

2010 Major Update to the
Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan



Local Food and
Sustainable Agriculture
Policy Briefing Paper
October 2010

Prepared by City of Boulder and Boulder County staff

This paper is intended to serve as a starting point for community discussion of changes to the policies in the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan. The ideas contained in the paper do not represent city policy or staff recommendations. This paper is one of five briefing papers. The Planning Board and City Council identified the following two broad focus areas for the major update following public input: urban form/ community design and sustainability policy changes. The briefing papers have been prepared to provide a framework for discussion of these focus areas.

Local Food & Sustainable Agriculture

Introduction

Many issues related to **local food supply and sustainable agriculture** were raised in the Comprehensive Plan update's first phase. Residents requested that Boulder take steps to actively encourage, promote, expand and sustain local food production for local consumption. Food choices and their method of production represent one of the most significant impacts that we humans have on the world around us. How the community feeds itself is directly related to meeting economic, social and environmental sustainability goals. Access to safe food, including locally grown food for all Boulder residents, should be a top priority for our community. A growing number of people in the region are "food-insecure". Community Food Share reported a 20% increase in the need for food assistance from both their member agencies and their direct service programs over the past year.

Roots in progressive food movements run deep in Boulder County and have contributed to the dynamic and thriving natural foods industry. Many local restaurants specialize in providing local ingredients in their food, garden to table processes have been initiated in local schools, and the demand for a year-round farmers market are all indications of people's growing interest in and demand for locally produced food.

This paper will discuss how issues related to food and agriculture are currently addressed in the Comprehensive Plan and what issues and challenges should be addressed as part of the 2010 major update to the comprehensive plan.

How is local food and agriculture currently addressed in the Comprehensive Plan?

Agricultural Sustainability – City and County will promote a viable agricultural economy and continued agricultural production in the Boulder Valley. *Policy 1.14 Agricultural Sustainability*

Preservation of Agricultural Land, Rural Areas & Amenities – City and County will preserve existing rural land use and character where agriculturally significant lands exist, and encourage the preservation and sustainable use of agricultural lands as a current and renewable source of both food and fuel and for their contribution to cultural, environmental and economic diversity using a variety of means. *Policy 2.08 Preservation of Rural Areas and Amenities, Policy 2.09 Agricultural Land*

Agricultural Economy – City and County recognize that a viable agricultural economy is an important tool for preserving rural character and providing an opportunity to grow and/or market locally produced food, fiber and horticultural products. *Policy 5.13 Role of Agriculture*

Delineation of Rural Lands - Significant agricultural lands are identified and delineated as Area III Rural Preservation Area. *Policy 2.10 Delineation of Rural Lands*

Multi-purpose Use of Public Lands - Multi-purpose use of public lands will be emphasized. However, in consideration of potential use of parks and open space lands, only activities consistent with the original intent of acquisition will be considered. *Policy 3.08 Multi-Purpose Use of Public Lands*

What issues and challenges should be addressed in the Plan?

Context

While there is a significant amount of agriculturally viable land within the Boulder Valley, other areas within Boulder County and the region offer a wider range of food production capacity, having more suitable soils. Some of this land is owned by city and county open space.

Agricultural land in Boulder County (public and private) beyond the Boulder Valley offers a wide range of potential food production. Much of the agricultural land owned by city open space in the Boulder Valley is best suited for forage production for livestock due to limitations of the soil (rocky, steep, prairie dog presence) and of the availability of water for irrigation (less than full season availability, no ability to store for later use, no ability to get smaller sized water flows). Forage production or raising livestock can be done in a range of ways: conventional, natural or organic.

Recently there has been demand for organic agricultural production on city and county-owned open space within the Boulder Valley. Currently the most common type of agricultural production on city owned open space lands is natural beef production. Grain crops, animal feed, sugar beets, and organic vegetable production is occurring on Boulder County-owned lands outside the Boulder Valley. These two agencies work together to provide land and water resources for natural and organic food production in areas suitable for a range of food production. Further information needs to be gathered and evaluated to determine whether other open space lands are suitable for food crop production including evaluating soil types and conditions and water availability.

The Boulder County Commissioners have created a new advisory committee, the Food and Agriculture Policy Council with the mission “to promote a locally-based food and agricultural system that advances Boulder County’s economic, environmental and social well-being, through research, education and public policy recommendations.” A high priority is to preserve and improve the viability of county agricultural lands and to increase the ability of the community to feed itself. The process is underway and some recommendations are expected to be developed later this year and into 2011.

City and county staff are also participating in the Northern Colorado Regional Food Assessment Project which will identify opportunities and needs related to the existing local food system in Larimer, Boulder and Weld Counties.

Because food production capacity is most effectively addressed on a regional level, city Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP) staff is working jointly with county staff in this work as it relates to publicly and privately owned lands within the Boulder Valley and will work with the county to assess and implement policies or practices that are developed through this process. Recommendations from these processes will be incorporated in policy changes for the 2010 update as they are available; however if the process is not complete, additional information and direction will be incorporated into the plan at the next mid-term update.

The Boulder Farmers' Markets are very successful, at capacity and are having to turn away farmers. City staff is initiating a process for the 13th Street, Central Park and Civic Center area that may include exploration for a year-round market.

Issues to consider in the Comprehensive Plan update:

- **Food Production on City-Owned Lands within the Boulder Valley**

As residents have become more aware of the benefits of fresh produce, and the costs and impacts of importing food, there has been a significant demand for more locally produced food, particularly sustainably produced food. Residents have requested that the city explore ways to increase sustainably produced food on city-owned lands. As people are more concerned about local food production, the city will continue to manage agricultural uses within the context of multiple uses on city Open Space and consider expanding food production as appropriate.

A commonly held belief is that conventional food production, processing and distribution have a higher contribution to climate change than organic or natural production due to high energy and water needs. While this may be the case in some circumstances, there are other considerations to take into account in assessing the full sustainability of any approach or process including labor needs, local market saturation, capital needs, suitability of soil, water supply and others.

The current practice for agricultural production on city-owned lands is to promote sustainable practices appropriate for the specific lands. The city's recently adopted Grassland Management Plan spells out specific strategies needed to maintain city owned native grasslands and their associated species. "Sustainable practices" can include a range of production types that take into account land suitability, water availability, invasive species, etc. Current city policies limit the application of pesticides to those specifically approved by the city IPM program. Currently no similar constraints on chemical fertilizer use exist. Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP) policy currently does not allow genetically modified crops to be grown on OSMP lands. As the work with the regional processes progress, there will be more information available about sustainable food production and recommended practices for the Boulder region that will inform on-going sustainable food production.

- **Water Availability and Distribution**

While open space land may be available, water rights are sometimes separated from the land for other uses. Maintaining the availability of water rights for use on suitable agricultural land is imperative to making food production viable. There are sometimes deficiencies in the infrastructure needed to deliver water to the areas with suitable soils. Education of gardeners on water saving irrigation methods would be a useful tool to encourage local food production and make it financially viable. The city and county, as owners of many shares in various ditch companies, may need to explore budgeting funds to assist ditch companies in better maintaining and enhancing the ditch and irrigation infrastructure.

The City of Boulder actively pursues acquisition or contractual control of water rights and ditch rights historically used on land within the city boundaries to minimize the need to secure agricultural water from outside the city boundaries if additional municipal water supplies are required in the future. This also assures a stable amount of water is available for community use by preventing local water rights from being purchased and transferred out of the Boulder Creek basin. The city allows larger-lot single-family or agricultural properties that are annexing to the city or connecting to the municipal water system to keep water rights for irrigation use with a condition to sell to the city later when the property redevelops. The city often will lease-back use of irrigation water to the selling party for a time. The city leases most of its surplus annual municipal raw water supplies to agricultural users. As demand for locally produced food continues or land suitability is re-evaluated, the city and county may cooperatively develop a strategy to focus available water under their control on the area's most suitable land for food production.

- **Food Production in Urban Areas**

The interest in home and community gardening, raising chickens and constructing greenhouses or other structures to grow food is increasing. While the Comprehensive Plan is currently silent on the issue of supporting individual or community efforts to grow food, this is an issue that has been repeatedly raised through the Comprehensive Plan process. Existing regulations allow gardens, accessory structures and some urban livestock with some limitations. Currently watering home vegetable gardens is treated as part of the resident's water budget and is not differentiated from water for other landscaping. Watering home and community gardens can be cost prohibitive for food production to be a viable use depending on the size and type of production. In a drought, water for vegetable gardens would be limited in a one in one hundred year drought (Stage III) and would be eliminated along with most outdoor irrigation in a 1 in 1000 year drought (Stage IV).

Zoning regulations for community urban gardens are being developed to support these uses and address any potential impacts to neighborhoods. The city may need to review regulations and processes to remove barriers and encourage more innovative approaches to urban gardening including use of rooftops for multi-family and commercial buildings. More

opportunities for small growers to sell their excess produce should be evaluated including those that might grow within publicly or privately owned community gardens.

There has been growing demand for community garden space, particularly for people in multi-family housing where personal or private open space is limited. There are also new organizations committed to growing food and/or providing fresh produce for populations that are food-insecure.

- **Access to Locally Produced Food**

One of Boulder County's Food and Agricultural Policy goals is to improve access to locally produced food. Also, this is an important way for local farmers to remain economically viable while offering local residents access to fresh produce and locally produced products. The existing farmers markets are well supported and seek additional times and locations to operate. The city is working to support the farmers market, facilitating its expansion into a year-round market including finding additional locations.

Appropriate locations and uses for food production and distribution may need to be evaluated as demand for locally or regionally produced food continues to grow. Currently the Comprehensive Plan policies recognize the importance of an agricultural economy but lack more specific direction about uses, priorities or removing barriers.

What are suggested measures or changes to address these issues?
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Sustainable Practices on City-Owned Land: Add a policy defining sustainable practices on city-owned land. Sustainable practices might include food production methods that are healthy, do not harm the environment, respect workers, are humane to animals, provide fair wages to farmers, and support farming communities.

Support Regional Processes: Define the issue of food production as a regional issue with regional (if not global) solutions. Policies should support work with regional processes to define sustainable practices for the Boulder Valley as well as the region including continued work with Boulder County Food and Agriculture Policy Council (FAPC) to implement the Strategic Plan and consider implementation of recommendations from the Northern Colorado Regional Food Assessment Project. If recommendations from this process are available by early 2011 they will be incorporated in the BVCP policy revisions.

Promote Access to Local Food: Develop a policy supporting local farmers markets, local food production, processing, storage and distribution infrastructure, working to improve consumer access and removing barriers to local food processing and sales.

Promote Urban Gardening: Develop a policy supporting community and home-based urban agriculture to allow more community gardens and innovative ideas for growing or raising food, including use of the rooftops on multi-family residential and commercial buildings, see examples below.



Organization: Currently the policies related to food and agriculture are scattered throughout the plan. This is an issue that bridges all areas of sustainability and the policies should be clear and easy to find.

Public Requests for BVCP Policy Changes

In the public request process at the start of the Comprehensive Plan update Everybody Eats!, a project of the Rocky Mountain Peace and Justice Center, requested policy revisions to actively encourage, promote, expand and sustain local food production for local consumption. The information in the request strongly influenced the issues and challenges as well as the recommendations in this briefing paper, especially acknowledging that this is an important component of sustainability for Boulder. Many of the requested changes regarding agricultural policy will be specifically addressed in other regional processes focusing on sustainable agriculture practices and will be incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan or other planning documents as appropriate and as they are available.

Focus Group Review

An informal focus group consisting of representatives of various local food organizations and county staff provided feedback to city staff on a preliminary draft of the Local Food and Sustainable Agriculture Briefing Paper. Although they were not a decision-making group and did not represent all viewpoints found in our farming community, they provided valuable input that helped refine these materials. Below is a list of focus group participants:

Growing Gardens & Boulder County Food and Agriculture Policy Council: Ramona Clark
Everybody Eats!: Rich Andrews (also associated with Transition Boulder)
Boulder Parks and Open Space/CSU Extension Agriculture Resources staff: Adrian Card

Key themes from the Focus Group

- Revise the **description of land suitability** in the Boulder Valley – there are places very suitable to vegetable production or “human food” production.
- The paper is missing information about **raw water and agricultural uses** / ditch policies / infrastructure needs.
- Add information describing the need for small gardeners or growers to have **access to market**.
- Include information on why local food is important –growing number of people in the areas who are **food in-secure**.
- Support agricultural **education efforts**.
- One member encourages being bold - recommends **no GMOs** on public lands in Boulder Valley.

Focus Group Meeting Notes

- Change description in context to more accurately reflect suitability of land within Boulder Valley for vegetable production - not all beef production. Request mapping information- it has been done.
- Major omission in the paper is the lack of discussion about water for ag use. If the city is looking to promote ag uses we need to change conditions to make that happen. Water rights acquisition for prime ag lands would be important. Ditch rights and use for ag is important. Getting water to where it needs to go - dispensation to smaller growers and households that have access to raw water.
- Discussion of cost for urban water for ag use – there are differing ideas about cost of water. Community gardens don't pay for water currently but it would be a big expense and is in other areas.
- Infrastructure for the transportation of water is a key area that will need attention and resources if more agriculture is to happen in the future. This infrastructure has been neglected over the past many decades. This includes maintenance to ditches to improve delivery capacity. Protecting trees and wildlife habitat is often in conflict with water

- Urban food access - need to find ways to support small garden retail - ability to accommodate smaller or individual growers to sell surplus food somewhere / how as farmers market is at capacity.
- The community gardens managed through the parks & recreation dept. don't allow sales because it is defined as a 'recreational' program. This may not be the case for other gardens where people want or need to sell a small amount of surplus. Could consider "neighborhood food hubs" for distribution. Neighborhood or roadside stands regulations or temporary permits should be considered.
- Support for "farmer cultivation center" - education concept with the intent to have a place to train new farmers and potentially connect with city or county open space for places for them to farm.
- Non-food ag - feed for nonfood animals -might consider priority for human food production.
- Need to add to paper - critical issue that a large portion of county residents are food-insecure. Look at civic forum stats - especially for unemployed or under-employed.
- Be bold in the paper and develop policy - no GMOs on public lands. Integrated Pest Management (IPM) important as well - in tune with true sustainability - involves weed management and invasive species - also relates to prairie dog management.
- City could encourage planting of fruit or nut trees to encourage urban gleaning programs; also edible landscaping or at least consider not precluding these.
- Consider issues of allowed uses on rural or ag properties - need to allow some processing of foods (jams, jellies, other products) so that growers can have more viable products.

Key Policies in the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan related to Food & Agriculture

I. Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan Policies

1. General Policies

The Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan is a joint plan between the city of Boulder and Boulder County that provides shared responsibility for planning and development in the Boulder Valley. The general policies section of the plan provides the overall planning framework for sustainability, intergovernmental cooperation, growth management and annexation.

Boulder has a long tradition of community planning. Most of the key policies that have guided the development pattern in the Boulder Valley have not changed since the 1977 Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan was first adopted, and many of them stem from long-standing community values. Boulder's planning has focused on respecting our unique community identity and sense of place, city-county cooperation, and keeping Boulder a distinct, separate and compact community. They represent a clear, articulate vision of our desired development pattern including:

- Recognition of sustainability as a unifying goal to secure Boulder's future economic, ecological and social health.
- Commitment to open space preservation and the use of open space buffers to define the community.
- Use of urban growth boundaries to maintain a compact city (the boundaries of the service area have remained virtually unchanged since first developed in 1977).
- Encouragement of compact, contiguous development and a preference for infill land redevelopment as opposed to sprawl.
- Provision of quality urban spaces, parks and recreation that serve all sectors of the community and trails and walkways that connect the community.
- Commitment to preservation of natural, cultural and historic features that contribute to defining the unique sense of place in Boulder.
- Commitment to programs that support respect for human dignity, human rights and the inclusion of all residents in community and civic life.
- Recognition of the importance of a central area (Downtown, University of Colorado, the Boulder Valley Regional Center) as a regional service center of the Boulder Valley and a variety of subcommunity and neighborhood activity centers distributed throughout the community.
- Recognition of the importance of the Federal Scientific Laboratories (NOAA, NIST, NCAR), the University of Colorado, and the private scientific and technology community that contributes to the economic vitality of Boulder.
- Commitment to a diversity of housing types and price ranges to meet the needs of the Boulder Valley population.
- Commitment to a balanced multi-modal transportation system.

Sustainability

1.01 Community Sustainability.

The city and county adopt the sustainability principles in policies 1.01-1.05 to interpret and guide implementation of the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan.

The city and county recognize:

- a) the critical interrelationships among economic, social and environmental health;
- b) the way we produce, trade and consume impacts our ability to sustain natural resources;
- c) social and cultural equity and diversity creates valuable human capital that contributes to the economy and environmental sustainability;
- d) planned physical development has an impact on social conditions and should be considered in community planning; and
- e) the quality of environmental, economic and social health is built upon the full engagement and involvement of the community.

The city and county seek to maintain and enhance the livability, health and vitality of the Boulder Valley and the natural systems of which it is a part, now and in the long-term future.

The city and county seek to preserve choices for future generations and to anticipate and adapt to changing community needs and external influences.

1.02 Principles of Environmental Sustainability.

There are limits to the capacity of the biosphere to support the life of human beings at current levels of consumption and pollution. There are limits to the land and soil available for food production, to available water, to resources such as trees, fish and wildlife, to industrial resources like oil and metals, and to the ability of nature to absorb our waste.

With this in mind, the city and county acknowledge the importance of natural capital, which can be kept at healthy levels for the long term only when we are able to do the following:

- a) Renewable resources should not be used faster than they are recharged or replenished by the environment.
- b) Non-renewable resources should be used with the greatest care and efficiency, and some of those should be used to develop renewable replacements.
- c) Waste should not be dumped into nature any faster than nature can absorb it.

1.03 Principles of Economic Sustainability.

- a) The city and county will encourage a viable and balanced economic structure and employment base within the parameters of established land use, environmental and growth policies.
- b) The city and county recognize that a healthy, adaptable local economy is vital to the community's ability to provide a highly desirable quality of life, high levels of services and amenities.

- c) The city and county will promote a diverse and sustainable economy that supports the needs of all community members.
- d) The city and county will seek to ensure that current needs are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs, for the economy is a subsystem of the environment and depends upon the environment both as a source of raw material inputs and as a sink for waste outputs.

1.04 Principles of Social Sustainability.

The city and county will promote a healthy, sustainable community by:

- a) Recognizing, respecting and valuing cultural and social diversity.
- b) Recognizing that social and cultural inequities create environmental and economic instability.
- c) Ensuring the basic health and safety needs of all residents are met.
- d) Providing infrastructure that will encourage culturally and socially diverse communities to both prosper within and connect to the larger community.

1.05 Community Engagement.

The city and county recognize that the quality of environmental, economic and social health is built upon full involvement of the community. The city and county will recognize the rights of and encourage all community members to play a role in governmental decisions, especially those that affect their lives or property, through continual efforts to maintain and improve public communication and the open conduct of business. In addition, the city and county will continue to support programs and provide opportunities for public participation and neighborhood involvement. Efforts will be made to remove barriers to participation and involve community members not usually engaged in civic life. Increased emphasis will be placed on notification and engagement of the public in decisions involving large development proposals or major land use decisions that may have significant impact on, or benefits to the community.

Intergovernmental Cooperation

1.11 Regional and Statewide Cooperation.

Many of the most significant problems and opportunities faced by Boulder and other jurisdictions, particularly providing affordable housing, addressing the jobs-housing imbalance, creating a healthy economy, improving regional transportation, protecting the environment, managing open space, delivering human services and managing growth can only be dealt with effectively through regional or statewide cooperation and solutions. Therefore, the city and county will actively pursue cooperative planning opportunities, broader information exchange and communication, collaborative initiatives and closer cooperation with each other and with other entities in the region and state, including other cities, counties, unincorporated communities, the University of Colorado, the school districts, regional organizations and other policy-making bodies. These entities will be encouraged to identify and address issues of shared concern for which a multi-jurisdictional perspective can best achieve mutually beneficial solutions.

1.14 Agricultural Sustainability.

The city and county will promote a viable agricultural economy for the Boulder Valley and beyond by working together and with the agricultural community.

Rural Lands Preservation

2.08 Preservation of Rural Areas and Amenities.

The city and county will attempt to preserve existing rural land use and character in and adjacent to the Boulder Valley where environmentally sensitive areas, hazard areas, agriculturally significant lands, vistas, significant historic resources, and established rural residential areas exist. A clear boundary between urban and rural areas at the periphery of the city will be maintained, where possible. Existing tools and programs for rural preservation will be strengthened and new tools and programs will be put in place.

2.09 Agricultural Land.

The city and county will encourage the preservation and sustainable use of agricultural lands as a current and renewable source of both food and fuel and for their contribution to cultural, environmental and economic diversity. The city and county will encourage the protection of significant agricultural areas and related water supplies and facilities, including the historic and existing ditch systems, through a variety of means, which may include public acquisition, land use planning, and sale or lease of water for agricultural use. (See Policy 5.13 Role of Agriculture.)

2.10 Delineation of Rural Lands.

Area III consists of the rural lands in the Boulder Valley, outside the Boulder Service Area. The Boulder Service Area includes urban lands in the city and lands planned for future annexation and urban service provision. Within Area III, land is placed within one of two classifications: the Area III-Rural Preservation Area (RPA) or the Area III-Planning Reserve Area (PRA). The boundaries of these two areas are shown on the Area III-Rural Preservation Area and Area I, II, III Map. The more specific Area III land use designations on the comprehensive plan map indicate the type of non-urban land use that is desired as well as recognize those county developments that have or can still develop at other than rural densities and uses. The Area III-Rural Preservation Area is intended to show the desired long-term rural land use; the Area III-Planning Reserve Area is an interim classification until it is decided whether or not this land should be placed in the Area III-Rural Preservation Area or in the Service Area.

a) Area III-Rural Preservation Area.

The Area III-Rural Preservation Area is that portion of Area III where rural land uses and character will be preserved through existing and new rural land use preservation techniques and no new urban development will be allowed during the planning period. Rural land uses to be preserved to the greatest possible extent include: rural town sites (Eldorado Springs, Marshall and Valmont); existing county rural residential subdivisions (primarily along Eldorado Springs Drive, on Davidson Mesa west of Louisville, adjacent to Gunbarrel, and in proximity to Boulder

Reservoir); city and county acquired open space and parkland; sensitive environmental areas and hazard areas that are unsuitable for urban development; significant agricultural lands; and lands that are unsuitable for urban development because of a high cost of extending urban services or scattered locations, which are not conducive to maintaining a compact community.

b) Area III-Planning Reserve Area.

The Area III-Planning Reserve Area (PRA) is that portion of Area III with rural land uses where the city intends to maintain the option of limited Service Area expansion. The Area III-Planning Reserve Area classification maintains both rural preservation and urban development options until the city and county decide the ultimate desired land use. The location and characteristics of this land make it potentially suitable for new urban development, based on the apparent lack of sensitive environmental areas, hazard areas, and significant agricultural lands, the feasibility of efficient urban service extension, and contiguity to the existing Service Area, which maintains a compact community.

5.13 Role of Agriculture.

The city and county will foster and assist continued agricultural production in the Boulder Valley. A viable agricultural economy is an important tool for preserving the rural character of Area III and providing an opportunity to grow and/or market locally produced food, fiber and horticultural products. (See Policy 2.09 Agricultural Land.)