

Site selection experts raise a warning flag

2026-10-12

Gen RE

The Denver Gazette · 12 Oct 2026 · A1 · BY MARK SAMUELSON The Denver Gazette

When a crowd of Denver civic and business leaders met last week to hear feedback from seven site selection experts, who advise big corporations about where to move and expand, there were lots of compliments about how friendly Coloradans are.

And one company that launched operations here last July praised the cooperative spirit of local officials to get the plant opened quickly.

But the experts, who addressed the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce's annual Site Selector Feedback event, made clear that friendly folks and fabulous mountains aren't enough to lure new development to Colorado in today's competitive market.

"Don't ever tell me you have the best quality of life," said Kim Moore, executive managing director of New York-based Newmark, a real estate advisory firm. "Now, how many people have the best quality of life?"

"I know you have mountains," Moore told the crowd of several hundred at RiNo's ReelWorks event center. "That's great, but it's not at the top of the list."

"Colorado does not come (high on the list) as much as it should," Mike Mullis, who heads up the Memphis-based consulting firm J.M. Mullis, also told the crowd Thursday. "We see the dynamics in this area, this region. Yet we see characteristics that are very problematic that will be addressed with the right leadership involved."

"But it's a state that would hit our mark out of a hundred projects, maybe 20 times," he added.

'Denver showed up all the time' — 8 years ago

Darin Early, vice president of U.S. strategy and business development for tobacco giant Philip Morris International, praised the metro area's cooperative approach in clearing construction barriers. That, he said, had been key in luring the company's \$1.2 billion manufacturing site for Zyn nicotine pouches that opened in Aurora near Denver International Airport in July.

"The ability for this community to act cohesively is singularly unique within the country from a regional standpoint," Early said. "We were tasked with developing a factory in half the time it reasonably takes folks to develop. One of the only places we could do that in this country was here and that's a testament to the governmental entities."

But the group was less complimentary concerning other factors.

"So, about eight years ago, I would say Denver showed up all the time," Newmark's Moore said. "If we were looking for a tech market, if we were looking for an office market, financial services market, you would easily be in the top 10. Probably in the top six — maybe even higher."

However, she noted a change in the following years. "Our employers were happy here, but they were starting to struggle to get talent. And even though you can bring me a beautiful letter that says I'm going to give you \$36 million in nonrefundable tax credits, that means zero to a lot of people," Moore

Note

1

said. "You go into other markets and they're willing to change their franchise tax laws at the state government level because they want that project so bad to be a catalyst for their market."

She cited a recent competitive project that went to Tennessee, rather than Colorado, adding that North Carolina had been second on the list.

Worries about DIA

On an evening when the Metro Denver Economic Development Commission handed a special legacy award to Phil Washington, retiring as CEO of Denver International Airport, the consultants said that the airport is extremely important but suggested it is showing liabilities now.

In an annual survey on traveler experiences at major North American airports released by data analytics provider J.D. Power last month, DIA had fallen from 14th position among 20 airports last year to 18th this year. Another study by the Colorado research group CoPIRG found DIA's on-time arrivals performance was 75.4%, a little below the national average.

The chamber's president and CEO J. J. Ament, who moderated the panel, noted that the experience is being affected by ongoing construction.

"It's our state's largest contributor to the economy from a single location, built for 50 million passengers. We're putting 85 million through it, so forgive the construction as we expand," he told the consultants.

"It's incredibly important," said Moore, who is based in Dallas.

"It doesn't matter if you're manufacturing or if you're corporate headquarters, everybody's looking at connectivity and management time lost," she said. "So, the faster you can get there, the shorter amount of flights, the more they're on time."

Moore said that in meetings with legislators and others over the past three days, the experts had heard numbers say that Denver hopes to post better performance than Dallas Fort Worth International Airport.

"Well, I'm Dallas-based," Moore said. "It wouldn't take much if all your flights came in on time. Just saying."

K-12 worries

Despite Colorado's ongoing high marks for the education level of its workforce, several consultants raised concern about education here.

Mike Mullis' wife, Denise Mullis, the company's senior vice president, said the group had heard worrying data about graduation rates in K-12 education in the area.

"There were representatives in the room from the school district to talk about the career pathways. Those are the things that we look for," she said.

"There are just some really specialized skill sets that are not commonly found or there's not enough of them. So, there will be some recruitment, but we also need to look at future talent. You can't try and capture people in ninth grade when they've already spent a few years going, 'Yeah, this really isn't for me.'"

"You clearly have the talent, you are trying to improve on your K-12, but at the same time, one key thing is retaining that top talent and not losing that top talent that's graduating from your colleges and your institutions," another panelist added. He pointed to the high cost of housing and its possibly detrimental effect on maintaining young talent here.

"So, there's a lot of places to rent, but where you want to settle down and stay for more than five years, it becomes more difficult," the panelist said.

Asked about whether their meetings with Colorado legislators had been productive, Mike Mullis said that politics is less important than a determination to retain businesses.

"We don't care about politics in the state. We care about business climate. Whether you're Republican, Democrat, independent, we work with all the states," he said. "A state's No. 1 priority should be retention. Always retention. These companies — the (Philip Morris Internationals) of the world — are very sophisticated in looking at the business climate and what that legislature's doing. What do you pass in laws that doesn't make sense?"

He added: "We just finished a half-billion-dollar project in California (and are) getting ready to do another one. And people say, why in the world would you go to California? Because we have to be there for logistics reasons."

"They don't look at you the same way," Mullis told the crowd. "You don't have to be here. So, you got to make sure you've got viability and product and quality that stands out that they realize so quickly."

