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OUTSTANDING WOMEN IN BUSINESS

Career & Workplace

'Let's go build this city': Former DURA head Tracy Huggins avoided the spotlight as she transformed Denver



Tracy Huggins poses for a portrait during an Outstanding Women in Business photo shoot at 1660 Lincoln on June 29, 2026, in Denver.

SETH MCCONNELL | DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL



By [Lincoln Roch](#) – Intern, Denver Business Journal
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Story Highlights

- Tracy Huggins was executive director of Denver Urban Renewal Authority for 25 years.
- Huggins won the Denver Business Journal's Outstanding Women in Business Lifetime Achievement award.
- She was responsible for evaluating and financing some of Denver's largest development projects.

Tracy Huggins' daughters grew up in the back room of the Denver City Council chambers.

"There was a point in time where my husband was traveling for work quite a bit, and so the girls just came with me to city council meetings," Huggins said.

Huggins became a fixture of council meetings, always ready with an answer to questions on the minutiae of economic development. She never sought the spotlight, and never got the recognition that politicians did. She just let the work speak for itself.

As executive director of the Denver Urban Renewal Authority for 25 years, she was responsible for evaluating and financing some of Denver's largest development projects in the 21st century. In December, she announced her [retirement from DURA](#). Huggins is the recipient of the Denver Business Journal's 2026 Outstanding Women in Business Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of a career that helped transform the city.

Raised in Western Montana, Huggins was always interested in numbers. In college, she majored in accounting, which she did not enjoy until she took an auditing class.



Tracy Huggins, former Denver Urban Renewal Authority executive director, pictured in 2014.

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“I mean, who likes auditing? Nobody likes auditing. But I liked auditing. It was to me a little bit of investigative work and putting together a puzzle,” Huggins said.

After graduating from the University of Montana, she headed to New York City before her husband’s job brought them to Denver in 1987. Shortly after arriving, the couple decided to stay.

Her first job in the city was at Silverado Savings and Loan. She left the company right before it went defunct in 1988 during the savings and loan crisis, taking a job at an independent CPA firm that audited several public agencies, including DURA.

Developing Denver

DURA is a quasi-governmental agency tasked with helping spur the redevelopment of blighted property in the city. It can assist in financing projects and has the power to seize property through eminent domain. While independent from the city's government, board members are appointed by the mayor and its actions require city council approval.

Susan Powers, then DURA executive director, convinced Huggins to join the accounting department as DURA entered a transformative time.

“We were just starting to use the financing tool that is tax increment, just leaning in with the city to try to help figure out how to revitalize downtown,” Huggins said.

[Tax increment financing](#), or TIF, allows newly created tax revenue from a redevelopment project to be used to reimburse the developer for costs associated with infrastructure.

DURA was also on the cusp of undertaking one of the largest projects in the authority's history: the redevelopment of the land home to Stapleton Airport, which closed after Denver International Airport opened in 1995.



The Stapleton development in 2014.

KATHLEEN LAVINE, BUSINESS JOURNAL

Huggins was DURA's assistant director for the project's preliminary stages and later took over for Powers after some of the major land and development deals went through. But it would be Huggins' job to push the project through city council and implement the finance plan.

She credits her time in the accounting department for preparing her for the major infill project that would span her entire tenure as executive director.

Huggins managed DURA's debt service payments for the bonds on projects like the Denver Dry Building and Mercantile Square, where she learned to never trust financial projections. She said DURA barely had enough money to make the initial debt service payments due to delays in delivering the project.

"Having been through that, and realizing that the day we default on a bond payment, we're done, I have a very conservative underwriting strategy," Huggins said.

DURA would issue \$462 million in bonds reimbursed through tax increment financing for Stapleton, which is today called Centrtal Park, in 2004. Huggins insisted on a robust debt service coverage, knowing that things would take longer to get delivered and stabilize. The bonds were also refinanced in 2008, 2010 and 2013.



Former Denver Mayor Michael B. Hancock listens as Mayor Mike Johnston delivers his inaugural address during the Mayoral Inauguration Ceremony for Mike Johnston at the Ellie Caulkins Opera House on July 17, 2023, in Denver

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The former airport became home to 30,000 residents, 13,000 jobs and 1,100 acres of new parks and open space. The last of the bonds issued were paid off in December 2025.

Former Mayor Michael Hancock met Huggins when he was in his first term on Denver City Council. He credits her with teaching him the basics of economic development and still remembers the first meeting he had with her once he became mayor.

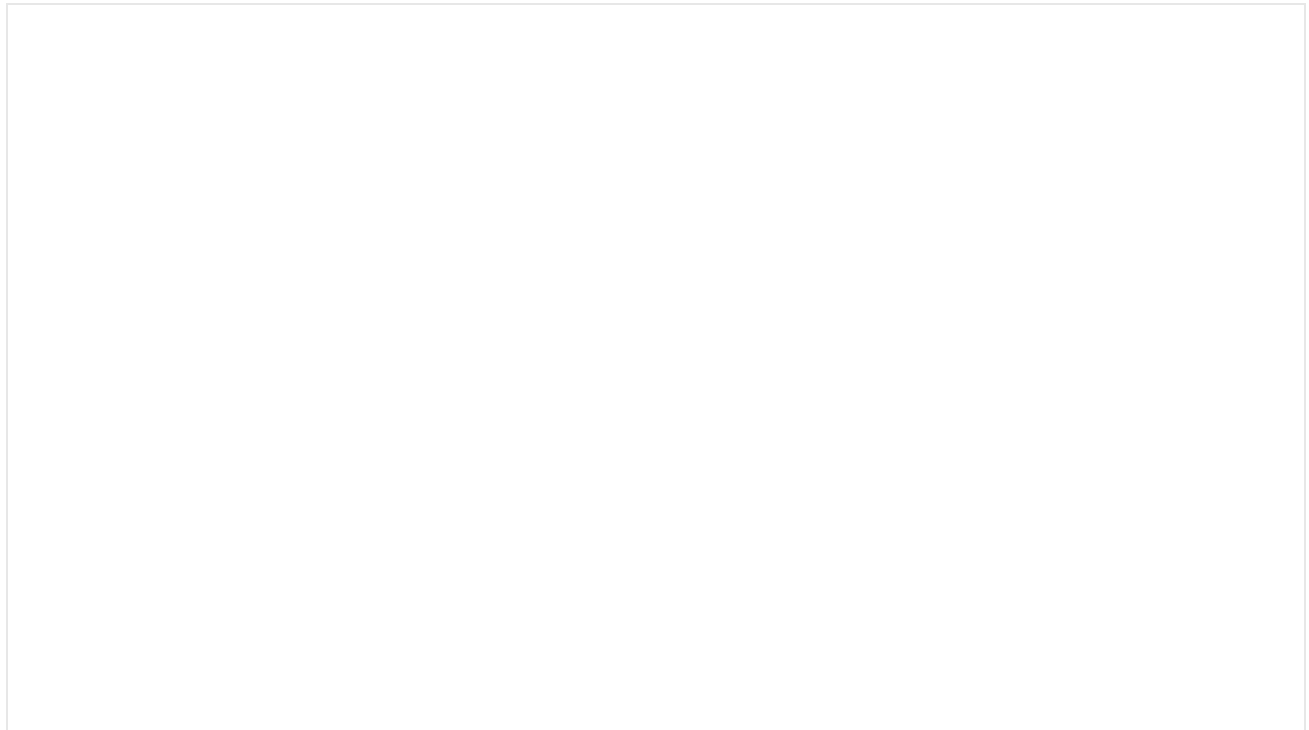
“I remember the last couple words that we said to each other as she exited the office from that meeting, which was, ‘Let’s go build this city,’” he said.

A balancing act

Huggins said that she cannot think of a more fun and ever-changing job than that of the DURA executive director.

DURA is at a unique intersection between public and private sectors. She found herself constantly handling the competing interests of the mayor’s office, various city agencies, the city council and private investors.

“Trying to bring together that urban planning public focus with the private financial interest and their limitations and willingness to take risk ... it is the most fascinating, most rewarding work I can even imagine,” she said.



From left, Mark Sidell, president of Gart Properties, Tracy Huggins, director of Denver urban renewal authority, Mayor Bill Vidal and Tamara Door, President & CEO of Downtown Denver Partnership, left, and Mayor Bill Vidal celebrate announcement of H&M opening of First Colorado store in late 2011 at Denver Pavilions on Wednesday. April 13, 2011. Hyoung Chang/ The Denver Post (Photo By Hyoung Chang/The Denver Post via Getty Images)

HYOUNG CHANG

Despite constant dealmaking, she believed in DURA's mandate and its fiduciary responsibility over politics. If a project failed to meet the criteria for blight, she wouldn't invest. If it did qualify, she often surprised developers with just how much information she wanted from them.

And if a project made it to council, she developed a reputation for answers that were above all honest, no matter the political consequences.

"Whether they agreed with her or not on the specific outcome, they always knew Tracy was giving them a straight answer and a clear answer," said DURA outside counsel Craig Umbaugh.

In addition to Stapleton, Huggins led DURA's efforts to redevelop Lowry Air Force Base, [renovate 16th Street](#) and transform the former Gates rubber factory at Santa Fe Yards. The [Summit FC expects to break ground](#) on a 14,500-seat stadium at the site in the fall.

Running DURA was never a nine-to-five job for Huggins, but one of her proudest accomplishments was refusing to let it keep her from her family. When she was raising her kids, she recounted getting home from work every night, making dinner, reading to them, putting them to bed and then logging back on.

"To balance her personal and professional life through all of the work that she accomplished while she was the CEO – it's pretty powerful," former [Downtown Denver Partnership CEO Tami Door](#) said. "It takes a lot of discipline."



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With the Stapleton infill wrapped up and the city's next massive urban renewal investment – the [planned Broncos stadium and entertainment district](#) at Burnham Yard – on the way, Huggins decided 2026 was the right time to hand over the reins. Bill Pruter was appointed interim executive director.

Before she figures out the next chapter of her life, she's decided to take a year off at the advice of friends. Currently, she's spending the summer in Western Montana.

Hancock said that under her watch, DURA became a reliable stakeholder for the community. He believes that the groundwork will outlive Huggins through every meaningful project the agency tackles, continuing her vision for the city.

“I think the real totality and the powerfulness of her legacy will not be known for years to come,” Hancock said.

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