

Denver mayoral candidate Aurelio Martinez wants to give neighborhoods a louder voice in a fast-changing city

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Denver mayoral candidate Aurelio Martinez speaks during the Fair Elections Fund mayoral debate in Claver Hall at Regis University on Feb. 9, 2023. (Photo by Andy Cross/The Denver Post)

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Aurelio Martinez fought to save Curtis Park’s then-decaying Victorian- and Italianate-style homes three decades ago as part of a neighborhood effort that created one of the city’s major historic districts.

But it was a more recent rezoning fight, one Martinez’s side lost, that led him to jump into the crowded Denver mayor’s race.

“That was the last straw — that’s when I said OK, we’re going to run for mayor,” he said. “Because we can’t let this happen to neighborhoods across Denver.”

Last year’s battle in the now-thriving neighborhood is one that’s played out in many parts of the fast-growing city. Edens, a real estate company, sought zoning changes near 27th and Larimer streets that would allow it to launch a big redevelopment on nearly a full block

owned in part by the Volunteers of America, which agreed to relocate all but its three-story headquarters. Edens wanted to build higher: up to seven stories along increasingly bustling Larimer, and up to five fronting quieter Lawrence Street.

The Lawrence side is near older single-family houses and rowhomes, along with new apartments. While several major neighborhood groups backed the rezoning — in part because Edens’ plans included income-qualified affordable housing — Martinez, 68, was among more than 100 who opposed it.

“I’m telling you, when we went to fight it, the city just would not listen to us,” said the lifelong neighborhood resident. “It passed the planning board like a hot butter knife going right through butter. ... They ignored us. And then it went to City Council, and the same thing.

“So now we in Curtis Park are faced with this seven-story monstrosity going right in our neighborhood.”

The rezoning was aided by a crescendo of recent city plans and affordable-housing mandates that incentivize taller buildings in more parts of the city.

If he wins, Martinez hopes to rebalance the debate.

He would draw on decades of experience in neighborhood advocacy and as a small business owner. Early in his career, the information technology professional opened a service and repair center for IBM electric typewriters, copiers and computers. In the 1990s, he and his wife, Lupita, helped run a concessionaire at City Park Golf Course and then opened a restaurant called Don Carlos, running it for about seven years.

Martinez returned to the IT field and retired five years ago, though he keeps a roster of clients.

As a young man, he was a prizefighter for 10 years. Since hanging up his gloves, he’s promoted matches and coached up-and-comers, at one point converting his garage into a boxing gym during the pandemic.

“Boxing is in my blood,” he said, though coaching is on hiatus while he campaigns.

As Martinez surveys a changing city, he says there’s a place for higher-density redevelopment, within limits.

To help residents stay in increasingly costly neighborhoods, he’s pitching a program that would provide downpayment assistance loans, offering deferred repayment or even forgiveness in some cases. He also wants to create a city ombudsman to resolve complaints — with more authority than the city’s staff of neighborhood liaisons.

The idea underscores his campaign’s focus.

“The residents that live in Denver have to have control of where they live,” Martinez said. “... I honestly believe that your neighborhood has to be your safe haven.”

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