon up to \$3.7 million in public funding to extend Grant Street north to 148th Avenue and build out 144th and 148th avenues east to Washington Street, but officials emphasized those infrastructure projects would have been completed with or without Amazon coming to town.

In total, an unprecedented \$350 million worth of commercial projects broke ground along the I-25 corridor in Thornton in 2017, city economic development officials say. There is little reason to think the flood of development will stop anytime soon. The city is home to 1,400 acres of undeveloped commercial land along the interstate.

"There are tons of reasons to come to Thornton," said Mayor Heidi Williams. "Its got easy access for people to locate their businesses and get employees here. Commuter rail is coming in. This is where primary jobs are going to come."

Thornton isn't alone in reveling in north I-25 boom times. Its neighbors, Westminster and Broomfield, also have large projects along the highway that have either recently been announced or are underway. They, too, feature vacant acreage that could invite more to come, officials with those municipalities say.

Over the past few months, Broomfield has landed a 400,000-square-foot Ikea furniture store, [expected to open at the at the northwest corner of I-25 and Colorado 7 in 2019](#), and the new location of the Butterfly Pavilion. [That 60,000-square-foot research center \(and field trip destination\) will highlight the science district in Broomfield's long-planned North Park neighborhood](#). The city, according to planning director Anna Bertanzetti, still has in the I-25 corridor more than 2,300 acres of undeveloped land — most of it in large lots that could invite big projects.

Market watchers agree with Williams' assessment that Thornton and its north metro neighbors are ripe for an influx of primary employers. Commercial real estate brokerage CBRE recently put together a presentation that forecasts continued strong population growth in the north metro area. It projects 1.69 million people will live on the north side of the metro area by 2022, outpacing the 1.64 million CBRE expects to live on the south side. In particular, parts of Thornton, Broomfield and Lafayette could see population growth of 4 percent or higher over the next five years, according to those projections. In the third quarter of this year, industrial real estate development in the north metro submarket was outpaced only by construction near Denver International Airport, CBRE says.

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“(Industrial real estate) is where a lot of the primary employment happens in our market. Industrial real estate is closely tied to population growth,” said Jessica Ostermick, director of industrial and logistics services with CBRE. “When you think of cold storage and food warehouses that are serving grocery stores and restaurants, that’s tied to population growth. And then certainly the e-commerce boom and that supply chain that is rolling out.”

Thornton’s population has grown from roughly 83,000 people in 2000 to more than 136,700 people in 2016, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. If you include the outlets and Amazon, Thornton will have added more than 4,700 new jobs between 2013 and 2018, economic development officials say. The city is seeing plenty of growth around the [Grove retail development and neighboring Cabela’s store](#), and is preparing to welcome its second hotel along I-25 in two years when a Hilton Garden Inn opens in the city next summer, officials say. The city’s average household income is \$104,000.

On the west side of I-25, not far from where crews are feverishly working to get the Denver Premium Outlets ready to open for the 2018 holiday shopping season, earth movers are busy grading future home sites in Westminster. [Century Communities’ Tanglewood development](#) is expected to bring more than 200 homes to 86 acres near West 128th Avenue and Huron Street, according to Westminster Economic Development director John Hall.



RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post

Crews work on new development along I-25 at the future Amazon fulfillment center, set to open in 2018, on Oct. 5, 2017 in Thornton.

Westminster has some large, primary employers operating in the north I-25 corridor, including [DigitalGlobe](#) and the [St. Anthony's North Health Campus](#), the latter of which is expected to expand in the near future, Hall said. The city also is home to its own thriving retail area. The Orchard Town Center, whose 2008 opening unofficially ushered in the current era of major commercial development in the area, is now home to 85 stores and more than a dozen restaurants, Hall said. A hotel will soon be built in the town center and a project that will bring multifamily housing to the area also is in the works, Hall said. The big projects Thornton has recently landed are good for the whole region in Hall's view. The city has at least 80 acres of undeveloped land along the highway.

"I don't know if someone headed to Cabela's really cares if it's in Thornton or Westminster. When you look north, Broomfield is getting Ikea. If they all have success, that is good for us," he said. "(The north I-25 corridor) is really beginning to take shape as a place in its own right where people can work and shop and dine and they can find a variety of housing types."

The area is not without its issues, as anyone who has sat in either southbound or northbound traffic on I-25 can attest. The Colorado Department of Transportation is working now on a [\\$97.5 million project to extend express lanes on the highway north to E-470](#) from where they end at 120th Avenue. Electric commuter rail was expected to begin serving Thornton by early next year, but Regional Transportation District spokesman Nate Currey said last week that the transit provider's N-Line project is now facing an [18-month construction delay](#).

“I think the ongoing challenge for the region will be finding a way to fund and extend transportation improvements to the north,” Hall said.

All in all, it’s a good time to be an advocate for business on the north side. Just ask [Metro North Chamber of Commerce president and CEO Gregg Moss](#). He said the north I-25 corridor reminds him of Atlanta in the 1990s.

“No longer is the metro north region the dusty back door to Denver or the Tech Center,” Moss said in an email. “For many years, that is where the development dollars flowed. That’s now shifted and we’ve graduated into a booming metropolitan area where the north celebration party is just getting started.”

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Joe Rubino focuses on consumer news for The Denver Post. He wrote for the Broomfield Enterprise, Boulder Daily Camera and YourHub before joining the Post's business team in 2017. A Denver native, he attended Kennedy High School and the CU journalism school. He once flew a plane for 30 seconds on assignment. [Follow Joe Rubino @rubinojc](#)

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