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| COMMENTARY |

Op-Ed: We're Proud to Fuel the Future of the Real Pueblo

NATHAN STERN | MAY 15, 2022 | 5:05AM



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Recently, *Westword* published an [op-ed by John Rodriguez](#) in response to the opening of our Fuel & Iron Bar in Denver, "For the Real Pueblo, Drive South to the Actual City." As the co-owner of [Fuel & Iron Bar](#), I couldn't agree with this headline more. In fact, the main purpose of our bar is to give people a taste of Pueblo-inspired food and drinks (much of it sourced from Pueblo producers) to highlight the amazing character of Pueblo and encourage people to visit. If you doubt the sincerity of this premise, consider the [investments we are making in the Pueblo community](#):

- When it opens this fall, Fuel & Iron Food Hall, located in the historic Holmes Hardware Building in downtown Pueblo, will serve as an incubator and launchpad for chefs who want to start their own brick-and-mortar restaurants in Pueblo. All five of the chefs/restaurateurs who have signed on to the project are either from Pueblo or already have a significant presence in the community.

- Fuel Farm, an urban farm and greenhouse that will launch a farmers' market and farm-delivery program to create greater opportunities for Pueblo County farmers.

- Fuel Kitchens, an incubator commissary kitchen that will help Pueblo entrepreneurs grow packaged-products businesses, as well as support food trucks, caterers and other mobile food businesses that need a place to prep.

- Fifty-two units of workforce housing, 28 of them on the upper floors of the Holmes Hardware Building, and 24 on an adjacent parcel built by [indieDwell](#), a modular home builder with a factory in downtown Pueblo.

- A childcare center on the Pueblo Riverwalk, the first childcare center in downtown Pueblo, which will serve the employees of the food hall, the residents of the apartments and other downtown workers and residents.

- An apprenticeship program with concentrations in restaurant ownership, agriculture and packaged products, which will bring culinary education back to Pueblo in light of the impending closure of the Pueblo Community College Culinary Arts program.

Altogether, these projects represent more than \$20 million of investment in downtown Pueblo, which will directly support Pueblo residents starting and growing their own businesses in the food and beverage industry. The size of these investments dwarfs the startup capital invested in our Denver bar many times over. To make these significant investments and then try to re-create the experience as a simulacrum in Denver, deterring visitors from Pueblo, would not only be insanely counterproductive, but would be financially ruinous given that co-owner Zach Czynyn and myself have and will continue to personally guarantee the loans backing these investments. We hope that the bar and the conversations it generates (including the op-ed) serve to drive greater traffic down to Pueblo.

The only part of the op-ed with which we disagree is the premise that Pueblo has experienced "five decades of stagnation" and has "ineffective leadership." While Pueblo lags behind the rest of Colorado in some areas, the Pueblo we know is a vibrant, ambitious and entrepreneurial community that is continuing to make great strides. Just a few examples:

- Pueblo brands such as Solar Roast Coffee, the Walter Brewing Company, Springside Cheese, Jojo's Sriracha and Formulary 55 are growing and distributing nationwide. Not to mention Snooze Mattress Co., Pueblo's first national franchise.

- Arts organizations like the Blo Back Gallery, Artisan Textile Company, The Ethos and Colorado Arts and Artists are making Pueblo a hub for the maker and artist community. Plus, Analogue Books & Records, an amazing books and records store downtown.

- New restaurants like Bruce Alehouse Brewing Co., Dee Taco, Bingo Burger, Bistoro, Ruby's and Blackbox Provisions are adding to the already formidable Pueblo dining scene.

- Technological innovations from the large-scale (like a new hyperloop testing facility or the world's first solar-powered steel mill) to the everyday (like ActivArmor, a custom 3-D printed cast company, or TankMatez Innovative Aquatic Products, which simplifies aquarium maintenance) are expanding Pueblo's tech industry.

- Civic attractions like the [Pueblo Riverwalk](#), the recently expanded Pueblo Convention Center, the Rawlings Library (the greatest library in the world — fight me on this one) and the Pueblo Levee Trail continue to make Pueblo a great place in which to spend time.

Whether we are the right messengers of Pueblo's greatness is certainly up for debate. We're not from Pueblo and, thus, arguably undeserving of building a brand that honors its heritage. That's why we are trying to bring in Puebloans to our project whenever possible, including our Culinary and Education Director, Mo Montgomery, who designed the food menu at our Denver bar; an advisory board of Pueblo natives living in Denver; roughly 100 of our investors; our muralist, former director of the Pueblo Arts Alliance, Dan Levinson; and the twelve local producers from Pueblo County who supply a significant portion of our ingredients, including Gagliano's Italian Market & Deli and Milberger Farms.

The feedback we've received from Pueblo residents and expats living in Denver has been overwhelmingly positive, which has encouraged us to keep pushing forward. We certainly hope that the work we're doing serves to support rather than supplant those who have been building up Pueblo for generations. To do otherwise would be a massive failure.

In summation, we'd like to quote directly from John Rodriguez's op-ed: "I'm not saying you shouldn't patronize Fuel & Iron. Patronize? Yes. But if you crave authenticity and the real Pueblo, actually drive to Pueblo." When you make the drive, you'll find an enchanting, vibrant and multicultural city that we're proud to be a part of.

Nathan Stern is a commercial real estate broker and developer who specializes in independent, local food and beverage. He is the co-founder of the Fuel & Iron project. Learn more at [fuelandironpueblo.com](#).

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