

# ***CHAPTER 8: PUBLIC SAFETY***

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## **Overview and Background**

The ***Public Safety Element*** of the comprehensive plan is intended to provide an overview of several public safety issues affecting residents of La Plata County. The provision of timely and adequate law enforcement, and fire and emergency medical services are paramount as the County continues to grow. So is thorough emergency preparedness planning, search and rescue services, and a number of other hazard mitigation issues such as wildfire and floodplain management.

## **Public Safety Goal**

**Goal 8.1: To ensure that, as the County grows, emergency preparedness planning and the provision of emergency services continues to meet the growing demands of residents and visitors.**

## **Law Enforcement**

The La Plata County Sheriffs Office is the primary law enforcement agency for the unincorporated County. Other agencies that provide law enforcement include: the Durango, Bayfield and Ignacio Police Departments; Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Police; Colorado Bureau of Investigation; Colorado Division of Wildlife; Federal Bureau of Investigation; Immigration and Naturalization Service; and United States Forest Service.

The Sheriff's Office is also responsible for operating the jail and the juvenile detention facility. Demand for law enforcement services has grown significantly in recent years. Between 1997 and 2000 the number of incidents investigated by the Sheriff's Department has increased by 25 percent from 17,737 incidents investigated to 22,100 (estimated). In order to meet service demands, the Sheriff added a number of additional deputy positions in the detentions division and the public safety division in 2000.

***Key Point: Between 1997 and 2000, the number of incidents investigated by the Sheriff's Department has increased by 25 percent***

The County's 88-bed jail opened in 1987, was intended to meet the County's needs until 2010. Increases in crime and tougher sentencing laws have led to significant overcrowding at the jail. The average daily jail population increased 83 percent between 1997 and 2000, surging from an average of 63 inmates per day in 1997 to 115 inmates in 2000. While planning is underway to meet the demands of this increasing population, a request of residents to finance a new jail was defeated in a November 2000 ballot initiative.

## ***CHAPTER 8: PUBLIC SAFETY***

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***Key Point:*** *Between 1997 and 2000, the average daily jail population increased by nearly 83 percent.*

### **Fire and Emergency Medical Service**

Fire protection in the County is provided by the Animas, Upper Pine, Hermosa, Los Pinos, and Fort Lewis Mesa volunteer fire districts and the city of Durango's full time paid fire department. The United States Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management fight fires on public lands in the County. Demand for fire protection services increases as the County grows. The Animas Fire District, the County's largest, had 78 calls in 1978, 800 calls in 1999, and an estimated 1000 calls in 2000.

***Key Point:*** *The Animas Fire District, the County's largest, had 78 calls in 1978, and an estimated 1000 calls in 2000.*

Meeting increased demand is contingent upon adequate funding and the availability of volunteers. The ability to do this varies among the County's fire districts. In 1995, Animas Fire District received voter approval of a bond issue and property tax increase, allowing them to construct several new stations, purchase new equipment, and hire several firefighters to man their main station during daylight hours when fewer volunteers are available. Other fire districts in the County have been less successful at passing property tax increases. In the mid 1990's the Upper Pine and the Los Pinos Fire Districts lost ballot initiatives.

***Key Point:*** *Meeting the increased demand for emergency services is contingent upon adequate funding and the availability of volunteers.*

With the exception of the Animas Fire, most of the districts are finding that it is becoming harder to attract volunteer fire fighters. The Hermosa Cliffs Fire District recruits volunteers county-wide because it cannot attract enough volunteers from within its own district.

In 2001, the Animas, Hermosa Cliffs and Los Pinos Fire Districts, and the City of Durango entered into a joint service agreement which establishes a single operating entity for the four districts, in essence, consolidating the four districts into one— ***The Durango Fire and Rescue Authority***. As part of this agreement, Mercy medical's ambulance service also becomes part of the authority. This consolidation provides a number benefits for County residents by reducing service redundancies and territorial discrepancies, while also reducing response times and increasing efficiency.

***Key Point:*** *Fire District consolidation has provided a number benefits for County residents by reducing service redundancies and territorial discrepancies, while also reducing response times and increasing efficiency.*

Even with the consolidation, the adequate provision of services is very much a function of development location and design. And while fire districts routinely provide comment on project

## ***CHAPTER 8: PUBLIC SAFETY***

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design as they move through the County's development review process, they typically do not play a major role in determining the location of new development.

***Key Point: Continued cooperation between government agencies and fire districts is critical to ensuring the provision of high-quality emergency services.***

As presented in ***Chapter 4: Land Use***, over 11,000 residential structures have been placed throughout the County since 1978. This scattering of home sites results in: 1) an overall increase in the number and time of responses; and 2) the need for additional facilities located further out in the County. Other issues such as proper road and driveway design and maintenance; as well as adequate road naming and address signing are important considerations for ensuring good access and minimum response times. The availability of an adequate water source is also an important consideration.

***Key Point: La Plata County Government, having a certain degree of control over the location and design of developments, has the ability to regulate development as a means of ensuring the continuation of adequate services.***

Another factor in the regulation of development is the fire code. The County's fire districts have endorsed the adoption of the 1997 Uniform Fire Code which would give them broad authority over building and subdivision design standards and other fire hazard mitigation measures. It is likely that they will request the Board of County Commissioner's endorsement of its adoption in 2001.

### **Emergency Preparedness Planning**

The County operates the Office of Emergency Management which oversees emergency planning, emergency services coordination and search and rescue operations. A part time director is the office's only paid staff person. It is anticipated that the Office will likely have to hire at least one full time staff person in coming years in order to meet growing demands for emergency services.

***Key Point: It is anticipated that the Office of Emergency Management will likely need at least one additional full time staff person in the coming years in order to meet the growing demands for emergency services.***

### **Search and Rescue**

The County Sheriff's Office and the County Office of Emergency Management coordinate search and rescue operations. The County's search and rescue workers are a trained volunteer force. Consistent with the demand for other emergency services, search and rescue incidents continue to grow concurrently with increases in the County's population and tourism. In recent years, the difficulty of many search and rescue operations has increased due to the growing popularity of high intensity outdoor sports such as climbing, kayaking and mountain biking. This has created a need

## ***CHAPTER 8: PUBLIC SAFETY***

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for greater training and more complex rescue apparatus in order to reach victims in remote and rugged locations.

***Key Point:*** *The popularity of high intensity outdoor sports such as climbing, kayaking and mountain biking has created a need for greater training and more complex rescue apparatus in order to reach victims in remote and rugged locations.*

### **Wildfire Hazard Mitigation**

In recent years, the risk of wildfires has increased throughout the County due to significant development in forested areas along with the build up of tree densities and underbrush in most forests. During dry summer months, particularly in drought years, wildfires have been known to cause considerable property damage. Fortunately for La Plata County, it has been spared from the catastrophic wildfires that have impacted other communities in recent years.

While some fires can be allowed to burn naturally in order to maintain or restore the health of forest lands, out of control wildfires need to be prevented through cooperative, community and land management planning.

***Key Point:*** *Out of control wildfires need to be prevented through cooperative, community and land management planning.*

In 2001, a wildfire risk assessment was conducted in La Plata County to identify specific areas in the County susceptible to a significant level of wildfire risk. The assessment indicated a large number of residential subdivision with a high degree of wildfire risk. The outcome of the assessment was to provide information to fire districts, land management agencies, property owners and local governments so that they could take the actions necessary to reduce and prevent out of control wildfires.

***Key Point:*** *The 2001 wildfire risk assessment provides La Plata County with invaluable information that can be used during the development review process to ensure wildfire risk in developing areas can be minimized*

### **Flood Plain Hazard Mitigation**

La Plata County regulates development in flood plains via standards established in the National Flood Insurance Program. The program establishes development standards to be used on projects located within flood plain areas designated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Some areas of the County, such as the Florida and Pine River drainages, do not have FEMA flood plain designations, and as such, applying specific development standards to projects near these waterways is difficult.

## ***CHAPTER 8: PUBLIC SAFETY***

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***Key Point:*** *Some areas of the County, such as the Florida and Pine River drainages, do not have FEMA flood plain maps, and as such, applying specific development standards to projects near these waterways is difficult.*

### **Summary of Goal, Key Points and Plan Recommendations**

#### **Goal**

**Goal 8.1:** To ensure that, as the County grows, emergency preparedness planning and the provision of emergency services continues to meet the growing demands of residents and visitors.

#### **Key Points**

The ***Key Points*** presented in this chapter include:

- U Between 1997 and 2000, the number of incidents investigated by the Sheriff's Department has increased by 25 percent.
- U Between 1997 and 2000, the average daily jail population increased by nearly 83 percent.
- U The Animas Fire District, the County's largest, had 78 calls in 1978, and an estimated 1000 calls in 2000.
- U Meeting the increased demand for emergency services is contingent upon adequate funding and the availability of volunteers.
- U Fire district consolidation has provided a number benefits for County residents by reducing service redundancies and territorial discrepancies, while also reducing response times and increasing efficiency.
- U Continued cooperation between government agencies and fire districts is critical to ensuring the provision of high-quality emergency services
- U La Plata County Government, having a certain degree of control over the location and design of developments, has the ability to regulate development as a means of ensuring the continuation of adequate emergency services.
- U It is anticipated that the Office of Emergency Management will likely need additional staffing in the coming years in order to meet the growing demands for emergency services.

## ***CHAPTER 8: PUBLIC SAFETY***

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- U The popularity of high intensity outdoor sports such as climbing, kayaking and mountain biking has created a need for greater training and more complex rescue apparatus in order to reach victims in remote and rugged locations.
- U Out of control wildfires need to be prevented through cooperative, community and land management planning.
- U The 2001 wildfire risk assessment provides La Plata County with invaluable information that can be used during the development review process to ensure wildfire risk in developing areas can be minimized.
- U Some areas of the County, such as the Florida and Pine River drainages, do not have FEMA flood plain delineations, and as such, applying specific development criteria to projects near these waterways is difficult.

### **Plan Recommendations**

Plan recommendations are included as *Action Items (AI)*. They should be implemented through their prioritization and initiation. The Action Items summarized below are incorporated into an *Action Item Prioritization Table* included in Chapter 12.

- AI8.1:** Continue active role in the funding and supporting law enforcement and emergency service agencies.
- AI8.2:** Continue to work cooperatively with special districts and volunteer groups to assist them in pursuing their missions.
- AI8.3:** Continue to coordinate with public safety and emergency service providers to ensure adequacy of development standards and review process.
- AI8.4:** Determine whether wildfire hazard mitigation standards should become further integrated into the development review process.
- AI8.5:** Request completion of FEMA flood plain mapping throughout County.

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