

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Land use planning is intended to give residents, property owners and community leaders a means for creating a shared vision for the future development of their community. Authority for planning is granted to counties by the State of Colorado under Section 30-28-106 of the Colorado Revised Statutes. In part, the statute reads:

“It Is the Duty of a County Planning Commission to Make and Adopt a Master Plan for the Physical Development of the Unincorporated Territory of the County”

The La Plata County Comprehensive Plan establishes a framework for planning in the County. Planning is not intended to be a static, one-time event, but an ongoing process that reflects changing conditions in the community. While the comprehensive plan establishes the framework, the ongoing planning process sets forth the specific actions to carry out the plan so the community can work together to achieve its desired future.

***The Comprehensive Plan Is Intended to Guide Planned Growth
While Protecting the Environment
And Enhancing the Lives of County Residents.***

The comprehensive plan establishes a number of goals to guide planning in the coming years. A prioritized list of “action items” in the plan provides a road map for achieving the goals. The goals and action items are based upon the goals and visions established as part of the district land use planning process of the mid 1990's. The district land use plans form the foundation, or baseline, from which the comprehensive plan's various elements have been crafted.

The Comprehensive Plan Also Seeks to Recognize the Diverse Perspectives on Land Use and Private Property Rights Expressed by County Residents.

This introduction includes a brief look back at several planning efforts in La Plata County over the past two decades. It provides an overview of the 2001 Comprehensive Plan's purpose, its structure and its layout. It documents the planning process used during the preparation of the plan. It presents a brief overview of other government entities that influence the plan. Finally, it recognizes that changes may occur to the land use regulatory process in Colorado that could affect the content and direction of the plan in the coming years.

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Background

In La Plata County, the process of planning has been underway for many years. Early iterations of the comprehensive planning process included a master plan prepared and adopted in 1984. It was replaced by a follow-up planning process undertaken in the late 1980s which resulted in the 1990 adoption of the ***“La Plata County Comprehensive Land Use Plan: Element 1-Policy Plan”***. Both of these plans were based on the philosophy that land use regulation should be kept to a minimum except when the health and welfare of County residents was at stake.

The 1990 Plan was the precursor to what today is known as the ***“La Plata Land Use Code”***, the permitting system by which development is regulated in La Plata County. The emphasis of the land use code is the concept of compatibility between adjacent properties and the mitigation of impacts to improve compatibility rather than the imposition of restrictive land use classifications. The intention was to establish standards for new development to ensure impacts to neighbors are mitigated while allowing flexibility in the use of one’s land.

As the mid 1990s approached, however, a county-wide survey indicated that attitudes toward land use regulation in the unincorporated County was shifting (See Appendix 1). This new sentiment suggested that mitigating the impacts of development was only addressing part of the issue. It was felt that without some type of county-wide organization of what types of uses went where, providing essential services in the County would become more difficult and expensive as more development occurred. As a result, a new comprehensive planning process was undertaken. By 1997, the County had established 10 planning districts, eight of which established land use plans to guide growth by identifying preferred land uses types and densities within their district.

The district planning process identified a vision of what each of the districts should look like in the future. Goals and objectives were established; preferred land use types, locations, and densities were mapped; and district review groups were established to watch over implementation of each plan. While each of the plans has its own unique vision, goals and objectives, several prevailing themes tie each of the plans together. These include such things as retaining rural character, accommodating new growth, protecting the environment, respecting private property rights, and ensuring housing affordability.

Plan Purpose and Structure

While the district land use plans share common themes, there are a number of county-wide issues that are either inadequately addressed in the district plans or were not addressed during the district planning process at all. ***While the comprehensive plan is intended to incorporate and uphold the intent of the district plans, it is also intended to provide further detail and guidance to the overall growth management system of La Plata County.***

The Comprehensive Plan Consists of the Following Twelve Plan Elements:

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| 1. Introduction | 7. Agriculture |
| 2. Growth Trends | 8. Airport Area |
| 3. Land Use | 9. Public Safety |
| 4. Transportation | 10. Extractive Resources |
| 5. Housing | 11. Parks, Recreation and Trails |
| 6. Environmental Resources | 12. Plan Implementation |

Chapter 4 and 11 each summarize topics that have already been addressed through separate planning processes. The *La Plata County Transportation Plan* and the *La Plata County Trails Plan* were each adopted in 2000 and are briefly summarized and incorporated by reference into the 2001 Comprehensive Plan. **Chapter 3: Land Use** incorporates by reference the *District Land Use Plans*.

Each primary plan element is organized in the following manner: 1) an overview and background of the issues is provided; 2) the plan elements goal or goals are identified; 3) analysis is provided for the plan element; 4) goals and key points are summarized; 5) Plan recommendations including specific action items are identified.

Within each plan chapter certain issues have been highlighted for recognition as important facts or recommendations, and are identified as “**Key Points**”. These key points help to clarify the significant aspects of each plan element for the reader. Many, but not all, of the key points lead to **Action Items**-specific actions that should be taken to implement the plan.

The Plan Implementation chapter is structured differently. It is intended to outline strategies for implementing the plan. It provides a prioritized list of action items that should be undertaken to ensure the plan recommendations become a reality.

Plan Preparation Process

La Plata County’s 2001 comprehensive planning process actually began in the mid 1990s with Phase I, the creation and adoption of the district land use plans. Phase II of this program was initiated in 1999 by identifying approaches for dealing with issues of county-wide concern, those that overlap the district plans and ultimately affect the cost of living and/or quality of life of all County residents.

The framework for the Phase II document was initially established with input from the County Planning Commission, a number of community focus groups, and staff. Several public forums were held in the summer of 1999 at which members of the community shared their perspective on issues of concern ranging from housing, public safety, utilities, agriculture, recreation, open space, and a number of other topics.

Over the course of the next two years, planning staff, in conjunction with a planning consultant, worked with the Planning Commission, the Board of County Commissioners, and the public to establish a set of working papers which helped to set the stage for the plan’s main features. The working papers titled “*La Plata County Comprehensive Plan: Framing the Discussion*” were widely distributed during the fall of 2000. Nearly one hundred written and oral public comments

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were collected during that period and modifications were made to reflect those comments.

Between January and March 2001, five informal planning commission public work sessions were held to gather public input relative to individual plan topics. A facilitator walked the public and planning commission through a set of draft planning policies. The meetings were well attended with a session on agriculture drawing well over 100 participants. Nearly 15 hours of public testimony was received during these meetings.

All meetings were publicized via press releases to the major local media outlets and a number of print ads appeared in the Durango Herald. Herald and Pine River Times reporters attended several of the public work sessions and prepared a number of pre-meeting issue articles as well as post-meeting outcome articles.

From the background research, public input, and the guidance of the Planning Commission and Board of County Commissioners, a draft plan was written and presented to the Planning Commission for review/discussion and process direction in early June 2001. Five additional work sessions were held with the Planning Commission and Board of County Commissions between June and August to finalize the draft plan. The draft plan was then distributed to local media outlets and widely publicized for public comment. Two public hearings were tentatively schedule for late September and early October to gather final public comment prior to consideration for adoption by the La Plata County Planning Commission.

Relationship to Other Public Entities, Plans and Regulations

The Comprehensive Plan and its implementation tools are intended to be used in conjunction with a number of other public entities, and their plans and regulations. Following is a overview of a number of those public entities and their relationship to the 2001 La Plata County Comprehensive Plan.

Local Municipalities

The City of Durango and the Towns of Bayfield and Ignacio all have adopted comprehensive plans which include, among other things, land use and transportation elements which overlap into lands regulated by La Plata County. The County also enters into a multitude of agreements with these entities regarding issues ranging from road maintenance to revenue sharing.

Southern Utes and Ute Mountain Utes

La Plata County includes approximately 176,000 acres of Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Tribal lands located in the southern portion of the County. Recognized as sovereign nations by the Federal government in the late 1800s, the regulatory function of La Plata County government does not apply to tribal lands. None-the-less, issues that transcend political boundaries require a degree of interaction and cooperation. This interaction has led to a number of formal and informal agreements between tribal and non-tribal interests. Appendix 2 includes a list of those agreements.

Federal and State Land Management Agencies

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With approximately 41 percent of land in La Plata County controlled by Federal and State land management agencies--Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Colorado Division of Wildlife, and the Colorado State Land Board, the coordination of activities and sharing of information is critical. Whether it be information of plans for controlled burns or plans for a new development proposed near interface lands, coordination will help to ensure that comprehensive planning policies and strategies are met.

Colorado Department of Transportation(CDOT)

Activities of the Colorado Department of Transportation have significant ramifications for the residents of La Plata County. The proposed upgrade of US Highway 160 and south 550 through the County will have a lasting effect on traffic and development patterns throughout the County. The coordination of County land use and transportation goals with those of CDOT will help to ensure consistency between the two entities.

The Changing Landscape in Colorado

With significant population growth expected to continue in the coming decades, the debate over the effects of growth and its impact on residents' quality of life have risen to primary importance. This debate has led to a number of citizen and legislative efforts to radically change how land use is regulated in Colorado. While most initiatives failed in both 2000 and 2001, it is likely that new initiatives will be forwarded in 2002 or 2003.

This plan has attempted to address the most common aspects of a community comprehensive plan. It has not, however, attempted to anticipate and incorporate all aspects of any potential constitutional or statutory changes that may occur in the coming years. As a result, this plan may require significant modification in the coming years if major changes to the land use regulatory process in Colorado occur.

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