

*open spaces*



*wildlife habitat*

# Keep Custer County Special

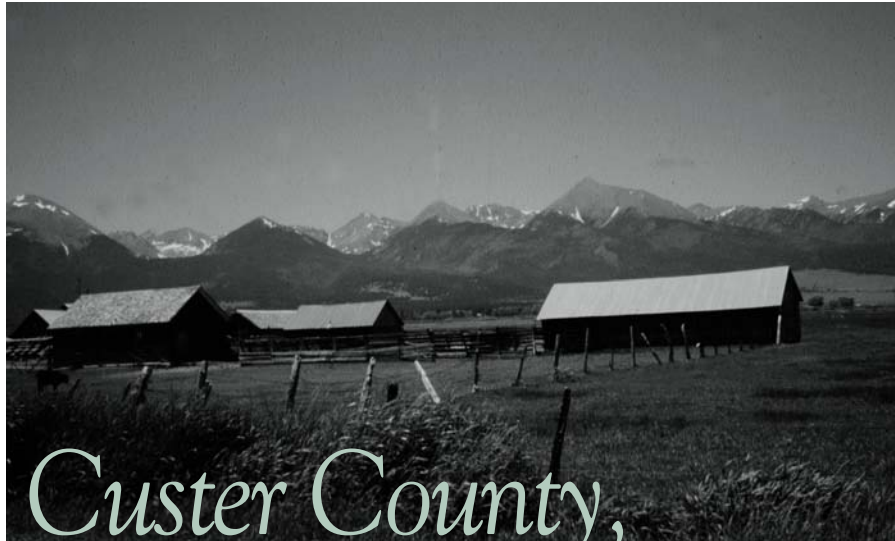
Custer County Community Forum



*good schools*

*clean air & water*

*beautiful views*



# Custer County, Colorado

*In 1869, when the first German colonists arrived in what would later become Custer County, Colorado, a handful of trappers and a few Ute Indians were the area's only inhabitants. These were soon joined by a few hardy British and French settlers. None of the new residents could have known then that 125 years later their new home would become one of the fastest growing counties in America.*

*When gold and silver were discovered in the 1870s and the railroad arrived in 1881, it looked like Custer County might become a major population center, and for a time Silver Cliff was Colorado's third largest city. But the population boom didn't last long. The unforgiving climate, remoteness, and the difficulty of earning a living from the land kept the population low.*

*In the 1990s, good roads, better health care, and the conveniences of modern life made it possible for Custer County to grow significantly. Once the growth started, it took off dramatically. In 1990, the county's population was a little over 1,900. Today it is about 3,500, an increase of 80 percent. Growth has brought with it new opportunities, but it has also raised new challenges.*

As people continue to relocate to this special place, they arrive to a community that is friendly, open, and inclusive. Both newcomers and old-timers are anxious to find a way to deal intelligently with what the future may bring.



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## *It All Began with a Celebration*

On June 25th and 26th, 1999, a broad cross-section of the community came together to celebrate the county's past and present, and to take part in a workshop to begin charting a preferred direction for the county in coming years. About 400 residents attended the festivities on Friday night, and approximately 250 people participated in Saturday's workshop.

Friday night's barbecue, inspirational video, and live music provided a great opportunity for neighbors—newcomers and old-timers, young and old—to have a good time meeting and getting acquainted with each other. The good weather, excellent food, and fine music put everyone in a festive mood. The video on the county's history (produced by Chris Riggs) portrayed a longstanding love for the land and a depth of character in the people who have made this special place their home, whether part time or full time.



## *. . . And Then We Rolled up Our Sleeves and Went to Work*

At Saturday's workshop, residents identified what they value about life in the county, created a shared vision for the future, and began discussing specific steps for realizing community priorities.

The premise underlying the workshop was threefold:

- Informed dialogue can improve the quality of local decisions on public issues and influence how change affects a community.
- Stepping back from the crisis of the day and focusing on the big picture offers the opportunity to decide where people want their community to go in the future.
- Collective decisions based on a foundation of shared values reflect the highest common interest.

The workshop was organized into three breakout groups over the course of the day. Because so many people attended, there were seventeen focus groups. Each group discussed the following topics and then shared their conversations with the other groups:

### VALUES

What do you value about living in Custer County? For instance, why did you move to or buy land in the county, or stay if this is where you were born?

### GOALS

What do you want Custer County to be like in ten years? What would you like to stay the same? What would you like to change?

### TOOLS

What specific short-term and long-term measures should be taken to create the future identified in the earlier discussion? Who should take responsibility for the next steps?

Sara Hebbert, Bill Jack, and County Commissioner Dale Hoag introduced the day's event. They emphasized the need to work as a community to preserve and promote the things that are important to citizens in the county. They also underlined the importance of citizen participation and future planning. Ben Alexander of the Sonoran Institute moderated the workshop. He also gave a slide show during lunch on other rapidly growing communities around the West and their approaches to protecting their unique resources and special assets.

At the end of the workshop, there was an air of excitement as people reaffirmed the common ground discovered in the morning sessions and expressed their interest in helping to direct the future of the county.



## Top Priorities

Participants came up with an impressive list of values, goals, and specific tools. These ideas total more than ten typed, single-spaced pages. While not everyone agreed with every point made during the day, there was significant overlap on key issues and how to address them.

No attempt was made to steer workshop participants in any particular direction. Nor was any attempt made to find consensus on issues where there was disagreement. Instead, discussion focused on areas of general agreement. There was interest in follow-up workshops, better information on important issues, and ways to stay involved in helping to shape the county's future.

What follows is a summary of the key points where workshop participants found general agreement. Top priorities are outlined and next steps identified.

# VALUES

The sense that Custer County is a special place resonated with everyone. What's special about the county includes the natural environment, the people who live here, and the character of the community.

## ENVIRONMENT

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Everyone appreciates the beauty of the valley and surrounding mountains. One participant called the county “the most beautiful place on earth.” The rural character of the county—especially the open spaces, working agricultural operations, wildlife habitat, and beautiful views—topped most group lists. People also valued low population density, clean air and water, access to public lands and protected wilderness, dark skies, and peace and quiet. And folks said they enjoy the towns’ walking scale, easy access, free parking, and historical architecture.

## PEOPLE

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There was an appreciation for how friendly people are and what good neighbors they are. The “Westcliffe wave” was singled out as a sign of goodwill. Groups consistently remarked that there is a sense of inclusiveness and belonging, whether they have been in the county a long time or arrived recently. Participants appreciated the diverse backgrounds and talents of residents, and found the sense of trust and mutual responsibility to be important as well.

## QUALITY OF LIFE

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Participants valued the nature of the community with its small town feel, lack of crime, low traffic, and slow pace of life. The county is a great place to raise a family, has an active and diverse religious community, and is rich with activities and volunteerism. Most people liked the fact that the community doesn't have to change to accommodate tourists and lacks a dominating industry. They also appreciated local health care, quality schools, and the library.

# Goals

## GOALS

As participants looked ahead, they came up with a variety of ideas about what the county might look like in ten years. In general, people wanted to retain the values expressed above, and at the same time improve opportunities and the quality of local services.

### TWO TOP PRIORITIES EMERGED:

#### 1 • AGRICULTURAL LANDS AND OPEN SPACE.

At the top of nearly everybody's list of what to protect were the agricultural lands and open space in the county. People said they value the way of life, heritage, and good neighborliness of the ranching community and their land base. They appreciated the views and beauty of the landscape generally. And they were concerned about the future of critical wildlife habitat.

#### 2 • SCHOOLS. Education surfaced as important to everyone, and was the next clear priority. People wanted a nationally recognized school system that will remain the center of the community. They wanted to see more of an emphasis on academics, better student-teacher ratios, updated facilities and technology, and an improved library. There was also interest in adult education and equivalency degrees.



*“Everyone benefits when we encourage cooperation and appreciate differences.”*

workshop participant

### FOUR OTHER AREAS OF AGREEMENT RESONATED WITH EVERYONE:

1 • **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.** Throughout the workshop people expressed a desire for more economic opportunities and diversity. Folks wanted the downtown to remain the business center, with locally owned and home-based businesses (not franchises), and industries that are compatible with the environment and lifestyle in the county. They wanted to upgrade telecommunications infrastructure and maintain an environment that is attractive to clean industries. There was interest in a stronger agricultural economy and in keeping tourism relatively uncommercialized. People saw the need for more livable wages, job opportunities for young people, and an improved county tax base.

2 • **INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION, AND PROCESS.** The promise of community involvement and participatory democracy appealed to many participants. There was consistent interest in finding ways to keep citizens more informed about county issues, improve communication between the public at large and their elected officials, and influence key issues related to public welfare.

3 • **PRIDE.** It was no surprise that people are proud of Custer County—the history, people, community, and landscape. There was a lot of interest in protecting the historical architecture, maintaining the close familiarity and friendliness, and preserving the rural character and beauty.

4 • **WATER.** There was general concern about future water quantity and quality. Folks didn't want to lose more water out of the valley, and they didn't want development to outstrip underground water supplies. They wanted to ensure water quality against non-point source and septic pollution.

# Tools

## TOOLS



One participant noted that the timing for community involvement seemed right because “it is still possible to shape the future here.”

The afternoon session of the workshop focused on how to protect key values and achieve the goals expressed in the morning sessions. A lot of good ideas emerged. The top priorities are listed below.

### MASTER PLAN

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There was overwhelming support for adoption of a county master plan. People made a number of comments about the plan: Make the plan a "living document" and update it as the county changes; use this forum to help revise and complete the plan; define a clear timeline and deliverables for the plan and complete it within the year; adopt the plan and adhere to it. They believed that the plan should establish a clear standard for the kind of development the county wants in the future and set out guidelines for how to achieve that pattern of development on the landscape.

### GROWTH MANAGEMENT—THE RURAL SIDE

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Participants recognized that a new master plan by itself will not adequately protect important agricultural lands, open space, and wildlife habitat. They expressed support for a variety of tools—regulatory and non-regulatory—that will ensure the protection of these key assets. There was support for enforcing current zoning regulations, issuing fewer variances, and tightening up zoning where it is inadequate to protect against unwanted development. Incentive-based approaches to land protection were popular, especially a purchase of development rights program. Also mentioned were transfer of development rights, conservation easements, and business diversification to ensure the financial viability of agricultural producers. Participants discussed a number of funding mechanisms for protecting open space, including impact fees, grants, fundraisers, and property, sales, and bed taxes. People expressed an interest in learning more about land preservation tools and developing an outreach campaign to generate support for land protection.

### GROWTH MANAGEMENT—THE URBAN SIDE

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The corollary of keeping open space undeveloped is keeping towns vital, compact, and attractive. There were lots of ideas about how to enhance existing town centers. These included financial incentives to locate new residences and businesses in town, and providing quality services inside municipal boundaries. There was interest in making towns more attractive by restoring historically significant buildings. People also wanted more cooperation between the county and the towns of Westcliffe and Silver Cliff to ensure a clear urban-rural boundary and compact commercial development.

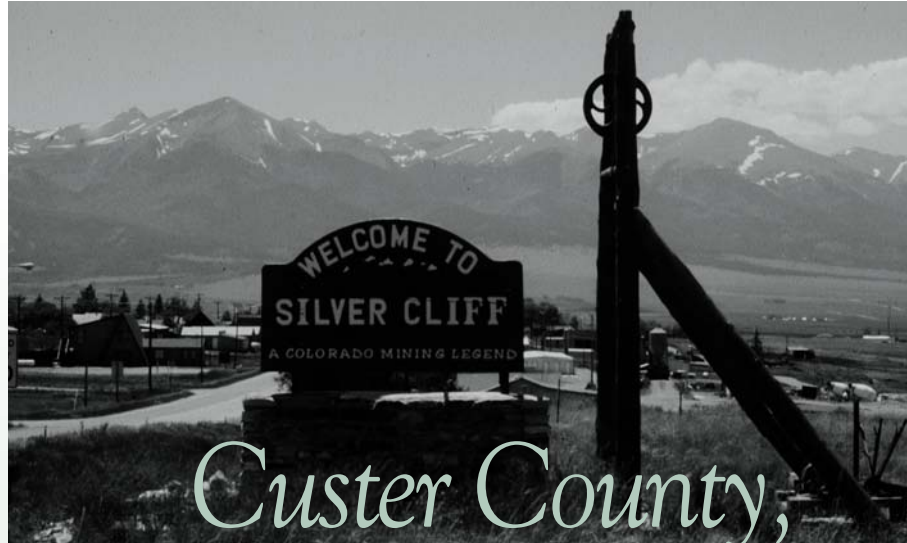
### IMPROVE SCHOOLS

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Participants felt that the first priority is to pass the upcoming school bond, which should create the financial capacity to ensure quality education in coming years. There was support for improving the library, perhaps through additional funding. Participants supported more community involvement (through such means as a talent bank of local residents that the schools can draw on) to strengthen educational offerings.

*“Successful communities need active citizens!”*

workshop participant



# Custer County, Colorado

## *Where Do We Go from Here?*



At the close of the workshop, participants agreed to let the steering committee write and distribute a summary of the workshop and discuss ideas for follow-up workshops and action steps. Participants signed cards indicating their willingness to assist with various tasks and their interest in being kept informed about upcoming events. A number of attendees emphasized the importance of following through on the ideas generated in the workshop. Successful communities need active citizens!

The steering committee would like your help to keep Custer County special. Everyone who would like to lend a hand is encouraged to attend ongoing meetings or get directly involved with specific issues such as adoption of the master plan and passage of the school bond.

There will be two public meetings to discuss the master plan for the county this fall, the first in Wetmore on October 26th and the second in Westcliffe on October 28th. This is a great chance to voice your opinions about a variety of issues facing the county and make sure they are included in the blueprint for the county's future.

The school bond election date is November 2nd. Be sure to get out and vote.

The next Community Forum workshop will be held on November 6th. It will consist of a panel of experts who will explain various open space and agricultural land protection tools, and will be followed by a question and answer session. This event will be a great opportunity to learn more about how to protect the open lands in the county.

### **UPCOMING EVENTS:**

Master Plan Meetings:  
October 26 in Wetmore  
October 28 in Westcliffe

School Bond Election:  
November 2

Community Forum Workshop:  
November 6

*For more information,  
contact the following individuals:*

About the master plan: Paul Snyder at (719) 783-3089  
About the school bond: Sara Hebbert at (719) 783-3343  
About the Community Forum: Bill Jack at (719) 783-2935  
For copies of the video and this summary: Nancy Kendrick at (719) 783-3018

#### **WORKSHOP STEERING COMMITTEE**

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Pat Bailey	Linc Lippincott
Paul Brown	Jim Little
Sara Hebbert	Peggy McIntosh
Bill Jack	Paul Snyder
Nancy Kendrick	Linda Swift

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#### **ABOUT THE SONORAN INSTITUTE**

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The Sonoran Institute is a nonprofit organization with offices in Tucson, Arizona, and Bozeman, Montana. The Institute promotes community-based strategies that preserve the ecological integrity of protected lands, and at the same time meet the economic aspirations of adjoining landowners and communities. Underlying the Institute's mission is the conviction that community-driven and community-inclusive approaches to conservation produce the most effective results over the long run. The Institute can be reached at 520-290-0828 or 406-587-7331.

**Thanks to everyone who made this event possible!**



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