

CHAPTER 11: PARKS, RECREATION & TRAILS

Overview and Background

The *Parks, Recreation, and Trails Element* of the County comprehensive plan focuses on recreational programming and facility needs in the County—something which La Plata County government has historically played only a limited role in providing. The plan element overviews existing conditions, programs and plans; the need for partnerships and intergovernmental coordination; the identification of potential funding sources; and plan recommendations.

In recent years, La Plata County has become a hot bed for new residents and tourists. Much of this interest is the result of the County’s immense scenic beauty, public lands and recreational opportunities. With over 40 percent of the land in the County held by public land management agencies, back country recreational opportunities such as camping, hiking, biking, and horseback riding abound. However, as the County population continues to increase, so does the demand for more traditional recreational facilities such as ballfields, tennis courts, swimming pools, and picnic grounds.

Key Point: *Active recreation refers to land that is managed for high levels of public use, with the purpose of providing a variety of opportunities to the public. This includes such facilities as ball fields, golf courses, playgrounds and picnic grounds.*

While it has traditionally been the communities of Bayfield, Durango and Ignacio that have provided such amenities, shifting demographics would indicate that it may have become more of a County-wide issue in recent years. The 2000 Census indicates that of the approximately 44,000 residents of the County, nearly 28,000 of those residents, or approximately 57 percent, live in the unincorporated County, outside the communities that provide the recreational amenities. In fact, it is the unincorporated County residents who make up the majority of the users of the recreational programs provided by Durango, Bayfield and Ignacio. In 1998, Ignacio reported that more than 80 percent of the participants in its three recreation programs were non-town residents. Bayfield also reported such figures. In 1999, the Town’s estimated population was 1,607, while its recreation program had 1,400 participants. Over 50 percent of the participants were reported to be non-town residents. Durango, which presides over the County’s largest parks and recreation program, also reported such figures, with non-city residents accounting for over 57 percent of the participation in its youth sports programs.

Key Point: *While it has traditionally been the communities of Bayfield, Durango and Ignacio that have provided recreational amenities, shifting demographics would indicate that it may have become more of a County-wide issue in recent years.*

Recreational facilities in the unincorporated County are somewhat limited. The municipal recreation programs often partner with the 9-R School District to utilize school site facilities. Other than school facilities and those found on State and federal lands, recreational facilities in the outlying County are limited to those provided within private developments.

CHAPTER 11: PARKS, RECREATION & TRAILS

Parks, Recreation & Trails Goal

Goal 11.1: To Ensure That the Recreational Program and Facility Needs of County Residents Are Met as the County Grows.

Existing County Recreational Activities

While La Plata County government, itself, does not have a formal parks and recreation function, it has been involved in a number of recreational issues, and on occasion has even provides financial assistance for recreational activities and facilities. These efforts have included:

- 1) **Fairgrounds** – The County fairgrounds has been the historic center for County sponsored recreational activities over the years with equestrian activities, public use buildings, and acreage for fairs and carnivals. A recent master planning effort has set the stage for an overhaul of the physical layout and probable future uses of the facility.
- 2) **Gold Rush Gym** – While no longer in existence, the County had partnered with this private gymnastics group by offering subsidized rent of a County-owned building located at the north end of the fairgrounds. The City has since taken over the gym’s activities.
- 3) **City of Durango Recreation Center** – The County partnered with the City by leasing County-owned land for the recreation center at the north end of the fairgrounds.
- 4) **Trail Issues** – The County has been involved with a number of trail issues in recent years including providing funding for the development of a County-wide trails plan; cosponsoring a Great Outdoors Colorado grant for a trail feasibility study; taking an easement on a trail through the Horse Gulch/Ewing Mesa area; and assisting in finding resolution to the Colorado Trail extension into the City of Durango issue.
- 5) **Equestrian Center** – The County has been active in trying to find a new site for an equestrian center that was displaced as a result of the changes occurring at the fairgrounds.
- 6) **Joint Sales Tax** – The County and the City of Durango utilize joint sales tax revenue to partner with the 9-R School District to improve and/or maintain recreation facilities around the County. This is an annually reviewed partnership.
- 7) **Park Requirements** – As part of Durango Mountain Resort’s development plans, a district park is envisioned, with maintenance of the facility taken over by the Lake Purgatory Metro District.

Key Point: *While La Plata County government, itself, does not have a formal parks and recreation function, it does get involved in recreation issues, and on occasion provides financial assistance to recreation-oriented activities.*

Existing County Regulations and Plans

CHAPTER 11: PARKS, RECREATION & TRAILS

Continued growth in the County will add to the demand for municipal recreation facilities. It will likely lead to residents requesting additional park and recreational facilities for the unincorporated County. Areas of the County experiencing the most growth, such as Florida Mesa, possess the least public open lands or passive recreation areas. As a result, residents in the most-populated and fastest-growing areas of the County have limited access to recreational facilities near their homes.

The County's land use system does address this issue in a limited fashion. The land use code and several of the district land use plans contain generalized requirements and/or objectives regarding park development and recreational use of public lands. **The following is an overview of the treatment of recreational facilities in the County's existing codes and plans:**

La Plata Land Use Code

The land use code contains limited references to recreation facilities within developments. The code is more notable for its omissions than its inclusions. It does not require development of parks within developments, with the exception of some minimal standards for small playgrounds within multi-family developments and mobile home parks. The code also does not require the payment of park development fees, or land dedications, in conjunction with developments.

Key Point: *The County land use code does not require the payment of park development fees, or land dedications, in conjunction with developments.*

District Land Use Plans

Four of the district plans contain limited references to park and recreation issues:

- **West Durango:** Establish a multi-purpose community center building that fosters a sense of community, e.g. meeting room, day care, fire station, etc.
- **Junction Creek, West Durango, Florida Road:** Management of recreational use; trail access; and trail head parking on public land.
- **North County:** Identify potential locations and pursue funding for the development of local parks, playgrounds, garbage collection, a post office and, possibly, a community center to serve area residents. Encourage development to provide public benefits, including recreation areas, trail systems and needed public facilities.

Key Point: *The district land use plans provide a foundation for determining appropriate locations for recreational facilities in the County.*

La Plata County Trails Plan

The County Trails Plan was adopted as an element of the County Comprehensive Plan in June 2000. The mission of the plan is to promote the ongoing development and maintenance of a strategic, well designed network of trails that provide safe, convenient and enjoyable recreation and transportation experiences for

CHAPTER 11: PARKS, RECREATION & TRAILS

all trail users. The plan addresses recreation in a number of ways including improving access to public lands, and ensuring connectivity between neighborhoods.

Key Point: The mission of the County Trails Plan is to promote the ongoing development and maintenance of a strategic, well designed network of trails that provide safe, convenient and enjoyable recreation and transportation experiences for all trail users.

Partnerships and Intergovernmental Coordination

Providing quality recreational opportunities for all residents of the County will require a number of creative approaches. Establishing partnerships and intergovernmental coordination may help to ensure the efficient allocation of resources and a minimization of redundancies.

Local Communities

The City of Durango has taken a number of significant steps in recent years to ensure that the recreation needs of area residents are met. This has included the development of the ***City of Durango Parks, Open Space, and Trails Plan***; the construction of a community recreation center; continued work towards completing the Animas River Trail; and the establishment of an open space acquisition program. Bayfield and Ignacio have also been active in ensuring that recreational programming is available in their communities. These activities have largely been possible because of political support, and more importantly, funding. Funding for these activities comes from sales tax revenues and matching state and federal grants.

Key Point: Funding for recreational programming and facilities comes predominantly from sales tax revenues generated from the sale of goods and services in the local communities.

The City of Durango has recognized for quite some time that a majority of the revenue used for community improvements is generated by residents of the unincorporated County and by tourists. It is partially for this reason that the City has not differentiated between City and non-City residents when assessing program users fees, and has not made a significant issue of the fact that the majority of program users are non-City residents. As the area's population continues to grow and the percentage of non city residents using city programs and facilities also continues to grow, so will the pressure to upgrade facilities and programs. This may require more resources than the City alone may be willing to provide for. It is therefore critical that La Plata County government begin to evaluate potential funding sources that will allow it to further assist with the provision recreational facilities and programs.

CHAPTER 11: PARKS, RECREATION & TRAILS

Key Point: *As the County and the local communities within it grow, the pressure to upgrade and maintain park and recreational facilities and programs may require formal governmental partnerships in order to meet the needs of the community.*

Key Point: *It is critical that La Plata County government begin to evaluate potential funding sources that will allow it to further assist with the provision recreational facilities and programs.*

School Districts

School districts in the County have typically made their facilities available to the local communities. This type of partnership is essential for ensuring that recreational activities continue to be available in areas other than within the confines of each community. Additionally, as school sites are developed and remodeled, local communities should be consulted to determine whether there are any recreational partnership opportunities available.

Key Point: *The use of school site recreational facilities such as ballfields and playgrounds should continue in order to minimize the need to develop additional recreational facilities.*

Land Management Agencies

The Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service, the Colorado State Lands Board, and to a somewhat lesser extent, the State Division of Wildlife, all have the capability of allowing some degree of passive and active recreational activities to occur on the land they manage. The feasibility of strengthening partnerships to provide active recreation facilities on these properties should be evaluated.

Key Point: *The feasibility of establishing partnerships with Land Management Agencies to provide active recreation facilities on properties they manage should be evaluated.*

Land Trusts/Private Entities

While currently narrow in their scope and numbers, land trusts working in La Plata County may at some point in the future provide opportunities for adding recreational amenities. Private land holders and/or corporations in the community may also have interest in forming partnerships that would provide long term land leases or funding assistance.

Key Point: *Land Trusts and private entities should not be overlooked when evaluating potential partnerships for recreational amenities.*

CHAPTER 11: PARKS, RECREATION & TRAILS

Additional Potential Actions and Funding Alternatives

Additional Potential Actions

The County could take additional action in relation to providing recreational amenities for County residents. It could expand upon its incentive-based public benefit criteria system within its district plans to provide density bonuses for providing active recreational facilities within developments. *Active recreational facilities could include such things as tennis and basketball courts, golf courses, playground equipment, community centers, etc.*

Key Point: *The County could expand upon its incentive-based public benefit criteria within its district plans to provide density bonuses for providing active recreational facilities within developments.*

Potential Funding Sources

Sales Tax: As discussed previously in this chapter, local municipalities typically fund recreational programs and facilities through their general fund which is predominantly based on sales tax revenue. La Plata County, as a statutory County, does not have the same taxing authority as its local municipalities, and, as such, takes in far less sale tax revenue as a percentage of its total budget. In fact, the County already collects what it can under State law, 2 percent, and cannot increase beyond that amount. Additionally, budgetary constraints limit the County's ability to make discretionary expenditures beyond commitments it already has.

Key Point: *Budgetary constraints limit the County's ability to make discretionary expenditures for things such as recreational programs or facilities.*

Mill Levy: While raising the historically low mill levy for County property tax payers is a viable alternative for increasing revenues, this option has historically not received much political support.

Key Point: *While raising the historically low mill levy for County property tax payers is a viable alternative for increasing revenues, this option has historically not received much political support*

Capital Expansion Fees: La Plata County does not require the payment of park development fees or land dedication in conjunction with new development. This type of capital expansion fees is quite common in many communities. Like any capital expansion fee, however, such fees are typically passed on to the consumer via higher lot costs.

Key Point: *Capital expansion fees are typically passed on to the consumer.*

Use Tax: Another alternative is a use tax. A use tax is, essentially, a sales tax collected on certain goods purchased outside the County, purchases that can be tracked through auto registrations or building permits.

Key Point: *A use tax is a sales tax collected on certain goods purchased outside the*

CHAPTER 11: PARKS, RECREATION & TRAILS

County, purchases that can be tracked through auto registrations or building permits.

The issue of establishing a use tax in La Plata County received significant discussion in 2001. Local automobile dealers wanted a use tax instituted in La Plata County to level the playing field, so to speak, with auto dealers outside the County who are, theoretically, at a competitive advantage to local dealers because the sales tax is lower in the community where they operate. By instituting a use tax, the purchaser of the auto would be required to pay the “differential” tax at the time that they register the auto in La Plata County. The same could apply to building material at the time of building permit application.

Key Point: By instituting a use tax, the purchaser of an auto outside the County would be required to pay a “differential” tax at the time that they register the auto in La Plata County.

Because the institution of a use tax would require approval of the voters, earmarking the proceeds for a particular use that is supported by the community is the most likely way to get the tax approved. The 2001 ballot initiative revolved around a proposal to direct use tax revenue towards open space acquisition and affordable housing. The measure failed by a 3 to 1 margin in the November 2001 election.

Key Point: The institution of a use tax requires approval of the voters

Recreation District: Another revenue generating option is the establishment of a special “recreation district” which would have the ability to levy taxes for recreational facilities and/or programming. A recreation district would, essentially, have autonomy over how it utilized the funds it raised. This option would not require County involvement once the district was formed. There have been attempts to form special recreation districts in the unincorporated County in recent years. Residents of North County discussed the possibility purchasing a parcel of land on which a community center and a playing field could be built. In the Bayfield area, residents proposed a ballot measure to create a special recreation district encompassing the Town of Bayfield and surrounding areas. The Bayfield ballot measure was defeated in December 1999.

Key Point: A recreation district would not require County involvement once the district was formed.

Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) Funding: GOCO is good source for funding specific planning, development, and acquisition projects. However, GOCO funds are intended as supplemental funds, leveraged by other funding sources and as such would not alone sustain an ongoing parks and recreation effort.

Key Point: GOCO funds are intended as supplemental funds, leveraged by other funding sources.

Summary of Goals, Key Points and Plan Recommendations

CHAPTER 11: PARKS, RECREATION & TRAILS

Goal

Goal 11.1: To Ensure That the Recreational Program and Facility Needs of County Residents Are Met as the County Grows.

Key Points

The following *Key Points* were presented.

- T While it has traditionally been the communities of Bayfield, Durango and Ignacio that have provided recreational amenities, shifting demographics would indicate that it may have become more of a County-wide issue in recent years.
- T While La Plata County government, itself, does not have a formal parks and recreation function, it does get involved in recreation issues, and on occasion provides financial assistance with recreation-oriented activities.
- T The County land use code does not require the payment of park development fees, or the dedication of land, in conjunction with developments.
- T The district land use plans provide a foundation for the determining appropriate locations for recreational facilities in the County.
- T The mission of the County Trails Plan is to promote the ongoing development and maintenance of a strategic, well designed network of trails that provide safe, convenient and enjoyable recreation and transportation experiences for all trail users.
- T Funding for recreational programming and facilities comes primarily from sales tax revenues generated from the sale of goods and services in the local communities.
- T As the County and the local communities within it grow, the pressure to upgrade and maintain park and recreational facilities and programs may require formal governmental partnerships in order to meet the needs of the community.
- T It is critical that La Plata County government begin to evaluate additional funding sources that will allow it to further assist local communities with the provision recreational facilities and programs.
- T The use of school site recreational facilities such as ballfield and playgrounds should continue in order to minimize the need to develop additional recreational facilities.
- T The feasibility of establishing partnerships with land management agencies to provide active recreation facilities on properties they manage should be evaluated.
- T Land trusts and private entities should not be overlooked when evaluating potential partnerships for recreational amenities.
- T Budgetary constraints limit the County's ability to make discretionary expenditures for things such as recreational programs or facilities.
- T The County could expand upon its incentive-based public benefit criteria within its district plans to

CHAPTER 11: PARKS, RECREATION & TRAILS

provide density bonuses for providing active recreational facilities within developments.

- T While raising the historically low mill levy for County property tax payers is a viable alternative for increasing revenues, this option has historically not received much political support.
- T Capital expansion fees are typically passed on to the consumer.
- T A use tax is a sales tax collected on certain goods purchased outside the County, purchases that can be tracked through auto registrations or building permits.
- T By instituting a use tax, the purchaser of an auto outside the County would be required to pay a “differential” tax at the time that they register the auto in La Plata County.
- T The institution of a use tax would require approval of the voters.
- T A recreation district would not require County involvement once the district was formed.
- T GOCO funds are intended as supplemental funds, leveraged by other funding sources.

Plan Recommendations

A number of alternatives and recommendations have been presented in this plan element. Implementation should be achieved through the prioritization and initiation of action items. The *Action Items (AI)* identified below are incorporated into an *Action Item Prioritization Table* included in *Chapter 12: Implementation*.

- AI11.1:** Establish discussions with local municipalities to assess likely future impact of County-wide use of municipal recreation programs.
- AI11.2:** Identify a viable long-term revenue source for future funding of: 1) park facility development and maintenance in the unincorporated County; and 2) existing municipal recreation programs.
- AI11.3:** Evaluate the merits of establishing requirements for the development of private parks within larger developments, and/or park fees-in-lieu of land dedication.
- AI11.4:** Revise district plans to include reference to the County Trails Plan as part of public benefit criteria process.
- AI11.5:** Continue to establish and/or enhance partnerships with local municipalities, land management agencies, and others to assist in the provision of recreation programs and facilities.
- AI11.6:** Evaluate merits of expanding district plan public benefit criteria to include active recreational facilities.

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