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**THE DILEMMA OF COUNTY AND MUNICIPAL
OPEN SPACE PROGRAMS:
THE CASE OF JEFFERSON COUNTY, COLORADO**

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Outdoor Recreation:
Promise And Peril in The New West

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The Dilemma of County and Municipal Open Space Programs: The Case of Jefferson County, Colorado

by Ron Holliday

I. Summary

Twenty-five years ago, the citizens of Jefferson County, Colorado, passed some of the most visionary legislation in the country. They voted to tax themselves to preserve open space lands -- for themselves and for generations to come.

Thanks to all that effort, Jefferson County was one of first counties in the nation to develop an aggressive open space preservation program and today has one of the best in the country. The result of this self-imposed sales tax is evident everywhere in Jefferson County. That ½ cent tax, producing over \$309 million since the program was created, has helped to preserve more than 31,000 acres of open space lands, build nearly 150 miles of trails and bike paths, and provide funding for neighborhood parks and playgrounds, athletic fields, golf courses, wildlife areas and recreation centers.

II. Growth brings new challenges and demands for Open Space

- A. Growth in Colorado has been a major issue of the 1990s. Two years ago, Jefferson County became the most populous county in the state, surpassing the City and County of Denver. Located to the west of Denver and incorporating both plains and mountain areas, the county has grown from 438,430 in 1990 to an estimated 510,600 at the end of last year.
- B. Many of the new residents of the state and the county were attracted to Colorado because of its active lifestyles. That desire for active recreation areas puts further demands on the county's Open Space program. Many residents want far more extensive recreational development -- neighborhood and regional park facilities to

provide for both youth and adult needs as well as the preservation of large tracts of open lands for scenic enjoyment.

- C. Use of already existing Open Space parks for active recreation has also escalated with new forms of recreation such as mountain biking. While many residents enjoy the quiet and solitude of Open Space parks while hiking or riding horses, others see the opportunity for mountain biking on challenging terrain in breathtaking surroundings. The combination of uses sometimes presents conflicts among park visitors and creates further challenges in the planning and management of Open Space lands. Because of the potential conflicts, some residents are even suggesting dual-trail systems -- one for hikers and equestrian use, the other for mountain bikers. Of primary concern on resolution of these issues is the open space resource and balancing preservation and recreation objectives.

III. The biggest challenge is “balance”

- A. The county has diverse natural and urban environments. It has large cities with urban recreation needs. It has unique wildlife habitats, trail corridors, historic and archeological sites and greenbelt buffers that need to be maintained. It has beautiful land formations on mountain and plains that should remain pristine. It has to weigh the needs of six-year-old soccer players, mountain bikers, bird watchers, softball teams, hikers, cliff dwelling raptors, and deer and elk herds.
- B. Balance has been the key challenge throughout the first 25 years of the Open Space program -- to balance the use and preservation of the open lands within the boundaries of Jefferson County with the needs and desires of its people. It's a balancing act almost as critical as the environment it's helping to preserve.

- IV. Developing strong partnerships with cities and recreation districts
 - A. In 1980 the citizens of Jefferson County voted to allow the sales tax to also be used for development of recreational facilities. Jefferson County recognizes the importance of providing close and accessible recreation and open space opportunities to the urban population and has developed strong partnerships with the cities and recreation districts to achieve that goal.
 - B. A population-based formula currently allocates approximately \$103 million of Open Space funds to cities in Jefferson County, and about two-thirds for use at the county levels. In addition to the cities' one-third share, the Open Space fund has provided more than \$28 million to the 11 cities and towns and nine recreation districts in the county to help with their open space and recreation projects through joint venture grants.
 - C. Property acquired on behalf of a city is deeded directly to the respective city by the Board of County Commissioners. Lands acquired in unincorporated areas are either managed and developed by Open Space staff or leased to the governing recreation district for management and development.
 - D. Active sports types of uses, such as baseball and soccer, are considered to be within the realm of city and recreation district operations. Jefferson County typically acquires land for active recreation areas and offers help in developing it through joint ventures with the cities and recreation districts on a case by case basis. Management of these areas is done by the city or recreation district having jurisdiction over the facility. Recent efforts have included acquiring large tracts of land for regional facilities that can be enjoyed by more than one jurisdiction.

- V. A five-county Mountain Backdrop project preserves scenic views
 - A. Jefferson County's partnerships in preservation efforts have grown beyond its boundaries. The county is spearheading a five-county cooperative project focused on the scenic preservation of the mountain backdrop along the Front Range of Colorado.

- B. The “mountain backdrop” is defined as the eastern foothills of the Colorado Rocky Mountains where the great western plains meet the mountains. It is where the ecosystems and land-use patterns of the plains and foothills merge. The views of the backdrop are symbols of Colorado’s natural beauty.
- C. The Front Range Mountain Backdrop Project is a cooperative effort among the five counties lining the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains from the Wyoming border to Pikes Peak – Jefferson, Boulder, Larimer, El Paso and Douglas counties and Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO).
- D. The project is another outgrowth of concern over a rapidly growing population and its impact on mountain views. Between 1970 and 1990, the population in the five counties increased by 86 percent, with more than 600,000 additional residents. More and more people want to build homes on the steep mountain slopes, which can present wildfire hazards, create erosion problems, disturb wildlife, put strain on infrastructure and detract from the views.
- E. A \$50,000 planning grant was received from GOCO to begin organizing the project, defining the assets and liabilities of the 150-mile Front Range corridor. Great Outdoors Colorado grants a portion of lottery funds to state and local agencies for proposed projects, many that include the preservation of open spaces and natural areas. The grant for the Mountain Backdrop study was matched by \$10,000 from each of the five counties.
- F. All five counties involved continue to develop strategies to implement further conservation efforts. The counties are trying to achieve the preservation of the mountain backdrop by public acquisitions, easements, cooperative efforts with outside groups and encouraging private landowners to preserve and conserve their property.
- G. Jeffco has been preserving portions of the mountain backdrop for more than two decades. The first purchase on the backdrop was a 69-acre parcel in 1973. Since then, the county has preserved more than 15,000 acres of land along the backdrop, covering a distance of 28 miles. The Five County effort is now at the stage of

seeking potential partners in preservation methods and minimizing use impacts in areas where preservation can not be achieved.

- VI. A master plan guides the open space program
 - A. The Jefferson County Board of Commissioners establishes policies and directs the Open Space Program. Deciding which properties should be acquired, how much money should be spent on acquisitions versus development and maintenance, which lands should remain undeveloped and which should be used for parks, trails, playing fields, golf courses or picnic areas are some of the many decisions that must be made.
 - B. The county commissioners appoint a citizen advisory committee to review and make recommendations on acquisitions and major expenditures. Members of this Open Space Advisory Committee represent all areas of the county including the cities, recreation districts and the county as a whole.
 - C. The Open Space staff is as diverse as the areas they serve. Credentials include professionals in natural resources, park and recreation, planning, architecture, real estate acquisition, wildlife biology, nature interpretation, and volunteerism.
 - D. The key document used as a guide for making Open Space decisions is its master plan. The master plan projects long-term needs and goals for 20 years and, updated about every five years with extensive public input, provides an action plan for the next five years.
 - E. To update the plan approximately every five years, Open Space staff collects new data such as census and growth information, new wildlife habitat and range studies, updates inventories of public lands and policies affecting open space preservation. Attempts are made to predict growth and locations of intensive growth. Public workshops are held for citizen review and comment before a draft of the document is presented to the county commissioners for adoption.

VII. Jefferson County's Open Space program continues its mission

- A. The citizens of Jefferson County appreciate how fortunate they are to have a program in place to preserve and maintain the county's natural resources.
- B. Funding generated by the ½ cent sales tax supporting the Open Space program can not continue to provide for the purchase of all the land some of the citizens want preserved.
- C. Open Space staff are exploring a wider range of options for land preservation to effectively deal with the growth issue. Conservation easements, working closer with organizations dedicated to land preservation, land donations, testamentary gifts, and cooperative agreements and leases go beyond the simple, outright purchase of open lands as alternative methods of preserving open spaces. Plan Jeffco, the citizens' group that spearheaded the creation of the Open Space fund 25 years ago, is still dedicated to the program. Plan Jeffco is currently proposing a \$160 million bond initiative, called Save Open Space, or S.O.S., to accelerate the land acquisition program over the next 25 years.
- D. The mission of the Open Space program remains "to provide a living resource of open space lands and waters throughout Jefferson County for the physical, psychological, recreational and social enjoyment of present and future generations."
- E. Jefferson County continues to be a desirable place to live, due in large part to its Open Space Program. It's Jefferson County's successful Open Space program that allows lands to be used for the entire spectrum of active and passive uses, building and maintaining strong partnerships with its cities and towns to provide open spaces, needed recreational facilities and the protection of the unspoiled mountain views.