

Keeping trim: Boulder buys up surrounding open space while making the city itself more and more dense. One example of infill: the alley houses being built in downtown neighborhoods below.



Bicycle riders from hell. Traffic jams on the greenway. Crowds of pedestrians on the pedestrian mall. The truth is out about Boulder, Colorado. It's not utopia.

It's awfully pretty though—a high plains city sitting in a basin on the eastern lip of the Continental Divide, surrounded by whitecap mountains and ranchland, a city that gets part of its water from a glacier and a lot of its glamour from its pristine setting.

It is also a city with edges. Development, for the most part, ends abruptly at the city limits instead of petering out along commercial strips or bouncing across empty land to outlying shopping centers and industrial parks. Denver is only 25 miles southeast, but the suburbs marching up the Denver-Boulder Turnpike pretty much stop at the Boulder County line. Don't cross that mesa, pardner. In Boulder, they call it

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The Town That Said No to Sprawl

Lessons from Boulder, Colorado—part of our year-long series on open space in America.

By Sylvia Lewis

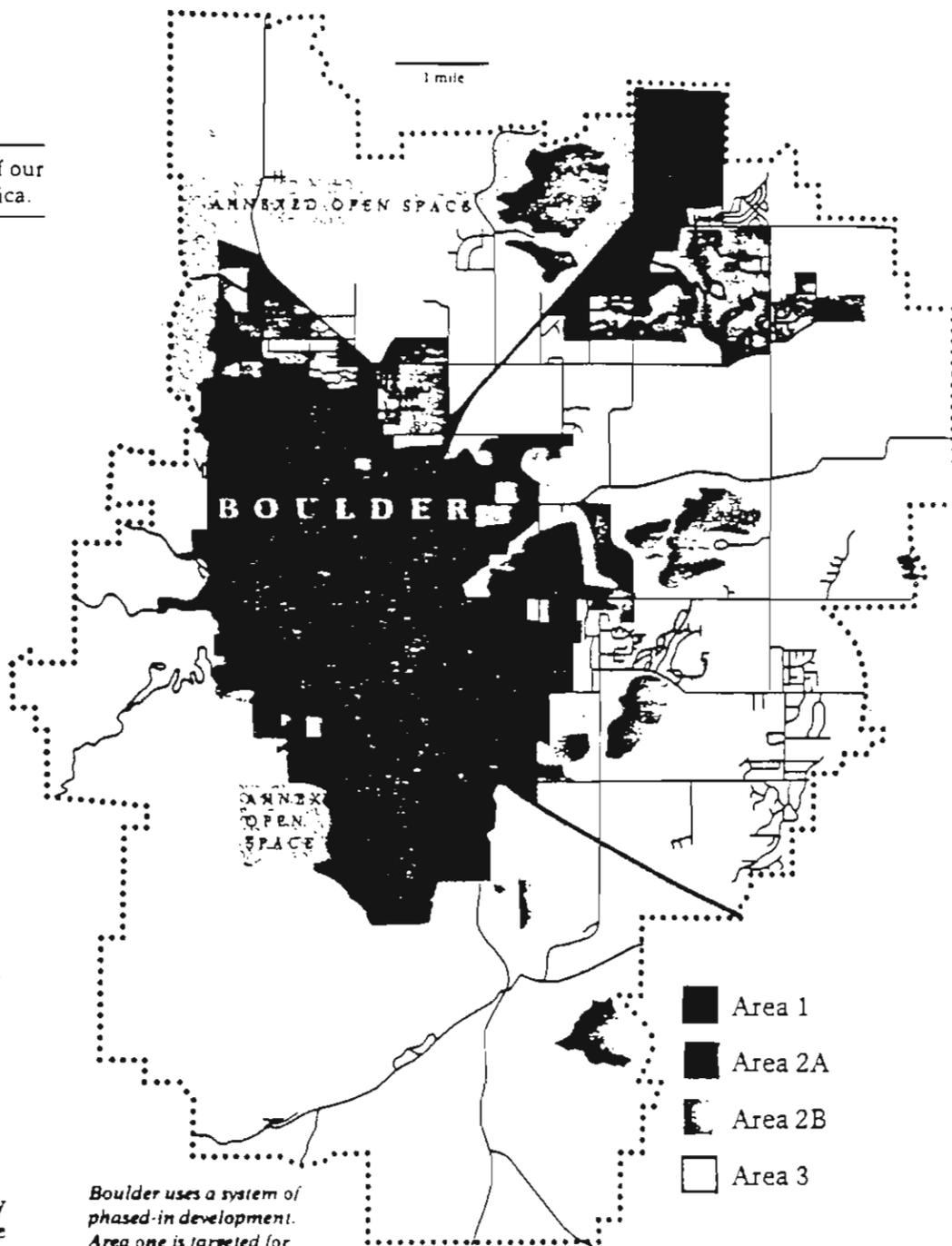


Photo: Tom Sawyer

"open space."

Much of the credit for keeping the city relatively compact must go to long-time residents whose stick-to-it attitude has put planning issues at the forefront of community debate for 30 years. Many of them are members of a group called PLAN-Boulder County. Equally important are the city officials who have come up with the right tools: a city sales tax to pay for purchases of open land and a 1978 city-county comprehensive plan created by an intergovernmental agreement.

The plan, in fact, has just undergone its second five-year revision. But because Boulder is the kind of place where people actually analyze and debate public documents, the process was something of a Talmudic exercise. Scheduled for adoption in 1988, the final revision was delayed



Boulder uses a system of phased-in development. Area one is targeted for development now. Areas 2A and 2B may be built up in three to 15 years. Area 3 (inside the dotted line) may or may not ever get developed.

until late 1989 by back-and-forths between city and county staffs, planning commissioners, and citizen groups. "If we miss something, we've got 80,000 people here eager to point it out," laughs Susan Osborne, the city's director of long-range planning.

In the beginning . . . Boulder's population is closer to 88,000, in-

cluding 22,000 students of the University of Colorado, but the count was only about a third of that in 1958 when a couple of professors began to work up a head of steam over housing development that was creeping up the mountain foothills just west of the campus.

It happens that the two men in question, Robert McKelvey and Albert Bartlett, are mathematician and physicist, respectively,

- Area 1
- Area 2A
- Area 2B
- Area 3

so they used the laws of physics to choke off incipient sprawl. They drew a line around the city at points averaging 400 feet above the city's elevation of 5,350 feet and proposed that development stay below it. Boulder's water flowed from the mountains to the city reservoir by means of gravity; it was silly, they said, to pump water uphill for housing or any other type of building. Their "blue line," as the elevation is still called, stays 100 feet below the reservoir's mean water level. Bartlett's comment today is simply that the blue line was common sense.

In the 30 years since the blue line was adopted by popular vote, only one new building within the city limits has been built above it, and that happened early on. Just a few years after the blue line was established, Boulder voters approved an exception to it, to accommodate construction of the National Atmospheric Research Center on a mesa in the south part of the city. The chance to snag a prestigious national organization and the fact that the state had donated land for it proved a persuasive combination, and NARC moved into its distinctive headquarters, designed by I.M. Pei, in 1966.

That doesn't mean, however, that NARC has remained in a perpetual state of grace. At the moment, some nearby residents are protesting a proposed expansion that would bring NARC's entire work force of 800 to the mesa site—up from 400 there now. Their main concern is that the additional traffic will overwhelm the surrounding neighborhood. Ultimately, the issue will be resolved when NARC makes application for a planned unit development.

Overall, the blue line was quite effective in keeping development out of the mountains to the west, but it couldn't limit growth on the flatlands below. As the city's population doubled during the 1960s, Al Bartlett recalls, it soon became apparent that the blue line was only a first step in preventing development from leapfrogging out from the city center. By 1967, a second—and critical—tool was in place: a one-cent city sales tax, 40 percent of which was earmarked for open space acquisition, the balance for road improvements.

The two-for-one tax "was a brilliant move," says William Lamont, Boulder's planning director at that time, and now a consultant in Denver. "It brought developers to the table, and it brought environmental types to the table." The developers, of course, were interested in improving the roads, while the environmentalists were focusing on open space.

The four-tenths of a cent allocated to



Boulder: Bureau of Conference Services and Cultural Affairs

open space has added up. Over the years, the city has spent \$53 million to acquire 17,500 acres of open space—that amount in addition to its city parks. Most of the open space lies outside the city limits, and it is bigger than the city itself, by nearly 20 percent. Most of the land has not been annexed, but it is owned and managed—as ranchland, farmland, and prairie—by the city's real estate and open space department.

Last November, Boulder voters reaffirmed their commitment to open space by increasing the city sales tax by another third of a penny. According to James Crain, director of the city's open space department, the additional tax should pay for another 8,000 acres of open space in the next three years.

Camelot

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Boulder was "Camelot," says Bill Lamont—a time and place when the right people and the right ideas came together. With the blue line and the sales tax in place, and with initial purchases of open space under way, the community began to explore other means to manage growth.

One idea that held sway briefly during the 1960s was a concept called "spokes of the wheel." With the center of the city as the hub, new development was to be directed along major corridors to villages on the periphery. An annexation program was part of the plan. "This was Boulder's way to control growth outside its borders, using more stringent regulations on subdivisions and zoning than the county

allowed," says Nolan Rosall, a Boulder planning consultant who served as the city's planning director between 1974 and 1978.

The spokes-of-the-wheel concept was scrapped in 1965—but not before it had laid the groundwork for a leapfrog development centered on an IBM plant now employing 6,000 people. It and a large subdivision were both built in the mid-1960s about seven miles northeast of downtown. The IBM plant was annexed to the city but the subdivision was not.

In one of the few setbacks in its attempts to control development patterns, the city in 1976 lost a crucial lawsuit in the Colorado Supreme Court and was forced to extend water and sewer lines to the subdivision even though it lay outside the city limits and refused annexation. As a public utility, the court said, the city could not refuse water and sewer services in the area of its jurisdiction merely because the proposed development would be inconsistent with the city's growth policies.

Another failed scheme, proposed by local Zero Population Growth members in 1971, would have limited Boulder's population to 100,000. Voters turned thumbs down, accepting instead a proposal to slow the prevailing rate of the increase by limiting development. But the phrase *growth management* was etched into the public consciousness. A HUD-funded study of growth, completed in 1973 by an ad hoc local growth commission, plus state legislation requiring counties to prepare comprehensive plans, would prove more important than the ZPG proposal.

The National Center for Atmospheric Research (left), designed by I.M. Pei, sits on a mountain slope above Boulder. Guardians of open space (below and below center): Jim Crain and Delani Wheeler of the Boulder open space staff—and a stile that guarantees access by pedestrians only.



Shops, restaurants, street vendors— Pearl Street Mall is the place to see and be seen.



Within a few years, a third important arrow appeared in Boulder's quiver, the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan of 1978, a much-expanded version of a plan the city and surrounding Boulder County had adopted by intergovernmental agreement in 1970. Organizationally, the later plan allowed the two governments to coordinate planning and annexations, says Nolan Rosall. Programatically, it enabled two strategies to work in tandem: saving open space outside the city and controlling development within.

A point of interest is the fact that four different government bodies must approve major changes to the comprehensive plan: the city planning board and city council and the county planning commission and board of county commissioners. This means that city and county staffs must work together—and that the public has many chances to comment on proposed changes.

In agreeing to the plan, notes current Boulder planning director Edward Gawf, the city and county also agreed that new urban development will occur only where the full range of urban services exists. If a patch of land is not designated as "urban," neither the city nor the county will provide those services.

"It seems pretty innocuous," Gawf says, "but it's the most important thing of all: that we can plan the destiny of the Boulder Valley in cooperation with the county."

The practical result is that most new development has occurred inside the city limits, because only the city provides water and sewer services. Development outside the city borders is limited to the few re-

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maining lots that were platted in the county before the comprehensive plan was adopted. In most cases, those who build in the county must rely on septic systems and wells or trucked-in water.

The mechanics

An employee of the Boulder planning department since 1974—and director since 1982—Ed Gawf was on hand both for the original adoption of the comprehensive plan and for its two major revisions. To him, the plan's distinction between urban and nonurban land can be summed up in the simple phrase "one-two-three"—a shorthand description of Boulder's system for phasing in development.

Area one, the 19 square miles now within the city limits, has the full range of urban services—based on local standards for fire and police protection, water and sewer services, and so on. Area two—7.5 square miles under county jurisdiction—is targeted to be annexed and receive complete services within three to 15 years. And area three—59 square miles—is not projected to have urban services for at least 15 years, if ever. All told, Boulder Valley as defined in the plan covers about 85 square miles.

It takes a few more formulas to make the comprehensive plan work:

- The Danish plan—named for a city council member who, in 1976, persuaded voters that growth could be controlled by establishing a competition for building permits within area one. As the system works now, the city annually allots about 840 permits for new housing units, with individual developers limited to 40 permits apiece per year. The goal is to keep annual population growth under two percent.

"Through the mid-1980s there were some tough competitions," reports Ed Gawf, "but since then there have been more allocations than were actually used." Boulder's current growth rate is under one percent, he says.

- The concept of the "core area" within area one, the square mile between the university, the Crossroads Mall (the in-town regional shopping mall), and downtown (including government buildings and the lively Pearl Street pedestrian mall). The highest residential densities—25 to 30 dwelling units per acre—are found here.

- Changes made in designations within area two (2A will be served within three years, 2B not for three to 15 years).

- Changes from area three to area two. These changes can be made annually, says Gawf, but local officials prefer that they be done every five years, along with other revisions to the comprehensive plan.

After a dozen years of experience with

...n, he adds, it's clear that area three is Achilles heel. For the plan covers many contingencies, but not one of the most important: What happens after the city is essentially built out? Which land within area three should be targeted for development—and what types of development?

"Part of the dilemma is that developers are looking at a shrinking land supply in the city, while other people are not sure the community should grow—or at what rate," says Gawf. "And the planning department is looking at some land at the edge, but not so much as to discourage infill."

With a growth rate now slowed to less than one percent a year, local officials have left these puzzles for last, to be tackled now that all the other revisions to the comprehensive plan have been adopted. For Gawf's staff, solving them will take the better part of a year. The effort is worthwhile, he says, because it will determine the shape of Boulder for a long time to come.

Being choosy

To some extent, Boulder can afford to be fussy about development. With the university, IBM, and the federal government as employers, the city has been able to weather the economic storms sweeping through the rest of oil industry-dependent Colorado. Despite some layoffs in high-tech firms, Boulder County has had a net gain of over 400 jobs since 1985, according to the Boulder Chamber of Commerce; over 1,200 new jobs located there in the first nine months of 1989 alone. "Compared to the rest of Colorado, we're as solid an economy as there is," says the chamber's president, Dennis Nock.

More evidence: a median family income of \$43,200, housing prices about one-third higher than the national average, and unemployment of 3.9 percent at the end of last year.

Continued economic health may explain why Martha Weiser, a long-time member of PLAN-Boulder, can say "people in Boulder don't necessarily think of development as a business whose success is important to the city"—and why Nock doesn't turn a hair. ("Business has moderated its views somewhat over the years, and so has PLAN-Boulder," he says. "There's a lot of dialogue, and we've come a lot closer.")

Prosperity also explains why Boulder recently turned down U.S. West, the giant national phone company, when it wanted to locate its research division on open space land, steering the company instead to the University of Colorado's new research park. The city adopted a take-it-or-leave-it attitude, despite the firm's 700 new jobs and \$43 million facility.

"Not one penny of incentives was offered and they chose us anyway," says Nock. "No tax abatements, no deferrals, no free land."

Clearly, Boulder is a city that knows its mind—or at least a handful of people there know their own minds and have dragged everyone else along. Al Bartlett, whose blue line concept made Boulder a planning pioneer in the 1950s, says the key ingredient for success is consistency. He's especially proud of PLAN-Boulder's ability to influence government decisions—through white papers, public testimony, candidate endorsements, and referendums galore.

PLAN-Boulder members have served on the planning board and city council, and a former chair, Ruth Wright, represents Boulder as Democratic minority leader in the state house of representatives. Wright says one of her best memories is the day that Boulder voters approved a height limit ordinance—keeping development under 55 feet—that she wrote as a law student in 1971. "I wrote it as a law school paper in the spring, ran the petition drive in the summer, and debated it all over town in the fall," she says.

The fight for a city height limit turned out to be a minor skirmish in the group's long-running campaign to influence development patterns. From its own documents and from what others say, it is clear that PLAN-Boulder has fought in all the major planning battles of the last three decades, including the current debate about changes in land uses in area three.

Yin and yang

Judging from the results, the city's most important victory would appear to be its defense of open space. The fact that open space was a priority not only for members of PLAN-Boulder but for the residents at large became apparent in 1966, when a planning department survey showed that Boulderites were particularly eager to save the city's mountain backdrop. Soon they voted to increase the city sales tax in order to buy some of that property, and in 1973 the city set up its real estate and open space department, largely to acquire and preserve open land around the city.

To people in Boulder, "open space" and "growth management" are like a giant yin-yang symbol—two inseparable parts of a whole. Instead of taking visitors to local buildings, they point out places where development isn't—parcels where various proposals were defeated and the land was acquired for open space. Most residents, of course, focus on the open space and take the mechanics of growth management—the comprehensive plan, its three steps for

phased development, attendant permitting systems—for granted.

A few even wax poetic. Donald Walker, for one, says Boulder has "sculpted its surroundings," like a giant piece of environmental art. Glancing at the mountains from the window in his downtown office, he protested the title of this article, suggesting instead, "The Town That Said Yes to Its Environment."

Now director of a nonprofit group called Colorado Open Lands, Walker ran Boulder's open space program from 1973 to 1978. He spent \$14 million during those years, hardly enough to buy everything he wanted. "At the time, the concern was to save a narrow strip of backdrop and land along the corridors," he recalls. "I just didn't think that was adequate."

At the very beginning, a couple of days after hiring a secretary, Walker says, "We hopped on my motorcycle and rode around Davidson Mesa. I looked all around and said, 'Now, I think we ought to buy everything we see.' That meant the valley below the mesa, the entrance to the city, the river corridor, the entire mountain backdrop."

Bit by bit, this has come about—and it explains why Boulder is sharply set off from the Denver suburbs. On the road from Denver, Davidson Mesa is the first spot overlooking Boulder. Immediately behind the mesa sits the little town of Louisville, but in front, between the mesa and the Boulder city limits, are three miles of ranchland, now acquired as open space. Just beyond the city are the Rockies. All told, the city owns 17,500 acres of open space—95 percent of it outside the city limits—and 6,600 acres of parks.

Most of the open land has been bought outright, with sales tax revenues or bonds backed by sales taxes, but some has been donated. About half of the city's open space holdings are leased out for ranching and farming, according to Jim Crain, the current director of open space, and the rest is tallgrass prairie, wetlands, mountain slopes, and forest.

With an annual budget of \$4.8 million and a staff of 21, Crain's department not only buys open-space land; it manages it. And because management means not only cutting trails but also wildlife and prairie preservation, grazing, and crop production, Crain's staff includes naturalists and rangers as well as real estate brokers.

"We want to be good neighbors," he says, "and manage the land as well as or better than it was when it was purchased." In some cases, this hasn't been difficult, he adds, because the land was neglected, either overworked for crops or held by

speculators.

Over the years, highest priority has been given to buying farmland, land in floodplains, scenic areas, and, most important, acquisitions needed to limit urban sprawl. Crain says he has been able to negotiate good prices for land in the last category because the parcels he sought were off limits to development by virtue of being outside the city's urban service area.

Prices range from \$3,000-\$10,000 for land outside area three, Crain says, to \$5,000-\$15,000 for land inside area three, and up to \$80,000 an acre for land in area two. Sometimes prices are much higher. In 1987, Crain lost out on a two-acre parcel located in the mountains west of the city—one of the few remaining small parcels that had been platted for development in the county before the passage of the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan. The land cost \$525,000.

"We passed," says Crain, "but very close

good views?"

In Crain's view, they got a good deal. "It costs \$75 an acre per year for us to manage these properties; it costs \$3,200 an acre per year to provide city services to land in area one."

Open space, it turns out, is also a good bargaining chip for local business people. "People move here because of open space—the proximity to the mountains, the whole setting," says Kenneth Hotard, government liaison for the Boulder Area Board of Realtors. "This is a wonderful market to be in real estate."

By encouraging infill, the city has also kept down the housing vacancy rates. For rentals, which account for nearly half of all the units in the city, current vacancies are under three percent, says Hotard. (The downside is that there's relatively little affordable housing for those who need it. Hotard was one of several people who testified in favor of including an affordable housing goal in the latest revision of the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan—a goal that the city planning commission has adopted.)

Infill is especially evident in the center of town. To encourage higher densities on downtown residential streets, the city has okayed the subdivision of single-family lots, allowing a second unit to be built at the back of the lot. Between 80 and 100 of these "alley houses" have been built; in a few cases, they are larger than the buildings in front and have different owners.

Along with housing, the city has reinforced downtown retail and resisted proposals for outlying shopping centers. In 1979, city officials established an urban renewal district to expand an intown regional mall, the Crossroads Mall, located only a mile from downtown and kitty-corner from the University of Colorado campus. All three—plus the Boulder's municipal buildings—are within easy walking distance of the Pearl Street Mall, the very busy, four-block downtown pedestrian mall.

Connecting them, as well as adjacent residential areas and an industrial park at the east end of town, is Boulder Creek Path, a five-mile greenway used for biking, walking, commuting, and fishing (adults must throw the fish back). From his planning department office overlooking the western end of the path, Ed Gawf says he sees as many as 4,000 people a day pass by in the summertime. He also overlooks the creek, of course, and—shocking but true—the boulders that Boulder imported to make the proper eddies for its fish.

If there's a dark side to planning in Boulder, it's the bicyclists. They're everywhere, even at the tops of canyons that

some cars would have trouble climbing. And on the flatlands, ripping along the city's 18 miles of off-street bicycle paths, some of them turn into self-propelled Hell's Angels who terronze the slowpokes in their way. So serious is the bicycle problem that the city last November passed an ordinance keeping the speed limit on the bike paths to 15 mph.

The bottom line, though, is that Boulder isn't unique. What's been done there can be done elsewhere, says Bill Lamont. "In Boulder, when we did 'growth management,' I just thought it was comprehensive planning 101," he says. "You pull all the pieces together and move toward a vision for a particular city."

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Boulder Creek Path runs for five miles.



Planning director Ed Gawf out for a spin.

by, with not quite so good a view, we bought one acre for \$46,000." On the half-million-dollar property now sits a large house with an excellent view of Boulder. Situated outside the city limits, the property owners have their water trucked in.

Crain's next big project is to pinpoint the 8,000 acres he estimates he'll be able to buy by 1993 with money from the newly increased city sales tax, which expires at the end of 15 years. About two-thirds of that land will be farmed or allowed to revert to prairie, he says.

Did it pay?

What's the bottom line for all these planning efforts and the \$53 million the people of Boulder have spent on open land? Have they gotten more than a compact city with

