



# CHAPTER 1: A VISION FOR CLEAR CREEK COUNTY

## WHAT IS A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN?

The Master Plan for Clear Creek County is one of the primary policy tools at the disposal of the Planning Commission and Board of County Commissioners that can be used to advise decision making at the county scale. It is a comprehensive document that brings together issues that are often looked at in isolation and finds ways to unite them.

Comprehensive Planning in Colorado is enabled through Colorado Revised Statutes (CRS) 30-28-106 (1977). This statute grants the Clear Creek County Planning Commission the authority to adopt such a plan to guide the development of unincorporated lands within the County. This Master Plan is intended to supplant the previously adopted Master Plan (2004). In pursuing this update, the statute directs county planning commissions to undertake studies and surveys, identify growth and demand for county services and recommends content to include recreation and tourism uses.

While the contents and direction the Master Plan takes is at the discretion of the Planning Commission, a truly effective Master Plan can act as a guidebook for complex issues such land use, economic development, transportation, housing, natural resources, and hazard mitigation. As an advisory document, the goals established in a Master Plan are often broad, but can be more clearly articulated through specific strategies and policies that support broader goals.

An essential step in developing a comprehensive master plan is to define the appropriate “planning horizon” or the duration in time outward from the present within which the policies of the Master Plan can



be relevant and used as an effective guide for decisions. For some communities the nature of planning means a long-view is appropriate. For others, changes are so fast that even looking out five years is wrought with challenges.

Based on the feedback from the Citizen Advisory Committee to the Master Plan Update project, consultation with County Planning Staff and public engagement efforts, the approach taken for this Master Plan was two-fold. Firstly, the Master Plan provides some overarching long-range goals that go forward 20 years or so. The Master Plan also identifies a series of short, mid and long-term implementation approaches to help propel this plan forward. This strategy allows the Master Plan to keep a focus on the long-term but act more dynamically in the short to mid-term. Like any planning process it must continually reexamine issues and adapt as needed.

As a guide for the future, this document is meant to be read and used in a variety of ways. First and foremost, it is a tool for decision makers to gauge their choices about future development in Clear Creek County. Changes to County Land Use Code may occur over time to meet the goals, policies and objectives of the Master Plan. Beyond the vision and polices, the Master Plan also includes implementation priorities and actions. These may serve County staff, public officials and others in setting the course of action for the years ahead.

The Master Plan is also meant to be embraced by and accessible to the Clear Creek County community. As discussed below, this public input was vital to this update and the ideas expressed are directly reflected in the language and graphics of the Master Plan. Whether it is private developers seeking to move forward with their projects or communities engaging in local planning efforts, the Master Plan should be their first reference to understand the overall values and outcomes that the County desires.

## WHY UPDATE?

The 2004 Master Plan established a strong foundation for this Update. This new Master Plan brings forward much of the “bones” from the 2004 Master Plan, but has revised, reorganized and repackaged them in support of new or changing issues and with an eye towards making this document more approachable and useable for County residents and staff.

As discovered through the review of baseline conditions (discussed in more detail below) and through the interactions and conversations with residents of Clear Creek County, many things are changing that will have a profound influence on the future. Issues including transportation (the difficulty of being on the I-70 corridor, lack of community mobility), housing (affordability, accessibility and availability), recreation (addressing changing community needs) and the desire to better define where growth is preferred are all front and center in this Update.

But perhaps most notable among these many changes is the evolving future of the Henderson Mine. As the County's biggest private employer and a major contributor to regional tax revenue, the decline in mining activity instigated by international market factors currently does and will continue to have a profound impact on the County. This impact is both fiscal and perhaps more importantly, transformational to the character of the communities within the County. Mining in Clear Creek County has long been an attractor for new residents who have worked hard, raised children and invested both time and money



into making Clear Creek County their home. Mining has been a cornerstone of the regional economy and provided safe harbor when other business sectors have been stressed. Its legacy is wrapped up in both the people and places of Clear Creek County.

While the change in activity at the Henderson Mine is not something the County can directly control, it has helped spur a renewed focus on both long-range economic development planning and a review/assessment of the critical services that the County provides. The County has been active in exploring changes to its economic portfolio and increasing the diversity of the businesses that make up its employment base. The County has been examining all departments and their financial commitments to better understand where revenue is generated and where it is spent. Economic development strategy and fiscal discipline are important themes woven into this Master Plan.

Through this process the community reflected on its approach to economic development and stability. One overarching theme kept emerging: the need to maintain a high quality of life. The concept of quality of life for Clear Creek County residents certainly includes economic opportunity, but it also weaves together aspects of the natural and scenic environment, the County's rich culture and heritage, the prevalence of recreation and the importance of distinct subareas. As the policies of this master plan state, it is of the first and foremost importance that ensuring the qualities that have made Clear Creek County a valued place for so many are embraced and nurtured as the community moves forward.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE MASTER PLAN**

The Master Plan is structured around seven chapters.

Chapter 1 establishes the "Foundation" for the plan: highlights the process to update the Master Plan, important community inputs and key themes affecting long-term planning and culminates in the articulation of the Vision for Clear Creek County.

Chapter 2 goes into more detail on the baseline issues influencing long-term planning in Clear Creek County, including demographic and economic conditions, housing and transportation challenges and the status of key community assets and infrastructure.

Chapter 3 brings together the key themes and Vision and the issues and challenges facing the County into a Policy Framework. This series of statements articulate the objectives the County will pursue in support of the shared community Vision.

Chapter 4 summarizes the key goals and objectives related to economic development. While economic development issues are woven into many elements of the Master Plan, the importance of highlighting economic development goals and strategies was clear given the changes underway in Clear Creek County.

Chapter 5 outlines the goals and objectives for other elements of this plan (transportation, housing, cultural resources, etc.) Again, while many of these elements overlap, the Master Plan articulates key goals for each and supportive strategies to help realize those goals.



Chapter 6 introduces the Future Land Use Plan and associated land use goals and strategies. Land use is, arguably, one of the most important elements of a master plan. It helps affirm the position of the community as it relates to where and what form development should occur. For this Master Plan, a series of “guiding principles” for future land use decisions has been crafted based on public input and roundtable discussions with the Citizen Advisory Committee.

Chapter 7 brings all the elements of the plan together towards implementation. This chapter introduces a series of “implementation toolkit” components; fiscal, operational and regulatory tools that can be further considered as Clear Creek County moves forward in supporting its vision, policies and goals.

## COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Building a Master Plan that has broad community support is essential for its success. The outreach efforts conducted for this update of the Clear Creek County Master Plan often leveraged other recent efforts to explore community needs, understand changing conditions and evaluate the impact of such changes. This included consideration of ongoing economic development efforts within the County, aligning Master Plan goals, objectives and policy with positions taken in the County's Hazard Mitigation Plan and better consideration of community-scale (i.e., sub area) planning objectives. In addition, the Update process included a series of important engagement efforts to hone in on specific concerns and interests.

Highlights of the major elements of this engagement process are provided below. A more detailed summary of the Public Support and Engagement process is provided as Appendix I.

### Stakeholder Interviews

Beginning in September 2015 and extending through January 2016, a series of stakeholder interviews were conducted to help inform the Master Plan. The composition of the stakeholders was diverse, including representatives from important County departments, Housing Authority, SOLVE, etc. Additionally, several Clear Creek County commissioners were also interviewed. The nature of these interviews were generally free-form and open-ended and covered a wide variety of topics. Summaries of these interviews are provided in Appendix I.

### Economic Focus Group Discussion

On December 1, 2015 an economic focus group discussion was held with local stakeholders and business leaders to understand the changes in the Clear Creek County regional economy that have occurred in recent years and to consider strategies and tools for the future economy of the region. To ensure a wide range of viewpoints, participants included representatives from the Clear Creek County Economic Development Corporation and the Henderson Mine, as well as local business owners in real estate, recreation, dining and hospitality, and the professional services industries. Discussion centered on necessary updates to previous economic development plans and policies, findings from the baseline economic and demographic data, and important issues and strategies to address in the Master Plan Update. Primary discussion topics included the phasing out of Henderson Mine, the disconnect between affordability and availability of housing options, the value in the proximity to the Denver Metro, creating employment opportunities for young families, the need for improved communications infrastructure,



and the importance of leveraging the natural resource and recreation assets within the community in economic development strategies. For more detail about the Economic Focus Group session see Appendix I.

## Review of Past Studies, Plans and Documents

Clear Creek County has been very active in the past several years in continuing to plan for its future. Beyond the 2004 Master Plan, the County has been active in exploring issues such as housing, open space, cultural resources, recreation, economic development and transportation. In addition, the County has been (teaming with Gilpin County) been working on a new Hazard Mitigation Plan, the current draft of which has been considered as part of this planning process.

## Citizen Survey

Prior to major public engagement efforts, the Master Plan Update process included the distribution of a Citizen Survey. The survey was distributed to a randomly selected list of 3,000 property owners in the County. Over 631 responses were collected (a very strong 21 percent response rate). An online version of the survey was also made available to the broader public. This data, while considered separately, provided another window into the attitudes and concerns of Clear Creek County residents (and some visitors).

The Citizen Survey was structured to address a wide variety of topics ranging from quality of life, recreation, economic development and housing. Overall the data suggests that the quality of life in Clear Creek County is ranked high; as a place to live, retire or raise a family. The notable exception in these rankings was Clear Creek County as a place to work or start a business. As affirmed by the baseline demographic data, a majority of survey respondents work outside of Clear Creek County.

The key takeaways from the Citizen Survey include the following:

- Supporting infrastructure improvements (roads, broadband), expanding outdoor recreation and tourism-oriented marketing, expanding the diversity of economic activity and increasing the job market were all identified as “best opportunities” for Clear Creek County. All of these, with the exception of expanding recreation and tourism, were also identified as “biggest challenges”.
- Nearly 30 percent of those who work indicated that they own their own business. Perhaps not surprisingly, finding ways to better support local businesses (incentives and improving the business climate) were also identified as potential opportunities.
- A high percentage (about 10 percent) of respondents indicated that they work at home or telecommute to work. The demographic baseline affirms a similar situation. This “work at home” situation is likely highly correlated to local business ownership.
- Recreation was indicated as “very important” by a strong majority of respondents of which the vast majority (87 percent) “personally engage” in recreation in Clear Creek County. Recreational pursuits were diverse including hiking, biking, off-highway vehicles (i.e., snowmobiles and ATV's) and passive recreation like bird/wildlife watching. Getting outdoors is clearly important to the residents of Clear Creek County. When asked about “new” opportunities for recreation, the most commonly identified



improvements related to trails or access to trails. Community parkland and open space was also widely identified as an important new opportunity.

- With so much of Clear Creek County set aside as open space or within National Forest Systems lands (about 90 percent of the land area), the importance of preserving open space is a well-established value of County residents. When asked in the survey whether “enough” lands have been set aside, the results were essentially split with a plurality of respondents simply indicating “not sure”. This perhaps reflects the importance of communicating the purpose and value of open space in the decision-making process. When asked about the purpose of open space acquisition, the survey results noted environmental resources, recreation and scenery preservation as the top three.
- Echoing the baseline evaluation of housing issues, the results of the Citizen Survey indicated a majority of housing in the County was built prior to 1980. While approximately 70 percent of respondents indicated it was not difficult to find “affordable and/or acceptable,” the remaining 30 percent or so indicated spending more than 30 percent of household income on housing; a threshold indicative of stress in affordability. This situation should also be considered in light of the high percentage of commuting workers in the County which influences the cost of living for County residents.
- From the baseline assessment it became clear that County residents largely commute to/from work and have more limited access to health care services and/or grocery-retail opportunities. Given this, the Citizen Survey asked several questions about access to healthcare and grocery/retail issues.





- For most respondents the transportation issues related to health care access were only moderately important with 27 percent indicating it as “highly important”. What was more commonly identified as important was the range of healthcare services, the quality of those services and the access to specialization. Comments from respondents reflected a diverse range of opinions related to access; many noting the lack of providers in the region.
- Access to grocery/retail establishments was responded to similarly as with healthcare access. The majority of respondents noted the lack of grocery/retail in their area, the lack of variety and the cost of goods sold as important considerations.

A complete summary report on the Citizen Survey is provided in Appendix I. Within this appendix is also the raw collected data and survey comments collected as part of the process.

### **Citizen Advisory Committee**

To help better explore some of the details of the Master Plan Update process, a Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) was assembled. This group of 11 individual residents reflected a broad cross-section of the Clear Creek County community; members from established municipalities and more rural areas, younger and older in age, long time and more recent arrivals to the County.

The CAC met five times between January and June during the Master Plan Update process; reviewing information on changes in the County, reflecting on the vision and policy framework for this update and materially helping to shape the future land use plan and associated goals and objectives for critical plan elements. In their final meeting, the CAC met alongside the Planning Commission to review the themes, framework, and policy they had shaped throughout their involvement and discuss the main ideas.

Complete summaries of CAC meetings and materials can be found in Appendix I.

### **Recreation Working Group**

Although technically “outside” of the Master Plan update process, a citizen-led “Recreation Working Group” was formed during this process to help move the discussion on recreation policy forward. The Recreation Working Group also met periodically during the process and presented a set of draft goals and policy considerations to a joint Planning Commission – Citizen’s Advisory Committee meeting in May of 2016. These goals and policies recognized the importance of recreation in the region (as further exemplified in the Citizen Survey results) as well as the importance of continuing to plan for and shape future recreation (and more broadly tourism) outcomes in light of resident needs and as part of an economic development strategy.

### **Public Engagement Meetings**

Public meetings provide another opportunity for the community to listen and participate. One of the key lessons learned from the review of past efforts and the public engagement process was the independent spirit of the people of Clear Creek County. Whether through the challenge of living in a rural and rugged environment or through an inherent desire to shape their own futures, the people of Clear Creek County are uniquely individual. This is not to imply that they don’t recognize the value of community. On the contrary, Clear Creek County is a region dominated by strong communities; whether incorporated



municipalities or less formal population centers within unincorporated lands. People identify with these places AND with Clear Creek County. The importance of understanding this local-regional dynamic is critical to the success of this Master Plan. County-scale policies will find a better path for implementation through a more local scale.

The first public meeting was held on February 16, 2016 at the Clear Creek Metropolitan Recreation Center in Idaho Springs. At this meeting, approximately 45 attendees were introduced to the planning process and the major elements to be included in Clear Creek County's updated Master Plan. The baseline conditions for the different municipalities and sub-areas within the county as well as the county as a whole were then presented to community members. Included in the baseline conditions was data from the American Census Survey, the Colorado Department of Local Affairs, and the Clear Creek County Community Survey that was conducted for this project in 2016. While baseline conditions helped to identify current issues within the county, an audience polling exercise was done to elaborate on these conditions. Comments generated during this exercise were compared to previous survey data and helped to identify the highest priority issues.

On March 28, 2016 a second public meeting was held at the Idaho Springs United Center which allowed community members to provide input on actual components of the Master Plan. With the help of the CAC, versions of the vision and policy framework were drafted and shared at this meeting. After a brief presentation that explained the planning process, a series of posters conveying the draft vision and policies were discussed in an open house format that allowed community members (approximately 50) to provide feedback. Additionally, current land use maps were also provided to begin the discussion around future use and areas where use had changed since the last Master Plan update.

A final public meeting was held on June 6, 2016 at the Georgetown Community Center at which approximately 20 citizens attended. This meeting's presentation emphasized the processes used to form the vision statement, policy framework, future land use map, and goals of the master plan. The presentation also highlighted how these various components are intended to work together throughout the master plan document. Following the presentation, the group began the open house portion of the meeting. Citizens engaged in discussion with the consulting team and county staff, clarifying any remaining questions about the plan and planning process. During this time, citizens were asked to submit their feedback on the presentation, which was summarized on boards to facilitate commenting.

Complete summaries of each public engagement meeting and their accompanying materials can be found in Appendix I.

## **Adoption Process**

The plan was initially presented to the Planning Commission on September 21st. Over three working and regular sessions of the planning commission, revisions were made to the Master Plan Document. The Master Plan was brought to a public hearing on December 7th, 2016.



## IMPORTANT THEMES FOR THE MASTER PLAN

Throughout the Update process important “themes” emerged that helped inform the community’s reconsideration of the 2004 vision and the policies that help support it. From the community survey the importance of recreation was evident in the overwhelming importance of recreation to residents of the county. From interactions with the Economic Focus Group and stakeholder interviews the idea for diversity in economic activity was a constant message.

The importance of “quality of life” and being efficient was often mentioned at public meetings, through the work of the Citizen Advisory Committee and in comments from the Citizen Survey. Supporting independent thinking was obvious from the review of the many sub regional (area) plans. Connectivity has been a long-standing element of the County, exemplified by the continued pursuit of the Greenway Plan and the many intergovernmental agreements that exist.

Overall nine (9) important themes emerged that influenced the Vision and the overall policy framework of the plan. The icons below will appear elsewhere in this document to help reinforce how these key themes influenced the Vision, policy framework, goals and strategies that comprise the Master Plan.

### KEY THEMES

 Quality of Life	 Resiliency	 Recreation
 Built Environment and Land Use	 Mining	 Distinct Areas
 Economy	 Natural Environment	 Cultural Resources



## THE VISION FOR CLEAR CREEK COUNTY

A community vision statement is an expression of the aspirations for the future that a community holds close. It helps set the perspective through which the community looks at future changes and provide a touchstone against which those changes can be measured.

The 2004 Vision Statement for Clear Creek County was reflective of its time:

**“Actively pursue economic plans, build on the existing quality of life, and preserve the natural and cultural resources all for the benefit of the County and its citizens.”**

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From these inputs an updated Vision Statement emerged:

## A VISION FOR CLEAR CREEK COUNTY

*“Improve upon the existing quality of life in Clear Creek County by supporting the development of a diverse economy, protecting natural and cultural resources, becoming a more resilient community, encouraging recreation, and recognizing the County’s distinct areas.”*



This statement introduces several important things into the Master Plan

1. It asserts that improving the "quality of life" for the residents of Clear Creek County is the foundation of this long-term plan.
2. It connects and balances "development of a diverse economy" with important considerations like the protection of natural and cultural resources, being resilient to changes and assuring recreation is something that is "encouraged".
3. It builds upon the independent attitude of Clear Creek County by emphasizing the recognition of the distinct areas within the County as part of the way that quality of life can be improved.

