



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF CASE STUDY WHITE PAPERS

To: Core Area Advisory Board

From: Jonathan Taylor, Urban Renewal Manager

Date: May 21, 2026

Re: Research Summary of RiNo District (Denver, CO), River Arts District (Asheville, NC), and Linen District (Boise, ID)

Why These Three Cases

The board will compare three light-industrial corridor redevelopment cases with structural similarities to the Core Area. Each started as a neglected fringe district and, over two decades, became a recognized destination through iterative, non-master-planned processes combining identity-building with infrastructure activation. The cases illustrate recurring patterns executed in different ways.

Each case presents a distinct redevelopment approach.

- Denver’s River North Art District (RiNo) is the artist-led model, with grassroots branding and initial community effort preceding any public investment.
- Asheville’s River Arts District (RAD) is the federally funded model: a long phase of artist-driven change ultimately led to a large-scale, grant-backed infrastructure upgrade.
- Boise’s Linen District exemplifies the patient capital, developer-led model, in which a single private developer initiated building renovations before public agencies became involved.

CAAB’s responsibility on May 21, 2026 Meeting is to decide which elements of these models, alone or in combination, best fit the Core Area’s needs.

The following summary distills key insights and distinctions from the three white papers, providing a springboard for discussion. It is designed for board members who may not have reviewed the full documents. For further details—including citations, timelines, and sources—please refer to the complete white papers.

Denver’s RiNo: The Artist-Led Model

RiNo’s transformation started in 2005, when painter Tracy Weil and illustrator Jill Hadley Hooper brought together eight founding members to create an arts district that would, in Weil’s words, “really just... sell more paintings.” They used the city’s 2003 River North Plan boundary, shortened “River North” to “RiNo” (since Chicago already had one), designed a rhinoceros logo, and picked the tagline “Where art is made.” The early focus on a short, unique name, a memorable animal logo, a production-focused tagline, and a regular studio tour set the pattern for what came next.



The visual identity came through murals. By the early 2020s, the district had more than 200 active murals across roughly 400 acres. The CRUSH Walls festival, founded in 2010 by artist Robin Munro, drove this growth through the 2010s. When CRUSH collapsed in 2020–2021 after allegations against its founder, the district transitioned to Denver Walls, a woman- and immigrant-owned festival launched in 2023, without losing the mural inventory because the year-round RiNo Mural Program had been established as a separate institutional program.

The architectural language came through adaptive reuse. The Source, Zeppelin Development’s 2013 conversion of an 1880s foundry supported by about \$1.115 million in DURA tax increment financing on a \$4.7 million project, the TAXI campus, Catalyst HTI, and the recently approved Rock Drill redevelopment, with up to \$39.1 million in TIF on a \$566 million project, all preserve the foundry-warehouse-sawtooth-brick vocabulary that defines RiNo’s identity. New ground-up construction follows published design standards to maintain this architectural language.

Public infrastructure caught up between 2014 and 2022. The \$30 million Brighton Boulevard reconstruction, the 38th and Blake commuter rail station, the \$90.8 million 39th Avenue Greenway, and the 9-acre RiNo ArtPark together turned a culture-led brand into a physically navigable district. The RiNo Art District estimates that about \$200 million in public investment catalyzed roughly \$850 million in private investment. Governance is layered across four legally distinct entities: a 501(c)(6) arts district, a Business Improvement District, a General Improvement District, and a 501(c)(3) fundraising arm, each performing the function its legal form suits best.

TRANSFERABLE LESSON FOR THE CORE AREA

Identity authored from the inside came first, public infrastructure followed about a decade later, and the two reinforced each other only because the identity had already produced visitation that justified the infrastructure investment. Reversing this order tends to produce arts districts without artists.

Arts District: The Federal-Funded Model

The Asheville RAD’s history is longer than RiNo’s. Artist pioneers began acquiring and renovating empty tannery and warehouse buildings in the mid-1980s: Highwater Clays in 1985, Curve Studios in 1989, Riverview Station in 1990, Phil Mechanic Studios in 1999, and Wedge Studios in 2002. Each was a private renovation using personal capital, sweat equity, and minimal public subsidy. The City’s main early contribution was permissive zoning and tolerance for the unpolished aesthetic. The Studio Stroll, founded in 1994 by Highwater Clays, brought the first reliable visitation pattern into the corridor.

What distinguishes Asheville from RiNo is the planning lineage. The 1989 Asheville Riverfront Plan (RiverLink, AIA, and ASLA) won the American Planning Association’s Large Scale Planning Award. The 2004 Wilma Dykeman RiverWay Master Plan consolidated a 17-mile vision across two river corridors. The 2017 River Arts District Form-Based Code translated character protections into binding zoning at the moment of greatest market pressure. This cumulative planning record made Asheville competitive for the 2014 TIGER VI grant, as the City could point to a quarter-century of adopted, award-winning planning documents covering the same corridor.

The catalytic capital project was the River Arts District Transportation Improvement Project (RADTIP), with about \$35 million in construction (roughly \$50 million including associated investments), built between 2017 and 2021. The funding stack is the most replicable element: federal TIGER (about 30 percent), Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority (about 15 percent), state DOT (about 10 percent), state environmental and parks trust funds (about 5 percent), and local bonds and general fund (about 40 percent). The project delivered 2.2 miles of rebuilt complete street, two miles of fully accessible greenway, nine acres of new parkland, two roundabouts at



legacy industrial-era intersections, and lowered Riverside Drive beneath the Norfolk Southern trestle to accommodate truck traffic for New Belgium Brewing.

New Belgium’s \$175 million East Coast brewery, opened May 2016 on an 18-acre brownfield, was the single most credibility-shifting private investment in the district’s history. The brewery’s site-selection committee reviewed locations against 33 criteria, including water quality, walkable siting, and proximity to interstate highways — exactly the kind of national-tier private investor that arrives only after a district has been established. In February 2026, USA Today’s 10Best Readers’ Choice Awards named the RAD the number-one arts district in the United States, ahead of Dallas, Cleveland, and other peer cities.

TRANSFERABLE LESSON FOR THE CORE AREA

First, having an active freight rail line and a highway that acts as a barrier does not prevent mixed-use redevelopment. Planners can treat these as part of the area’s identity, invest in grade separation where possible, and keep light-industrial uses alongside arts and hospitality instead of removing them. Second, federal capital grant of about \$15 million can attract three to four times that amount in state, county, and local matching funds, but only if there is already a strong planning record. Agencies that begin planning in year one usually are not ready to compete for major federal infrastructure grants until year five or later.

Boise’s Linen District: The Patient-Capital Developer-Led Model

The Linen District began in 2005 when David Hale, a Portland-based developer, acquired the abandoned 1910 American Linen Supply Company building, a brownfield considered untouchable by developers for twenty-five years due to unknown groundwater contamination. The 2001 EPA Brownfield Assessment Grant provided the environmental clarity that broke the deadlock. Smart Growth America later documented the case as one of the most-cited brownfields leverage ratios in federal literature: every dollar of federal Brownfields funds at the site leveraged more than forty-eight dollars of downstream district investment.

Hale coined the term “Linen District” in 2005 to refer to the six-block area between 13th and 16th Streets and between Main and Front. The branding rejected generic “Arts District” or “Creative District” labels in favor of a building-specific identifier tied to documented industrial heritage. Over the following decade, Hale acquired and renovated additional buildings: the Linen Building, Big City Coffee, A’Tavola Gourmet Marketplace, the Furness Building, and the Lincoln Building. Meanwhile, the Tullis family converted a 1962 Travelodge motor lodge into the 39-room Modern Hotel and Bar in 2007, one of the rare national examples of a mid-century motor lodge repositioned as a destination boutique hotel without demolition. The Modern’s coverage in The New York Times, Vogue, Dwell, and other national publications extended the district’s reach beyond Boise.

Treefort Music Fest was founded in March 2012 by Eric Gilbert and co-founders, with the inaugural Main Stage in a Grove Street parking lot in the Linen District (now the \$100 million Broadstone Saratoga residential development). Treefort has grown into a five-day, fourteen-hour festival drawing about 20,000 attendees per day and generating roughly \$11 million in annual economic impact. Boise’s urban renewal agency, the Capital City Development Corporation (CCDC), did not finance rehabilitation of any anchor buildings. Its role was infrastructural: streetscape, mobility, public art, and public realm. Principal investments include the 11th Street Bikeway, a novel raised-bike-lane design that preserves 80 percent of on-street parking; the Pioneer Pathway, a continuous walking and biking connection through the district; and the Rebuild Linen Blocks on Grove Street project, completed in October 2025.



The Linen District’s defining unresolved problem is the Front Street and Myrtle Street one-way couplet, five-lane state highways (U.S. 20/26) carrying 31,000–40,000 vehicles per day through the district’s southern edge. Despite the 2013 Jeff Speck walkability analysis, the 2017 Sam Schwartz alternatives analysis, and a decade of CCDC negotiation, the couplet remains essentially unchanged because the Idaho Transportation Department insists any redesign must preserve five-lane unimpeded auto throughput. Near-term improvements like curb extensions, leading pedestrian intervals, signal retiming, and raised median islands have been implemented; transformative changes such as lane reduction and two-way reversion have not.

The second-generation institutional consolidation is now underway. The Broadstone Saratoga (306 mixed-use residential units), the 122-room Hotel Renegade, and the 68-room Sparrow Hotel together represent more than \$340 million in new construction in the immediately adjacent area — the predictable consequence of two decades of pioneering adaptive reuse.

TRANSFERABLE LESSON FOR THE CORE AREA

A primary highway through a redevelopment district is a multi-decade negotiation, and the district’s identity and economic vitality must be built in spite of, not because of, the highway condition.

Cross-Cutting Patterns and Application to the Core Area

Five patterns appear in all three cases and will be highlighted in the working session’s case study synthesis.

- 1) Every successful district had a named anchor before public investment arrived.
- 2) Public-realm investment compounded over a decade—streetscape projects, bikeways, public art, lighting.
- 3) Recurring programming built reliable visitation patterns long before residential density existed.
- 4) Timelines spanned decades, not years.
- 5) Someone convened—not always the agency or developer, but always at least one institutional voice held the brand and spoke for the district as a whole.

The Core Area has the same basic features that made the three case studies possible: it is a light-industrial corridor with empty large buildings, a few unique businesses that hint at an identity, infrastructure gaps, a transportation barrier (US 97 and the BNSF railroad), and a planning record that is still being developed. What the Core Area lacks so far are a group of anchor businesses, regular events, and a major public space project. The board’s working session is designed to start moving toward these goals.

The Core Area’s main decision is which mix of the three models to use. The Linen District’s step-by-step approach—starting with an anchor building, then adding events, followed by agency investment in public spaces, and finally institutional consolidation—fits the Core Area’s current situation and the agency’s realistic pace. RiNo’s approach to building identity (letting local businesses choose the name and brand, rather than imposing one from above) is a good fit for the four anchor businesses now in the Core Area. The Asheville model provides useful lessons about dealing with freight rail and highways, the importance of a strong planning record for federal grants, and using form-based zoning to protect character when market pressure is highest.

It is also important to consider the risks shown by these cases. RiNo shows the danger of relying too much on a single festival led by one person, the risk of the brand losing focus as the area becomes more commercial, and the displacement of original artists by larger investors—issues that Asheville and the Linen District also faced. The



Linen District highlights the risk of losing a clear brand when a developer leaves and no one steps in to take their place. Asheville shows the problems that can come from handling right-of-way acquisition in a confrontational way, and the political challenges that arise when federal grant deadlines force quick changes to project plans.

None of the three districts followed just one model from start to finish. Each one mixed different elements as opportunities came up. The Core Area will need to do the same, focusing on the key lessons from these cases: build identity from within, time public investment to support rather than replace private investment, and commit to steady progress over a decade or more, since none of the examples could have moved faster.



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