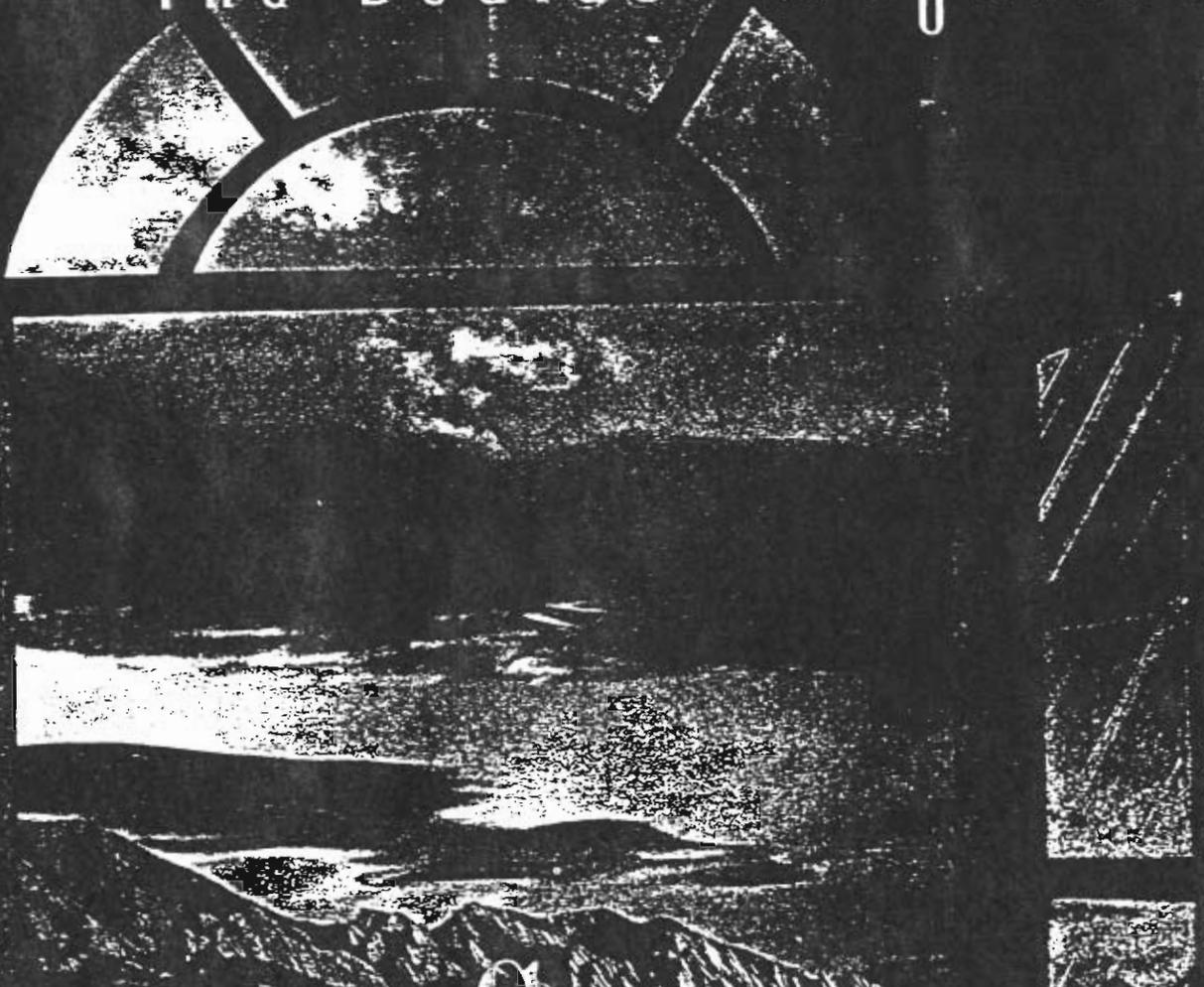


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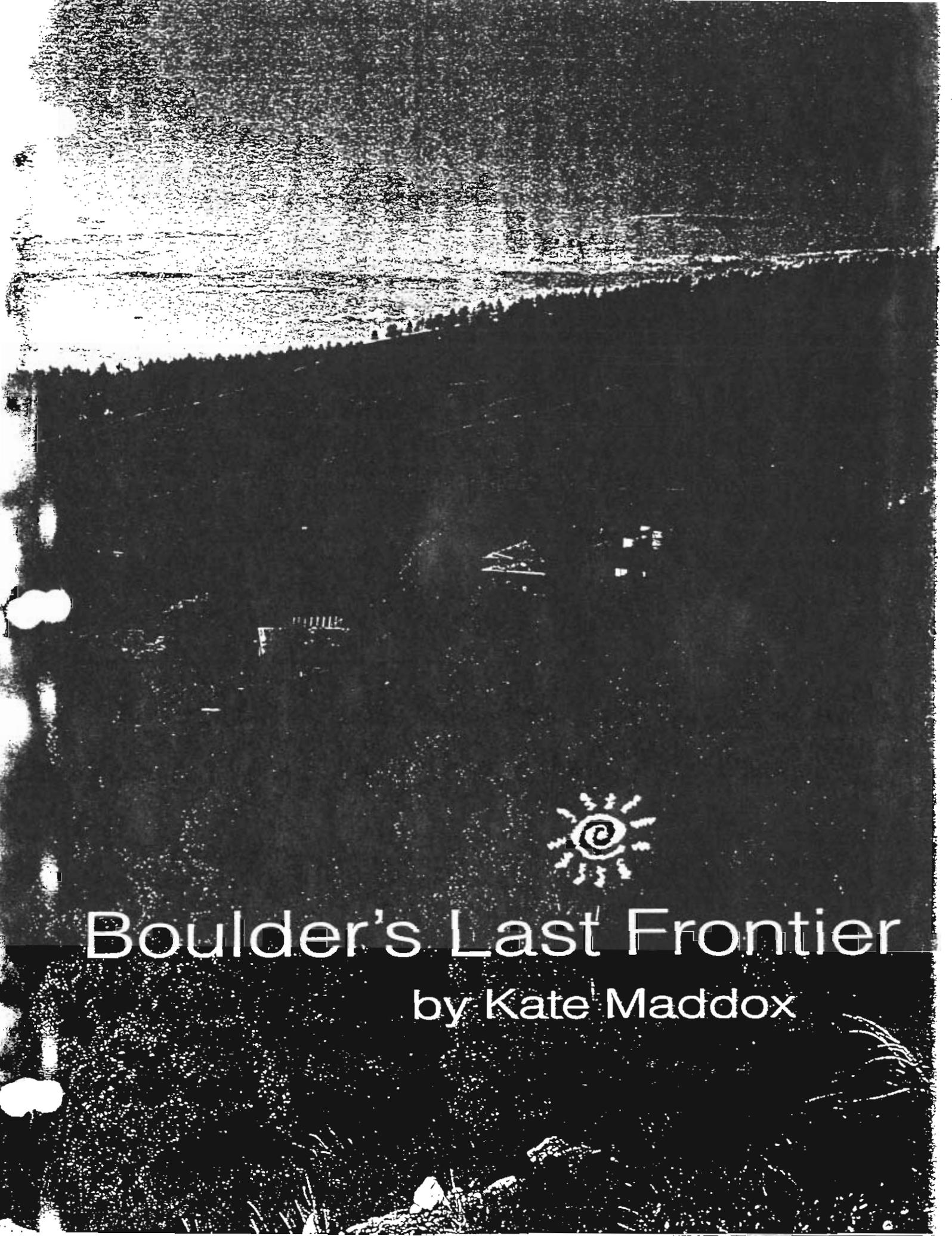


Cover Story

Open



Space.



Boulder's Last Frontier

by Kate Maddox

BOULDERITES LOVE THE CITY'S OPEN SPACE PROGRAM, BUT IT TOOK A GROUP OF CONCERNED CITIZENS TO REALLY GET IT ROLLING.

BOB MCKELVEY, A UNIVERSITY of Colorado math professor, stood on a Boulder hillside about 40 years ago and contemplated the news he had just heard. A group of developers was planning to build a luxury hotel on property known as Enchanted Mesa, where he walked his Labrador retriever every night beneath starry skies.

"How could they?" McKelvey fumed, as he pictured his beloved mountainside being devoured by bulldozers and concrete and transformed into a sprawling urban mass.

A few days later, McKelvey was riding his bike through campus when he spotted physics professor Al Bartlett in front of Norlin Library and hailed him down. "Did you hear what they're going to do?" asked McKelvey, relaying the news of the planned hotel. "We have to do something about it!"

And thus began a movement by Boulder citizens to preserve their sacred mountain backdrop and create a greenbelt of open space around their community to protect it from encroaching development.

For those who have been around awhile, that may not seem too far from the truth. It wasn't that long ago that you could drive into Boulder on U.S. 36 from Denver and see nothing but an open stretch of rolling land on which cows grazed and horses roamed, while the snow-capped Rocky Mountains rose dramatically in the background. The Rockies are still there, and so are some cows and horses, but the land increasingly is becoming crowded with shopping malls, housing developments and office parks.

This is exactly what the early proponents of the open-space program were trying to prevent in the city of Boulder.

"When you look back at the concerns people had back then, they were some of the same concerns people have today," says Jim Crain, director of the city's Open Space and Real Estate program. "They were concerned about growth, about preserving wildlife and about creating a buffer around the city. They were trying to preserve an identity for Boulder."

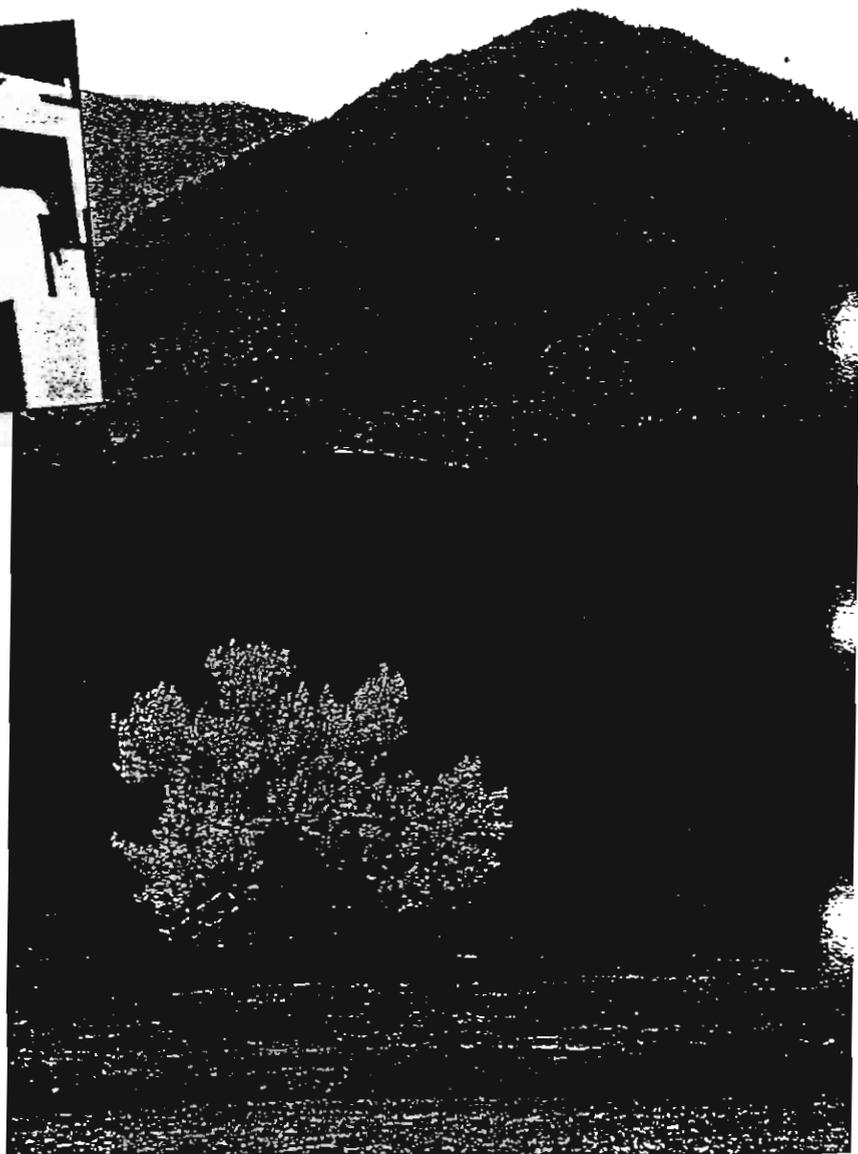


Al Bartlett: "We could have been Los Angeles all over again."

McKelvey, Bartlett and others saved Enchanted Mesa, but it was just one of many land battles to be fought in Boulder pitting preservationists and concerned citizens against pro-development forces.

In 1967, Boulder became the first city in the country to pass a sales tax for the purpose of buying open space land, and by 1993 the city had spent upwards of \$80 million to purchase 23,000 acres reserved for wildlife habitat, trails, greenways and other environmental uses. Without its open space program, Boulder certainly would be a different place today.

In Bartlett's view, "We could have been Los Angeles all over again. You can see what's happening out east," he says, pointing to housing and commercial developments cropping up in Boulder County. "It's Los Angeles coming at us at 60 miles an hour."



Even the earliest residents knew there was something unique about their town, and they wanted to preserve some of that character. In 1898, Boulder citizens passed a \$20,000 bond issue to buy the city's first park land – for a group of Texas professors who were looking for a summer "Chautauqua," or retreat, just the Flatirons.

There followed a period of heavy acquisition of park space, and in 1910 park designer Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. prepared a report for the city, titled *The Improvement of Boulder, Colorado*, in which he wrote "In the great tract of unspoiled foothill scenery lying above and beyond the Chautauqua grounds, Boulder has a priceless possession." Olmsted recommended that nothing should ever be done to ruin the city's greatest asset – its forested hillsides.

The park frenzy of the early part of the century quieted down between the World Wars, and it wasn't until the mid-fifties that the issue of preserving land in Boulder gained momentum again.

Shortly after word got out about the hotel being planned for Enchanted Mesa, the city announced it wanted to extend water service into the foothills for a new subdivision. This was just the catalyst McKelvey and his group needed to fight the impending hotel development.

"We seized on this as a device to freeze growth on the west side of the city," says McKelvey. He, Bartlett and a few other "wild-eyed university types" forced an amendment to the city charter through a referendum election in 1959 that resulted in the "Blue Line," an imaginary boundary above which no city services could be provided.

Over the years a few exceptions have been made to the Blue Line Amendment. In 1961, Boulder citizens approved the grant-

ing of a water permit for the newly created National Center for Atmospheric Research, even though the research facility sat on government-owned property on a mesa above the Blue Line. But the city got something in return: an agreement by the National Science Foundation, which owns the 570-acre parcel, to deed 120 acres to the city for open space use.

"We couldn't see any other way to get public open space on that property," says Bartlett, who was appointed to a citizens' committee to evaluate the NCAR proposal by the late Walter Orr Roberts, founding director of NCAR.

Janet Roberts has been a longtime proponent of open space as a City Council and Planning Board member.



Brian A. Aron

"I was persuaded by the argument that development on the mesa would be tragic."

—JANET ROBERTS



Boulder's housing demand exceeds the supply, and a big reason cited is the limits on development created by the open space buffer.

WALTER SHARED THE goals of the people who wanted to preserve the environment," says his wife, Janet, an active proponent of open space since the idea developed.

Janet Roberts served on the Boulder Planning Board back when the Blue Line Amendment was proposed, and she gave it her full support. "I was persuaded by the argument that development on the mesa would be tragic," she recalls, looking out her front window at the mesa in question.

After the Blue Line was won, the next battle became Enchanted Mesa, and it was a tough one, according to McKelvey. In order to stop the development, the city needed to buy the land in a hostile bid. "It's one thing to ask the community to say, 'No, we won't allow water service,' and it's another to get them to put up their own hard cash," McKelvey says.

But that's just what the citizens of Boulder did. In 1962, voters approved a \$105,000 bond measure to buy Enchanted Mesa, a 150-acre piece of land which extends below the Flatiron rock formations on the south side of Boulder. The mesa is now part of the city's mountain park system.

By this time McKelvey and his supporters were on a roll, and soon politically organized into an organization called "PLAN Boulder" to exert influence on the city council. PLAN Boulder's next big coup was the 1967 sales tax election, in which 61 percent of Boulder voters approved a 0.4 percent sales tax for open space. Since then, Boulder residents have never said no to money for open space, approving a 0.33 percent tax in 1989 and a 0.25 percent increase again last fall.

"Taxpayer support of the (open space) program has been consistent and vocal," observes Tom Cohen, a local Century 21 real estate broker, "a certain indication that residents appreciate the added value and quality of life issues involved."

But until recently, that hasn't been the case in the rest of the

THE CITY OF BOULDER HAS NEVER SAID NO TO MONEY FOR OPEN SPACE, APPROVING A 0.33 PERCENT TAX IN 1989 AND A 0.25 PERCENT INCREASE AGAIN LAST FALL.

county, where other cities haven't shared Boulder's enthusiasm for shelling out money for open space. In 1978, a proposed sales tax that would have been used to buy land for the cash-strapped Boulder County Parks and Open Space program was defeated by a 5-2 margin, while in 1989 a sales tax was defeated by 34 percent of the county's voters. In both elections, Boulder citizens overwhelmingly supported the tax, but east county residents blocked it.

When Boulder County voters approved the most recent 0.25 percent sales tax, the measure was seen as a real turning point in the often strained relations between Boulder and other cities over open space.

"It's important to have the support of all the cities in the county," says Ruth Wright, Boulder's Democratic state representative who fought hard for the open space program in the sixties as chairman of PLAN Boulder. "The city can just go so far before we start to look like megalomaniacs, reaching our tentacles farther and farther out into the county."

Boulder has indeed butted heads with other cities over controversial open space purchases. Last fall, for example, Boulder infuriated the town of Superior when it announced plans to buy the Telleen property, a parcel of 957 acres of land northeast of Superior, for open space. The land is in Superior's planning area, and city officials resent Boulder's intrusion.

"Boulder says it wants to work with other communities, but what it wants to do is control us," believes Karen Cumbo, Superior's town manager. "There's an attitude

about our growth and how horrible it is. People can't describe Superior without using the term 'sprawling.' We've become a symbol of everything that is negative about growth." However, she adds, "If Boulder is successful in shutting down Superior, the demand for housing is just going to move somewhere else."

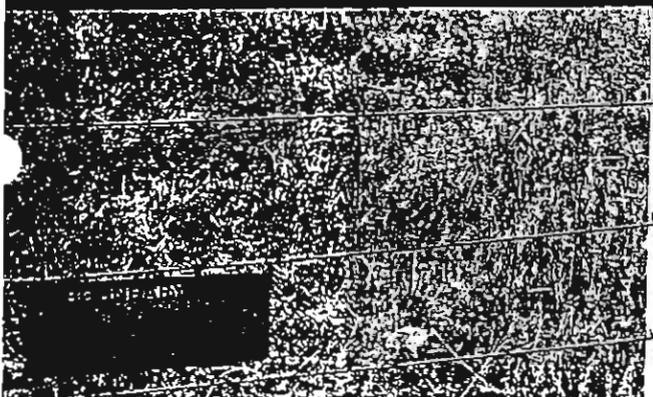
It's common knowledge that Boulder's housing demand exceeds the supply, and a big reason cited is the limits on development created by the open space buffer.

"We've walled ourselves with open space. That is nice and that is good," says Denis Nock, president of the Boulder Chamber of Commerce "but it is the number one factor driving up the cost of living in Boulder. How do we maintain the quality of life for those other than just the very affluent?"

Open space comes at a price, from maintenance like fence-building (left) to repairs for the heavily used trails (above, right).

"When you look back at the concerns people had back then, they were some of the same concerns people have today."

—JIM CRAIG



KEITH ANDERSON



MICHAEL LEONARD

Tom Kahn, owner of Walnut Realty in Boulder, agrees. "As Boulder limits its growth, people know they're assured that everything they can see that's vacant won't be developed at some point. I think that's why home values have soared in Boulder.

"It's a rare commodity to get a house in this town," adds Kahn. "If you're in, great. If you're not, it's going to cost you a lot of money."

Joel Ripmaster, president of Colorado Landmark, the Boulder affiliate of Sotheby's International Realty, explains it another way. "In the past three years, Boulder has developed its first-ever upscale market," he says. "For the first time, we are seeing a surge of interest in 'spectacular' properties in the \$700,000 and up price range."

It's a situation that is also frustrating more than a few homebuilders, who can't find enough clients who can afford to build in Boulder. "We see affordable housing as a critical, critical issue," says Martha Bredehoeft, chapter coordinator of the Homebuilders Association of Metro Denver's Boulder County Chapter. "First-time homebuyers and move-down homebuyers can't afford to live in Boulder anymore. That is really sad."

Even Boulder's open space visionaries recognize that the scenic mecca they helped to create has put pressure on the town's resources.

"Everything you do to make this town nice increases the population growth," says Bartlett. "If we wanted to control population, we should have made this the crummiest town in Colorado."

For McKelvey, the growing popularity of Boulder proved to be too much. In 1970,

OPEN SPACE

he and his wife, Mavis, moved to Missoula, Montana, where he is now a semi-retired professor working to save endangered species and designing computer models for population growth.

"I know Boulder wouldn't be such a nice place to live if it didn't have its greenbelts," says McKelvey. "But it's also one of the reasons I left. I didn't want to live in an upper-class ghetto."

It is no secret that as more and more people flock to Boulder to take advantage of its open spaces and beautiful surroundings, they're putting pressure on the land itself. Open Space Director Crain says maintaining the existing land is the program's biggest challenge, as more than 1.5 million people visit Boulder's open space areas each year. "We are providing breathing room and green space, and very few other communities are doing that. So people are coming here," says Crain.

THE CITY OF BOULDER appoints an Open Space Board of Trustees to make recommendations. A recent candidate for consideration to this board is landscape architect and environmental planner, Bob Perletz, senior associate with Winston Associates. "I believe the city needs to purchase land which is unique and can best protect the character of the community," says Perletz, who also counsels to explore other options. "The City may never have 'enough' funding to outbid development," he adds, "so for the open space program to ultimately be successful, alternative methods are required."

This year, about 22 percent of the open space program's \$14 million budget will be spent on operations and property maintenance, which includes line items like trail repair, ranger services, irrigation and fence building.

As Boulder continues to grow, undoubtedly so will the pressure on its open space program. More people will be attracted to this idyllic town - the one surrounded by the big green moat - and more people like McKelvey could be forced out.

But even critics of Boulder's open space program can't really find fault with the concept itself. "Open space is like motherhood and apple pie," says Superior's Karen Cumbo. "You can't not like it." ■

Kate Maddox is a freelance writer living in Boulder.