



COLORADO

Colorado Water
Conservation Board

Department of Natural Resources

Where We Grow is as Important as How We Grow

Jay Gallagher

CWCB Board Member - Yampa-White-Green Basin

"We cannot grow the next five million people like we grew our first five million."
- Governor Hickenlooper

Land-Use and Water

Colorado's Water Plan sets a measurable objective that by 2025, 75% of Coloradans will live in communities that have incorporated water-saving actions into land-use planning.

Colorado's Water Plan considers land-use in the context of achieving greater efficiencies in municipal water consumption through housing and landscaping designs that reduce per capita consumption. This is another means by which growing communities in the Front Range urban corridor can make existing water supplies go farther and defer expensive expansions of water infrastructure. While smaller communities in rural Colorado are typically located closer to their municipal water resources, reducing per capita consumption should be equally important to the rural ratepayer to defer an expensive filtration plant expansion.



A look at history of development in Colorado's Water Plan pg. 6-182

However, the benefits of land-use planning are not limited to the water consumption side of the equation; land-use planning can benefit the supply side as well. It can be a tool to help preserve or even improve water quality, and thereby increase available water supplies. Integrating land-use and water planning can benefit all Coloradans, many of whom live in rural Colorado communities that rely on rivers, streams, and alluvial groundwater for their municipal water supply.

State agencies have no statutory authority to force communities or water districts to take actions to protect their raw water resources. The authority to do so rests with local communities and governments. Local land-use policies and local ordinances can protect water quality in rivers and groundwater and preserve or even increase the quantity available to meet future municipal needs. Healthy rivers provide recreational opportunities - fishing and whitewater sports - that are of growing importance to the economies of Colorado's smaller communities.

Protecting Municipal Water Supplies in the Steamboat Springs Area

The City of Steamboat Springs and several adjacent water districts rely on shallow horizontal wells (also known as infiltration galleries) constructed in the saturated gravels and sands of the Yampa River in the South Valley upstream of the city limits.

These wells provide a reliable source of municipal water that is generally of higher quality than surface waters because alluvial gravels and sands provide a natural medium for filtration and storage. Higher quality raw water is easier and less expensive to treat to meet federal drinking water standards.



Photo credit: Kent Vertrees

The development of land-use policies over the years has served to protect groundwater recharge zones in the South Valley. Fifty years ago, Steamboat Springs, with a population of 2,800, had a modest economy with traditional roots in ranching. Its location along US 40 brought tourists to town to enjoy the local hot springs and skiing at the budding new ski resort.

By the late 1960's, with a growing ski resort and vacation home subdivisions proposed for the Steamboat Lake and Stagecoach areas, the Routt County Commissioners recognized the need to provide a framework to guide development in the county, and, in 1972, adopted the first subdivision and zoning regulations. The first County Master Plan followed in 1980.

The current County Master Plan, adopted in 2003, was the product of years of public engagement; it is a statement of community values. In particular, it seeks to protect the rural character and agricultural landscapes of the county so valued by residents and visitors alike. The Master Plan also contains the policies to sustain those values, for example, it directs development to existing growth centers to curb urban sprawl.

Through this public process, the County also engaged county residents in developing their own sub-area land-use plans. The Steamboat Springs Area Community Plan, in particular, directs growth to the west and downstream of the City.

In addition, cooperative efforts between landowners and the County have resulted in the preservation of open space under the County's Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) Program or through the acquisition of conservation easements held by the Yampa Valley Land Trust.



Photo credit: Kent Vertrees

The City of Steamboat Springs itself has taken specific measures. In 2007, the City adopted a Watershed Protection Ordinance to protect its municipal water sources and alluvial recharge zones by regulating certain non-agricultural activities upstream of its wells that might impair surface and groundwater quality, such as a large excavation project, the construction and operation of a large septic system, or the construction of a large impervious surface like a parking lot.

Over the course of 50 years, Steamboat has grown from a sleepy ranching community of 2,800 to a year-round resort community with over 12,000 full-time residents. Development and tourism has had impacts on our community and our natural resources. Recently, a significant reach of the upper Yampa River was included on Colorado's 303(d) list for waterbody impairment because of high water temperatures. Under section 303(d) of the 1972 Federal Clean Water Act, states are required to submit lists of impaired waters that fall short of water quality standards established for these water bodies. This prompted the City and a group of stakeholders to move forward to update the 2003 Stream Management Plan. The updated plan - to be completed in early 2018 - will assess the impacts of high nutrient counts, degraded channel geometry, drought, and over-use by recreation and will recommend actions to improve water quality, aquatic habitat, and recreational flows. The CWCB recently approved a Stream Restoration Grant and Water Supply Reserve Fund (WSRF) grant to fund this effort.

Steamboat's journey over the last 50 years demonstrates that, through the hard work of public engagement and collaboration, a community can come together to protect what is important to its identity and livelihood, whether it is traditional agricultural activity, open space, the river, or municipal water supplies.

About the author: Jay Gallagher is serving his second term as the Yampa-White-Green Basin representative to the Colorado Water Conservation Board. He is the former General Manager of the Mt. Werner Water and Sanitation District, the municipal water provider for the ski resort area and the City of Steamboat Springs. He also served on the Routt County Planning Commission for ten years with four years as Chairman.