

Fears Of Annexation, Loss Of Identity, Fueled Wheat Ridge's Creation | Feb. 21, 2019
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'Wheat Fields on the Ridge'

By Mike McKibbin

Half a century ago, residents of the rural area known as Wheat Ridge did not want to lose local control or be absorbed by either Denver or Lakewood. That was the impetus behind a 1969 incorporation effort that formed the City of Wheat Ridge, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

Howard Jaidinger, now 76 years old, is one of two surviving members of the incorporation group. Kent Higgins, now 74 and living in Highlands Ranch, is the other.

A proposal to form a municipality called Jefferson City (now known as Lakewood) would have included the Wheat Ridge area, Jaidinger said.

A member of the Wheat Ridge Fire Department, Jaidinger said he and around 8-10 other firefighters were concerned.

"We agreed we had to find a way to defeat the vote to form Jefferson City," he stated. "We didn't want to lose our voice if we would have been forced to join someone else."

Higgins agreed.

"Lakewood was more commercial with Colfax Avenue," he said. "It just had a different flair and we didn't want to lose our identity."

A unified group effort

Two plaques at Founders' Park, 3705 Jay St., list the city "incorporators" as Higgins, Jerry Rose, Jack Willis and Marty Weiland. The incorporation group included Albert "Ed" Anderson, Dana Bowling, William McBride, John McElderry, Walt Johnson, Bonnie Scoma, Louise Turner and Jack Prose. The incorporation sponsor was the Wheat Ridge Fire Protection District.

Neighborhood chairs and volunteers were Bill Echelmeyer, Bob Eckhardt, Jaidinger, Higgins, Harvey Kolesar, Warren Yousse, Pat Cunningham, Al Hamme, Ken and Mona Hoener, Jim Russell, Carolyn Rits, Paula Vessa, Ted Erickson, George Fentress and Jay Weiland.

Turner, who passed away on Feb. 13, 2012, at 87, was the first city clerk. In a Feb. 9, 2007, local history video on the city of Lakewood's web page, Turner said the first area incorporation attempt in 1959 lost by a 9-1 margin. It would have included the Lakewood and Wheat Ridge areas in a city called Ridgewood. Two years later, both areas put incorporation on separate ballots and both lost.

In 1969, the City and County of Denver had been eyeing eastern Jefferson County for annexation. Turner said the effort to form Wheat Ridge was undertaken although "no one in Wheat Ridge wanted to be a city, no one wanted a lot of laws or to change their way of life. But we wanted

protection against being annexed into another community. We didn't want to be Lakewood's north neighborhood."

Higgins also noted that while school desegregation was happening in Denver, opposition to that was not "outwardly open" among the Wheat Ridge proponents.

"I don't recall any major conversations about the integration of Wheat Ridge schools," he stated. "Our schools were already mixed and we had no issues."

Backers also worried that even if all Wheat Ridge voters opposed being included in Jefferson City's limits, they did not have the numbers to defeat the measure.

"So we had to schedule the Wheat Ridge election first," Turner said.

When asked how the city name was chosen, Turner replied, "There were wheat fields on the ridge."

Support shown, even in the rain

Public meetings were held to explain why the Wheat Ridge group — led by the fire department and local Grange — did not want the area to be part of Jefferson City.

"I remember we would use the loudspeaker on the fire truck to get people's attention," Jaidinger recalled.

Turner was responsible for one of the election petitions and recalled people stood in the rain to sign petitions.

A copy of the Outlook weekly newspaper in the Jefferson County archivist office in Golden reported petitions with 309 signatures were turned in to District Court on May 8, 1969. Included were 18 pages of legal descriptions and 27 pages of maps. A total of 150 signatures of registered voters from the area were needed to place the measure on the ballot.

On May 16, the Outlook reported a June 17 election date was set, while petitions calling for the incorporation of Jefferson City — including the Wheat Ridge area — were also filed. On May 30, the Outlook reported a June 24 election date was set for Jefferson City's incorporation.

A banner headline on the Outlook's June 20 front page read, "Wheat Ridge to be Colorado's 8th largest city." Voters approved the incorporation by a 3,183-2,636 count. The 5,819 votes cast represented around 45 percent of the 13,000 eligible voters.

The Denver Post, in a June 18 story, described Wheat Ridge's eastern boundaries as Lakeside, Mountain View and Sheridan Boulevard; to the south, West 26th Avenue and Crown Hill Cemetery; the west, Youngfield Street and Ward Road; and the north, West 52nd Avenue, West 49th Avenue, the north right-of-way of Interstate 70 and Clear Creek.

In a short front-page editorial comment, the Outlook wrote the results were not surprising and noted a month earlier, the paper had predicted the vote would carry by about 60 percent, "so we

were not far off.” The paper added its “guess” was that the Jefferson City incorporation vote the following week would also pass, as would a vote to change its name to Lakewood soon after the incorporation election.

After the Wheat Ridge measure passed, “all hell” broke loose among politicians from nearby areas, especially the backers of the formation of Jefferson City, Jaidinger said.

“It blew up like an atom bomb,” he added.

Higgins said the Wheat Ridge measure passed because the community had a unified voice.

“The fire department had 40-50 volunteer firefighters and we all had our own jobs in the community,” he noted. “And the Grange spoke for the agrarian community.”

Setting up a government

Since special districts already provided fire, water and sanitation, and the Jefferson County School District was in place, the only immediate need was law enforcement, Higgins added. Jack Bramble was appointed the city’s first police chief and several county sheriff’s deputies were hired as officers to provide weekend coverage, Jaidinger said.

Turner said the new city had 90 days after the election to come up with a “working system” of government. The Post story noted state statutes required an election to designate city council wards with two council representatives from each ward, a mayor, clerk and treasurer.

Turner said a small group of city supporters met twice a week — usually until about 2:30 in the morning — to set up the city.

“There was a lot of anxiety and nervous moments about lots of things,” she stated. “We were kind of ‘what do we do now?’”

Jaidinger said he doesn’t recall tax rates and other financial issues were concerns. A one-cent sales tax was the first money-raising source for the new city.

“I think most people then didn’t give a damn,” he stated. “The more common concern was losing our voice on government issues if Jefferson City was formed. We just didn’t want that to happen. We wanted to protect ourselves and the community of Wheat Ridge, we didn’t want to lose our identity.”

On June 29, the Outlook wrote that voters approved the formation of Jefferson City, then the state’s third largest, by an 8,476-3,371 tally.

Higgins said Wheat Ridge was and still is “uniquely different than Denver or any of the other surrounding communities. I am proud we were able to do it on a shoestring but I don’t think we comprehended the complexity. We were just a bunch of men and women who took a leap of faith to keep Wheat Ridge going.”

“We thought it was absolutely the right move to incorporate,” Jaidinger said. “We thought we were much different than Lakewood. I’m very happy and couldn’t be prouder — except for marrying my wife — than anything I’ve ever done. In a lot of ways, I can’t believe it’s been 50 years.”