



Land Use Code overhaul to improve functionality, responsiveness

Dec. 4, 2016

One of the things that distinguishes La Plata County is the diversity of its locale. From high mountains to high desert, dense urban development to sparse rural neighborhoods, arid regions to those with adequate water resources, commercial enclaves to agricultural havens, new communities and those with deep historic roots: ours is a county that offers something for everyone. That dynamic set of characteristics is why La Plata County continually draws new residents and visitors, and presents us with an opportunity to cultivate the unique personalities various pockets of our county possess as our community grows. In order to do that well, though, La Plata County needs a new Land Use & Development Code.

Perhaps the most frequent complaint we on the Board of County Commissioners receive is that our current Land Use Code is, to put it mildly, difficult to navigate and fraught with uncertainty. This circumstance is bad for all involved: those seeking to get projects approved in La Plata County, the county staff working with applicants, neighbors and the broader community who are unaware of what is allowed and what projects are proposed for their neighborhood, and ultimately, the county's ability to shape its future and accommodate healthy growth.

So we are going to fix this problem by revising the Land Use & Development Code to create a regulatory framework for growth that acknowledges and responds to the diverse character of La Plata County's many regions. This is not a small effort, and many of you may be skeptical about it as we begin the process – and for good reason. Bluntly stated, past attempts to create new Land Use Codes have not gone well. In 2007, after hundreds if not more hours of citizen involvement in crafting a new code, the project was shelved when the previous Board of County Commissioners recognized – rightly – that the document did not address many of the issues essential to so important a document as a Land Use Code. Furthermore, the 2007 code did not fully incorporate the unique needs and concerns of our county – a disconnect that was not an acceptable outcome.

Finally, in the 2007 version, the code was not constructed upon an up-to-date comprehensive plan – a relationship that is essential to the success of a land use code; and well-managed growth. We recognized in 2012 that updating the La Plata County Comprehensive Plan was critical to establishing the goals and policy framework for how the county grows. Under a systematic public process led by the Planning Commission and facilitated by county planning staff, the Comprehensive Plan update is near completion – it is on track for wrap-up in the first quarter of 2017. The Planning Commission has completed updates on the chapters.

As a board, we are absolutely committed to success in crafting a Land Use Code that reflects and responds to the varied needs and values of our community while providing builders, neighbors, developers, staff and the county at large with certainty and predictability in navigating the land use process. We recognize that there is a long way to go in this effort, and have begun the process by selecting a consultant, Kendig Keast Collaborative. Though we sought local firms to contract for this work, none applied and we are very pleased that KKC has extensive experience helping communities draft land use codes and planning documents that respond to diverse, and at times divergent, needs across their landscapes.

To begin scoping the issues, concerns, opportunities and challenges in La Plata County, Kendig Keast staffers have met with various stakeholders regarding our Land Use Code – folks representing agriculture, developers, the business community, specific issue representatives, neighborhood and district plan groups, architects, engineers, land use agents – to learn about what our code’s shortcomings are, and what the priorities are for the revised code.

During these initial listening sessions (Nov. 9-10) key themes and concerns emerged including:

- Inclusive code development process to ensure all interests are heard
- Unpredictability of the current code
- Procedural streamlining (the amount of time, effort, and money it takes to navigate the existing process)
- Urbanization around designated growth centers in the county
- Agricultural preservation
- Water availability and distribution
- Managing growth
- Revising the county’s road improvement standards to coordinate with demand and level of service
- Clarity from county leadership on the goals of this project
- District planning and implementation
- City/county coordination to plan for areas that may eventually be annexed
- Conservation of resources and open space

These points are very much in line with what we hear every day from folks who are concerned about the Land Use Code, and exemplify why we need to improve it.

Please let us know what’s important to you. We have an online tool for gathering your input and very much want to know your priorities for an improved Land Use Code. Find that form here: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/LUC_stakeholder. Additionally, we are sending regular updates that are also available online; to receive these via email, sign up at <http://eepurl.com/cnvEa>. We will keep you updated during this instrumental public process and urge you to get involved. Feel free to contact me at any time with questions or comments about the Land Use Code revision.

Brad Blake is chair of the La Plata County Board of County Commissioners. Reach him at (970) 382-6219.