

Mountain Man, on a Scooter

John Hickenlooper, the popular Denver mayor who sailed into a second term last month, has come a long way from his days as a community activist. Since taking office in 2003, he has overcome a \$70 million deficit and ushered in an era of bipartisan regional cooperation that culminated in the passage of the largest regional transit initiative (\$4.7 billion) in U.S. history. He also reduced downtown parking meter rates and is known for riding an Italian scooter around town. Not bad for a far-seeing guy whose previous claim to fame was developing the Rocky Mountains' first brewpub, Wynkoop Brewing Company. In this new column, City Hall, *TNAC* puts mayors on the hot seat. — **Interview By JoAnn Greco | Photo By Ray Ng**

TNAC: How has Denver changed in, say, the last decade?

JH: The most visible change is the vitality of downtown, with 10,000 new housing units, and a renovation of every last warehouse in one 24-block area. We're making the city more dense. That, with the fact that we've created a state-of-the-art opera house, unveiled the first Daniel Libeskind building in the U.S. (his Denver Art Museum expansion), doubled the size of our convention center, and will soon see the addition of Ritz Carlton and Four Season hotels to our hospitality stock, all leads to a critical mass. We're seeing more restaurants, more retail, more residents.

TNAC: The Democratic National Convention comes to town next year. What's in store?

JH: Oh, where do I begin? It's a matter of prioritization. We're looking at mobility, improving our transportation network and how we connect. We've got a free shuttle that goes up and down 16th Street, one of our downtown spines. We're looking at expanding that by adding free circulators. We're also undertaking a massive infrastructure investment in Union Station, which is to be the center of our intermodal transit system.

TNAC: Denver's commitment to transit-oriented development is well-known, as is its emphasis on regionalism. How have you managed to bring city and suburbs together?

JH: We've had some wicked battles in the past. The surrounding counties have even gotten the state to pass legislation that, for all intents and purposes, makes it impossible for Denver to ever again expand through annexation. To this day, there's a small municipality, Glendale, that's completely surrounded by Denver. Aurora, the second largest city in the area, has for years been battling with Denver about airport noises, about perceived poaching of businesses. The Saturday before I took office, I threw a cocktail party and invited the region's mayors and county commissioners and their spouses, and I said: "the adversarial relationship between the suburbs and the city is over. It is impossible for the suburbs to succeed without the city's success. It just doesn't make sense." So our sustainability initiative, Greenprint Denver, and our transit program, FasTracks—they're all designed and planned on a regional basis. All 32 mayors of the Metropolitan Mayors' Caucus, mayors from 8 counties, Republicans and

Democrats, came to Denver and supported what is the most ambitious transit initiative in the country, which includes 119 miles of new commuter rail and light rail, plus the redevelopment of Union Station.

TNAC: As the entire region pitches in to work together, what do you envision for Denver's downtown, its core?

JH: We have 15,000 people living downtown and in the surrounding neighborhoods, more than in a long time. But I'd like to see continued growth. The goal is to have villages springing up around these light rail stations, to tie together land use and transportation. It'd be great, too, if more people worked Downtown. That number is at about 105,000.

TNAC: A revitalized downtown, suburban buy-in, innovative transit, cultural riches. Sounds great. Anything still need fixing?

JH: Sure, the same things that plague all cities. We'd like to see improvements in our school district—we've got a very high level of kids living in poverty, we have a very high dropout rate. Public safety is a priority, too, although we had a ten percent drop in crime last year.

TNAC: Denver's struggles are familiar, and its goals for success echo those of other big cities. What's Denver's "unique selling proposition," if you will? What makes Denver Denver?

JH: What makes us special, I think, is the place itself. We're nestled in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, and have 300 days of sunshine with four distinct seasons. We've got 850 miles of bike paths, more than any other city. If you were able to measure the percentage of people who choose to live in a city based solely on quality of life issues, I think we'd come up number one. I also like to mention our values, which I see as uniquely Western values. We're a place that's more defined by our future than our past; people's achievements here are not defined by who their parents were, but by their own skills and exertions.

TNAC: Rugged individualism?

JH: Exactly. But self-sufficiency doesn't mean selfishness. The Old West was just as much about barn-raising as it was shootouts. □