

Protecting Views to Significant Features

San Marcos Design Standards and Guidelines Update

Introduction

During the course of updating the design standards and guidelines for downtown San Marcos, some citizens have advocated for protection of significant views in the area. The draft update includes some material on this topic, but is limited to a rather general discussion and a high level of guidance. Some people have suggested that a more detailed analysis of views and potential regulations is merited, as a separate project. This paper describes some of the factors to consider in crafting a scope of work for development of a more formal policy on views as well as potential protection mechanisms. The focus is on protection of views from a public way. Some communities also regulate views from private property, but that is not discussed. Note that state law may influence the way in which these concepts can be applied.

View types

A “protected view” is a broad term, since the character of a view can vary widely. When classifying views, it is important to describe the type of view that is desired to be maintained. These are some view types or “targets”:

1. Panoramic view: This is a broad vista, typically defined as a view cone.
2. Framed view (building): This is a narrower view corridor that is framed by buildings, but is clear from the ground up.
3. Framed view (landscape): This also is a narrow view, clear from the ground up, but framed by landscape elements, such as a flanking row of trees in a park.
4. View over a lower building component: As the name suggests, the view is over a lower building, which is in turn flanked by taller buildings.
5. View through a building: This may occur through a portion of a building such as a glassed-in lobby or pass-through.

View Cones

Typically, a protected view is defined by a view cone, or “view plane”. This is wedge shaped area starting from the station point and broadening out to capture the view target. Depending upon the type of view to be protected, the cone may be very narrow or it may be broad. The vertical angle of the cone also should be established. Many are set to look over shorter buildings and sites of lower elevations.

View Subjects or Targets

This is the object, or set of objects, that is to be viewed. It may be a landmark, such as a historic building or rock outcropping, or it may be broader, such as a scenic vista to a mountain range or river or even a downtown skyline.

Station Points

The place where one would stand and see the view target may be considered a “station point,” or “platform.” This is typically from a specific location in the public way, such as a park, or the steps of an institutional building, but some may be a more general location, such as the sidewalk along a specific city block.

Ranking significance of views

Not all view targets are equal in their importance. Ranking them will help to indicate the type of view that is to be maintained and perhaps the tools or regulations to use in establishing the protection. For example, the view from a special place in a public park to the tower of a courthouse may be more important than a view of that same tower from many sidewalks in the area. This ranking will help to determine if a full, unobstructed view is desired, or if a partial, or more filtered view would be acceptable.

Identifying views

A view protection study involves public participation as well as technical analysis by professionals:

Public process

A lot of information can be collected by technical analysis, but it is important that the community participates in defining view protection policies. They should help to identify the specific views that are to be protected, and to rank their significance. This may include interactive mapping exercises, site walks, and on-line photo sharing.

Technical analysis

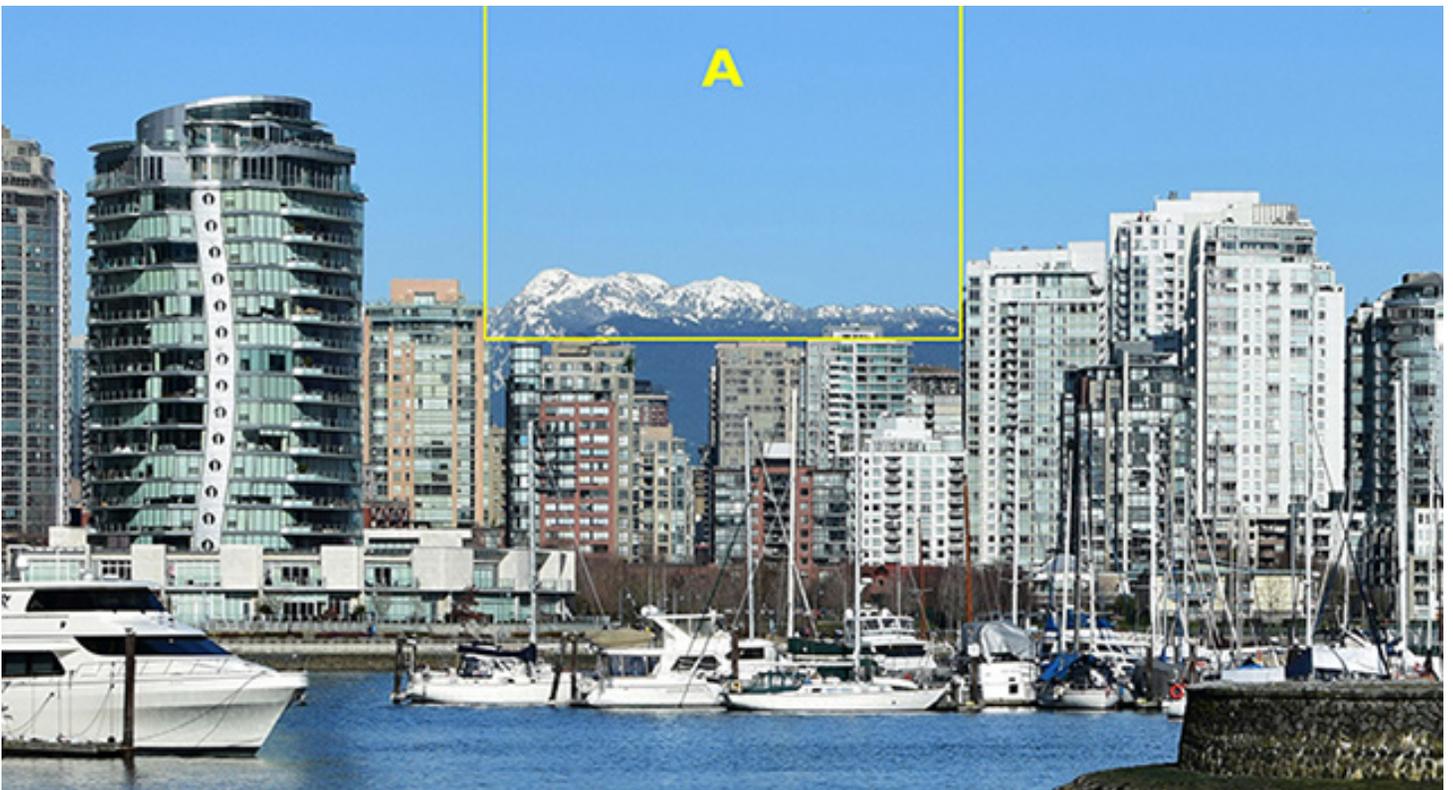
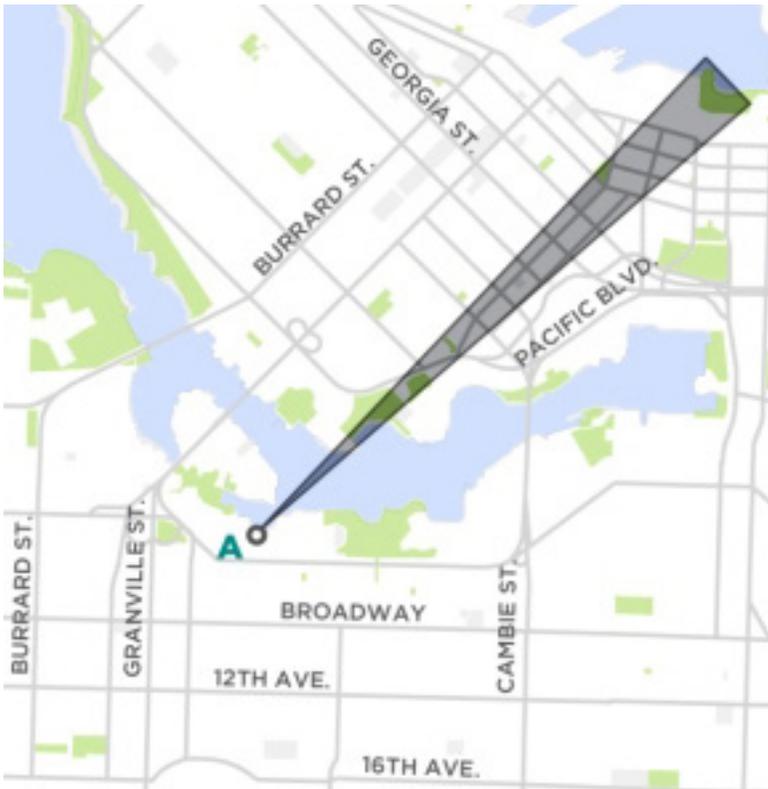
Good data is essential in establishing view protection policies. This includes documenting the locations of the views and their associated station points. Photographic studies are best for documenting views and perhaps in defining view cones. Computer modeling can help predict the results of alternative view protection policies.

Setting realistic expectations

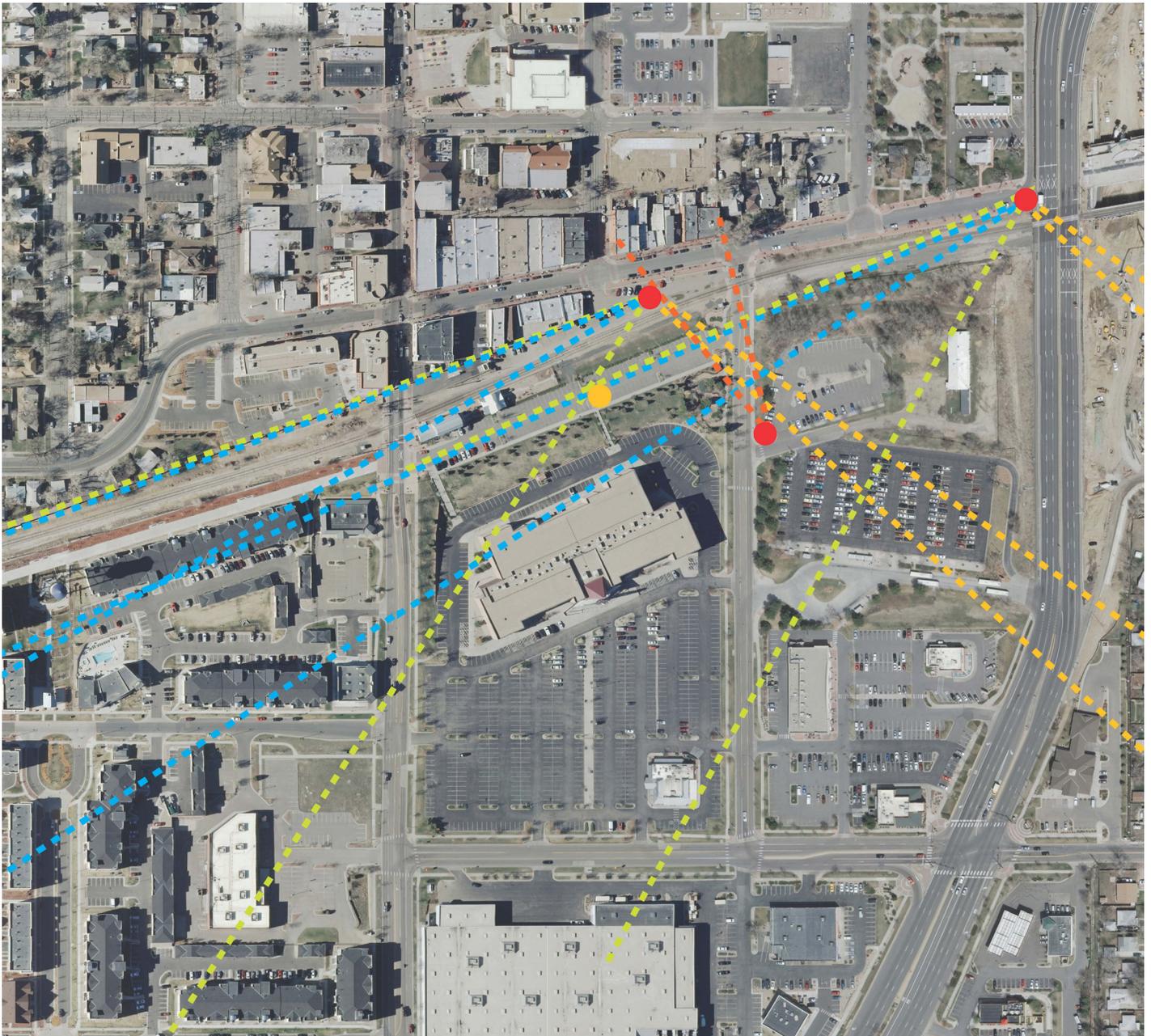
It isn't practical to preserve all views from all locations. Even new development of modest scale will change view experiences. Therefore, it is important to anticipate the potential results of a view protection policy. While some views can be protected by requiring new buildings to be lower, this may not achieve the desired results. In some cases, even a new building of one or two stories will block the view. A person standing at street level looking across a vacant lot to a courthouse could lose that view with even a low scale development. Understanding the difference in height between the view station point and its target is a key consideration in setting realistic expectations for view protection.

Applying protection tools

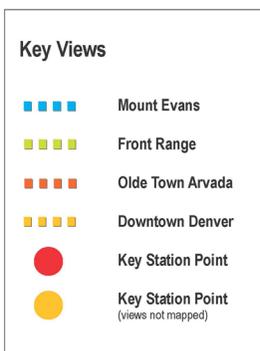
Depending upon state enabling laws, views may be protected by ordinance, in which design standards are applied. These set specific requirements, particularly height limits and sometimes setback standards. These are predictable and relatively easy to calculate. An alternative is through design review, using guidelines. While these also can be regulations, they require case-by-case consideration and are less predictable for all parties. An alternative to a regulation through local development code is to acquire view protection easements. Another is the transfer of development rights. These may be applied, for example, when special permits or flexibility in other regulations are sought.



In Vancouver, BC, view cones are mapped and further described with a photo from the identified station point, in which the area to be protected is shown. In this example, View A is to a particular mountain range.



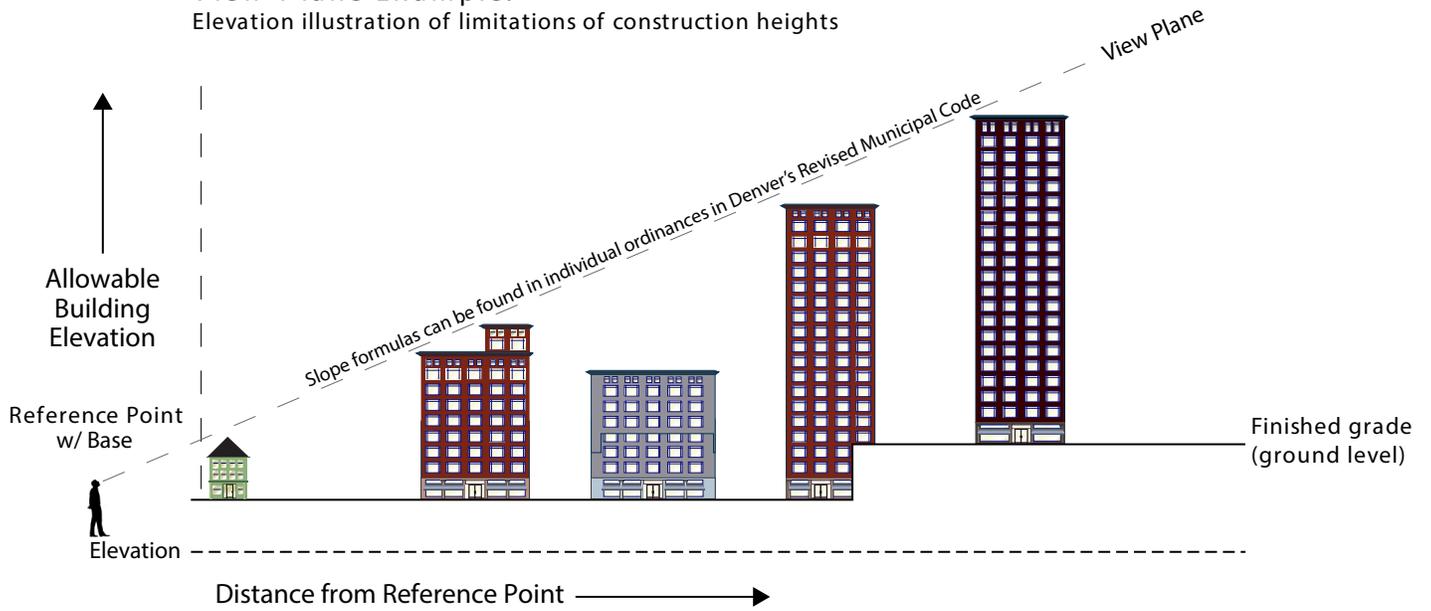
Preliminary Views Analysis



Winter & Company
April 4, 2011

A map of view station points in Arvada, Colorado identifies the arc of each view cone. View targets are to the Rocky Mountains and downtown Denver.

View Plane Example:
Elevation illustration of limitations of construction heights



Denver, Colorado illustrates how maximum building height is determined by the angle of the view plane. The focus is on maintaining views to the Rocky Mountains.