



KEEP CUSTER COUNTY SPECIAL



**Custer County, Colorado
Community Forum
Five-Year Summary**

1999—2004

CUSTER COUNTY, COLORADO



Photo: Bob Thomason

Five years ago this summer, Custer County residents came together to chart a desirable path for the future of the county. After an initial celebration of Custer County's past and present, a broad cross-section of the community rolled up their sleeves and discussed shared values, goals, and approaches to accomplishing those goals.

The resulting collaborative initiatives have traveled under the banner of "Keep Custer County Special" in the intervening five years. A series of efforts to gather sound information to educate the community and inform public policy decisions followed. This information was presented to the public and elected officials at a series of public forums, called the Community Forum.

The idea of these forums was to create a public space for citizens to discuss important issues related to growth and change, and how to maintain and improve the quality of life in Custer County. The premise remains the same today: informed dialogue improves local decision making; shared values are the best foundation for collective efforts to improve

community; and stepping back from day-to-day events and focusing on the bigger picture allows citizens to take part in the process of charting their future.

Five years later, the initial organizers of the forum – Custer Heritage Committee, San Isabel Land Protection Trust, and Sonoran Institute – decided it was time to take stock of the hard work undertaken over the last half decade and check back with the community on current priorities. We wanted to know if the goals of 1999 are the same today and, if necessary, to redirect energy and resources to current concerns and hopes.

Everyone benefits when we encourage cooperation and appreciate differences.

— Forum participant

What follows is a summary of the Community Forums held over the last five years, accomplishments over this period, and top citizen priorities on how to "Keep Custer County Special."

HISTORY OF COMMUNITY FORUMS

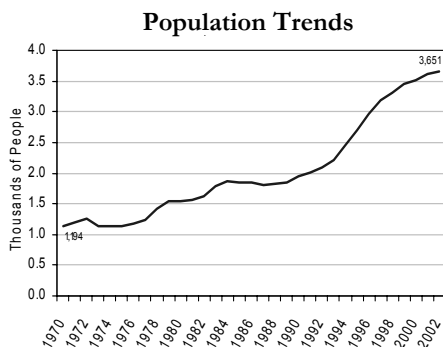
Since the first Community Forum in the summer of 1999, residents of Custer County along with a number of partner groups have sponsored and attended six public forums. They are:

- ▶ **Initial Forum** – established values and goals for the community
- ▶ **Land protection** – reviewed the array of rural land protection tools
- ▶ **Cost of Services** – evaluated the fiscal costs of various land uses
- ▶ **Master Plan** – solicited public input on the proposed master plan
- ▶ **Build-out Study** – showcased alternative growth futures for the county
- ▶ **Five-year Forum** – reviewed past work and established new priorities



RECENT TRENDS

By now, it's no surprise to most people that Custer County was one of the region's fastest growing counties in the 1990s. Population grew by over 80 percent. This growth changed the makeup of the community as some people left and many more came to the area. It altered the schools and what parents and students want from the educational system. And it put tremendous pressure on the landscape so important to most local residents and property owners.

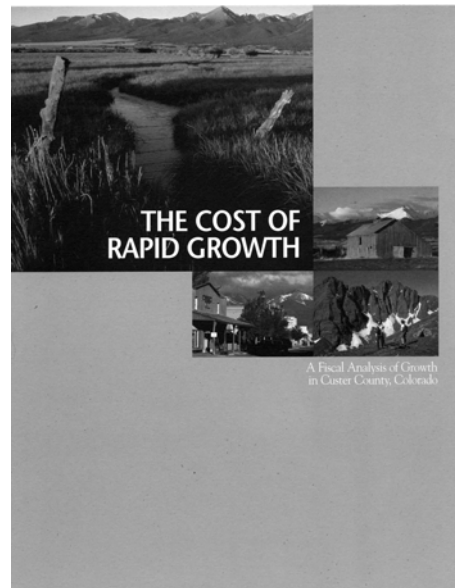


In the five years since the initial Forum, Custer County continued to see significant change. Population growth remained strong, and the population got older. More people meant new subdivisions and building starts — over 600 new homes have been built since 1999, an average of over 100 a year. This trend continues today. At the same time, average wages remained low while property values ebbed higher.

WHAT HAVE WE

Information

- ▶ **Western Community Stewardship Forum** – County staff and volunteer board members attended a three-day growth management seminar sponsored by the Sonoran Institute and National Association of Counties. Custer County was selected to this award-winning training in part because of its timely challenge statement: “We are interested in ideas and tools that are useful in engaging the public, supporting traditional economic sectors and promoting diversification, and implementing specific measures that will help to manage future growth.”
- ▶ **Clarion Associates Review of Zoning Resolution** – Clarion prepared and presented to the County Commission an in-depth evaluation of the county’s Zoning Resolution as part of the Western Community Stewardship Forum’s follow-up and in preparation for the update to this important document.
- ▶ **Cost of Community Services Study** – This fiscal impact study of different land uses and their contribution to the county’s financial bottom line was the first of its kind in Colorado. Significantly, a subsequent study by Colorado State University confirmed the findings of this initial report, including the fact that agricultural and open space lands pay more in taxes than they demand in infrastructure and services while the opposite is true for residential lands.
- ▶ **Build Out Study** – This University of Colorado at Denver report on build out scenarios for the county through 2025 made clear that significant public values will be compromised and natural hazards increased if new growth is not located thoughtfully. It also demonstrated that the county has a choice about how it grows and whether it benefits from that growth.
- ▶ **Water Study** – This ongoing USGS study, made possible with support from the Sonoran Institute, National Association of Counties, and Custer County, seeks to determine the effects of drought and development on available subsurface water quality and quantity. The study is already generating valuable information about the carrying capacity of different parts of the county to support current uses and future development.



ACCOMPLISHED?

Action

- ▶ **Adoption of County's First Master Plan** – The county adopted its first Master Plan in 2002. The Plan establishes the context and rationale for various implementation strategies, including the county's Zoning Resolution. The guiding vision is remarkably similar to public input at Community Forums.
- ▶ **Revision of County's Zoning Resolution** – The county revised its Zoning Resolution in 2002. The new Resolution strengthens the County's role in helping to minimize the impact of new commercial and industrial development throughout the county.
- ▶ **Renovation of Important Historic Buildings** – A number of historic structures have been restored through public-private partnerships, creating a vital link between past and future. These buildings include the Beckwith Ranch headquarters, Wolff Hotel, Denver & Rio Grand Engine House, Kennicott Homestead, Beardsley House, Hope Lutheran Church, and others.
- ▶ **New Conservation Easements** – In 1999, there were 3,142 acres protected by conservation easements in the county. That number has expanded to over 14,000 acres today thanks to the hard work of local and state groups



Photo: Bill Gillette

partnering with area landowners. The protection of a growing number of working ranches in the valley has been accompanied by significant new investment in area ranching operations.

- ▶ **Passage of School Bond** – After two failed attempts, the school district passed a badly needed school bond in 2000. This bond measure enabled the construction of a new wing for the school facility. The additional wing houses a new high school, K-12 library, art room, band room, two science labs, and special education classrooms.

- ▶ **Improvements to Public Library** – The library on Main Street is in the process of doubling in size. The library Board of Trustees purchased, then demolished, a building next door to the library. A new community meeting center and more space for books and patrons to browse will be housed in the new addition.

THE 2004 FORUM



On August 7, 2004 approximately 100 residents and landowners attended the latest Community Forum, which was held at the Saddle Club in Westcliffe. This forum focused on collaborative accomplishments over the last five years. It was also an opportunity to check in with area citizens about shared community values and top priorities for the county looking ahead.

The day began with a warm welcome from Sarah Shields and introduction by County Commissioner Dale Hoag. These preliminary remarks were followed by presentations from Ben Alexander on the history of Community Forums in Custer County, Brian Riley on accomplishments to date, Dick Downey on the county government's perspective, and Autumn Hood on current challenges and opportunities. Everyone then broke for lunch and small group discussions to identify the most important issues facing the county. Below is a summary of those priorities.

Top Priorities

Protect Agricultural Lands, Open Space, Wildlife, and Water

Protecting land and water resources is still a top priority. New is the linkage of agricultural land and open space protection with water. Folks want to ensure the valley retains water for agriculture as well as future development opportunities. They also want water quality to remain high.

Advance Economic Development

The emphasis here is on creating economic opportunities that are compatible with the pace and scale of life in the county, and do not detract from the area's natural assets. People want more jobs, higher wages, and new businesses. They also want opportunities for youth and increased export of products and services out of the county.

Promote Quality Education

Developing human capital in the county is popular with everyone. This includes formal K-12 education, pre-school and adult education, and education of the public on growth and change as well as responsible land ownership and management.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The level of follow-up and energy devoted to each of the top issues depends entirely on the community.

Custer County has a tremendous amount of social capital – the collective resources in the community to support public values and improve the quality of life for area citizens. Directing this social capital in strategic ways is important for the county to make meaningful progress in a climate of rapid growth and change.

The organizers of the Forum have agreed to sponsor a series of follow-up meetings on the three top community priorities. We hope these meetings can initiate or help coordinate ongoing efforts in each of these three areas. If there is sufficient interest, a subcommittee will be formed to make progress in each area.

Look for announcements advertising strategy meetings on natural resource protection, compatible economic development, and improving educational opportunities in the *Wet Mountain Tribune* this winter.

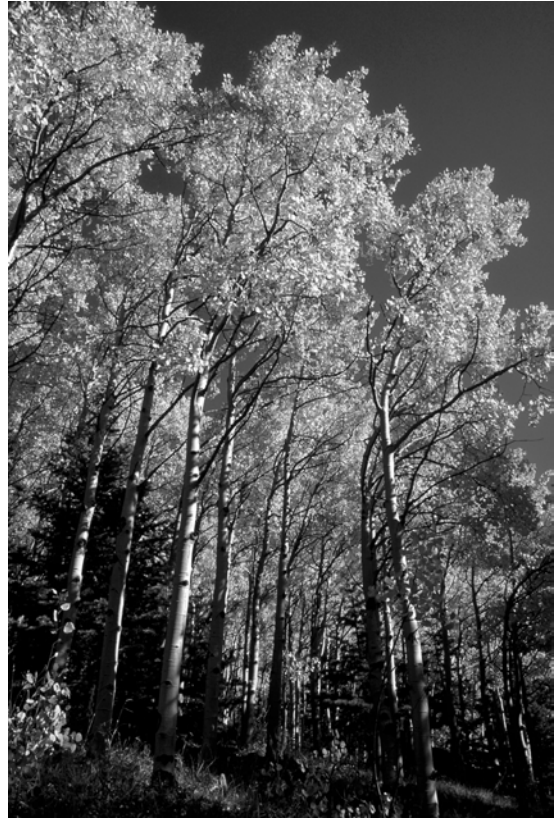


Photo: Bob Thomason

The Community Forum is a great opportunity to talk with neighbors about how to benefit from change.

— Forum participant

This publication sponsored by

Custer Heritage Committee

An informal group of landowners and citizens who are concerned about the future of agriculture and open space in Custer County, Colorado. The Committee works to educate the public about challenges facing agriculture and to protect ranching and open lands.

San Isabel Protection Land Trust (www.sanisabel.org)

A local land trust based in Westcliffe, Colorado that assists landowners in the protection of ranch, farm, and forest lands, wildlife habitat, open space for scenic beauty, and historic resources.

Sonoran Institute (www.sonoran.org)

A non-profit organization that works with communities to conserve and restore important natural landscapes in western North America, including the wildlife and cultural values of these lands.

The Institute's efforts create lasting benefits, including healthy landscapes and vibrant communities that embrace conservation as an integral element of their economies and quality of life.

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