

BOULDER COUNTY HEALTHY COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE

Boulder, Colorado

To develop and implement an inclusive action plan that, by integrating common evolving values, honoring diversity and creating a shared vision of a healthy and vital community, sustains such a regional community for generations to come.

Initiative Mission Statement

Background

Boulder County, Colorado is located along the foothills of the Rocky Mountains 30 miles northwest of Denver. Its spectacular scenery, encompassing peaks on the Continental Divide to rolling eastern plains, and high standard of living have lured an increasing number of new residents. Between 1980 and 1990 the county's population grew by 36,000 people. Between 1990 and 1995 another 16,000 people were added along with 13,810 new jobs.

In the late 1950's the city of Boulder foresaw the pressures uncontrolled growth might bring on its natural environment and quality of life, the very resources that brought people there in the first place. In 1959 it enacted a "blue line" - an elevation line across the foothills above which development could not occur. Eight years later the city voters approved a special sales tax to fund the purchase of eventually 26,000 acres of open space, many of which were outside city limits in unincorporated areas. In 1976, based on a task force's projection that Boulder's population could grow to 300,000 - 400,000 in 20 years, voters approved an annual growth cap of two percent for the city to be enforced through a limitation on building permits.

These measures have kept the city's population to under 100,000, but have caused housing costs to skyrocket, making living in the city unaffordable to many, and have had a profound impact on the surrounding jurisdictions. Boulder's residential building restrictions and the rise in housing costs have forced many who work

there to live in the neighboring communities of Lafayette, Longmont, Louisville, and Broomfield.

Forty-three percent of the work force now commutes, creating traffic congestion and air pollution and spreading sprawl development to the outer edges of the county. Boulder's open space purchases have insulated the city from the rest of the county but, at the same time, removed land from the market that other jurisdictions might have bought for retail space to enhance their tax base.

Recognizing that some form of regional planning was necessary if the quality of life was to be sustained for all county residents, a group of 38 county leaders formed a committee in 1994 to apply for a plan-



ning grant from the Colorado Healthy Communities Initiative (CHCI). In order to be considered, a community must demonstrate broad-based community support and prove that it is a community as defined by the CHCI: "a geographically delineated area defined by the shared interests of all its inhabitants." The proposal was approved in November 1994 and the Boulder County Healthy Communities Initiative was launched in January 1995.

The Colorado Healthy Communities Initiative

The Colorado Healthy Communities Initiative is a statewide, five-year \$6.8 million program sponsored by the Colorado Trust and designed and directed by the Denver-based National Civic League. It gives technical and financial support to up to 30 Colorado communities to establish community-based approaches to health and quality of life issues. Health is defined broadly to include issues that address the underlying factors that affect the quality of life beyond the absence of disease: a clean, safe physical environment and sustainable ecosystem, the provision of basic needs, quality education, and a diverse, vital and

innovative economy.

Collaboration and consensus-based decision-making are key elements that characterize this work. Communities are encouraged to find new ways of doing things, of providing services, sharing information, and operating local governments. They are encouraged to develop indicators of performance and benchmark goals on a wide variety of community issues such as: air and water quality, educational performance, population density, green space, and economic criteria.

Once selected, the community follows a specific community-wide collaborative problem-solving process developed by the National Civic League that takes the community through a 12-14 month planning phase and a two-year implementation phase. Each community can adapt this process to reflect its own character - its geography, resources, culture, values, and visions. It is also expected to raise matching grants. To date the Boulder Initiative has raised support from foundations, municipalities, hospitals, the media and the county government.

The Boulder plan

In January 1995 an Initiating Committee of community leaders from business, government and non-profit sectors began to design the framework for the initial planning phase. Following the National Civic League's guidelines, one of its first tasks was to select "stakeholders", a core group of approximately 120 people representing every sector of the County. This group was charged with the overall task of defining a vision for the county, beginning the process of finding a set of regional indicators of long-term health, and developing a plan of action to achieve these goals. The Initiating Committee dissolved in April.

Monthly meetings began in May and will continue until April 1996. They will be held in different parts of the county and the public is encouraged to attend. A plan of action and implementation strategies will be completed by the final session.

The first meeting was held in May 1995. Participants were asked to express the values and visions they felt are necessary and important for a healthier future for the county. After the meeting, the comments were compiled by theme: social values; neighborhoods; environment; education; economy and business; children, youth,

elders, and family; transportation; leadership/government; health care/human services; housing; arts and culture. These were then summarized and assimilated in a draft vision paper for review and discussion at the next monthly meeting.

As an integral part of the process the Initiating Committee hired Neal Peirce, a nationally-syndicated columnist and urban affairs reporter, to interview Boulder County residents and assess the county's problems, strengths, and options for action. The report served as a springboard for discussion. It was published in its entirety by The Boulder *Daily Camera* and the Longmont *Times-Call*, the county's two leading newspapers, distributed to participants present at the June meeting, and discussed further at neighborhood pizza parties hosted by volunteers during the months of July and August.

The media has played an important role in publicizing the progress of the Initiative and keeping the public informed. Members of the press have attended meetings and reported on the discussions. The *Daily Camera* and the *Times-Call* carry announcements of the meetings and report extensively on each one.

The August session focused on the selection of priority areas and on a draft community profile entitled "Roadmap for Collaboration." Within the overarching themes of sustainability, diversity and communication six primary issue areas have emerged from the meetings: education; children, youth, elders, and families (38 percent of the county's population is under 24); civic discourse; regional governance; community design, land use and accommodation; and materials allocation and energy use.

In the draft report, the Research Subcommittee presented possible indicators, based on research into current, available, reliable data, in each initial theme category. The final set of indicators, to be chosen once the community's vision and goals have been established, will be used to measure progress and success in achieving these goals. This list might also include additional indicators that address linkages between the vision categories, indicators for which original research will be necessary. Subsequent monthly meetings will refine the list of priorities, form committees to develop actions to achieve these goals, and, finally, develop and reach

How To Get in Touch with Boulder Initiatives

Contact: Susan Q. Foster, Director
c/o The Walter Orr Roberts Institute
University Corporation for Atmospheric Research
P.O. Box 3000 • Boulder, CO 80307
Tel: (303) 497-2108
Fax: (303) 497-2100
Email: susanf@ucar.edu
Web: www.ucar.edu/bchci/bchci.html

Scope: Countywide

Inception Date: 1995

Participants: Coalition of county residents from public and private organizations representing business, government, the media, education, environment, arts, health and human services, and religious institutions

Project type: Community-wide visioning, sustainable indicators, comprehensive community development

Methods used: Community-wide collaborative problem-solving process: public meetings; information sharing; research

Lessons learned: Importance of strong leadership from the beginning. Difficulties of keeping the focus on issues of sustainability and of increasing participant diversity.

consensus on an action and funding plan.

Challenges

The critical challenge is to continue to frame the process in the context of sustainability and long-term health, keeping the participants focused on what is best for the county as a whole rather than for each individual. Although several hundred people have been involved to date, the Initiative is still seeking ways to increase participant diversity. They want to involve youth, who have a great deal at stake, and plan to hold youth focus groups. Another challenge will be to strike a balance between a regional vision and the desire for strong, independent local communities—an issue much on the minds of many of the county residents.

For an area the size of Boulder County the Healthy Communities Initiative process provides a valuable framework for residents to envision and create a sustainable future. It gives the many communities

within the county a structured opportunity to work together on a regional vision rather than working independently of each other or in ad hoc collaborations as they have done in the past. It comes at a time when people are beginning to realize how interdependent their neighborhoods have become and that a comprehensive regional plan may be a necessity in order to preserve their environment and quality of life for future generations.

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UPDATE

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In May 1996 the Boulder County Healthy Community Initiative (BCHCI) completed its year-long planning process to develop a Community Action Plan and principles to guide its activities. Three complementary programs were created: the Neighborhood Groups Initiative, the Report Card Initiative, and the Principles of Sustainability Initiative. Each effort will base its outreach and development on community participation and consensus-based decision making. In addition, funding will be sought for the mediators and facilitators who are so important to the process.

In order to build support for its initiatives and to ensure successful outcomes, BCHCI is seeking to attract a wider cross-section of the community (i.e. more representation from ethnic groups, corporations, and youth). Because the Latino community was not well represented in the original process, outreach efforts to involve them in long term assessment strategies and housing issues have increased. The Neighborhood Initiative program is focused on affordable housing, including both apartments and mobile homes. BCHCI has also invited the corporate community to give public presentations about their vision for a vital, sustainable Boulder County.

BCHCI's director Susan Foster attributes the group's success to the quality of its volunteer mediators and facilitators, the expertise, guidance, and support of local and state government officials, and the effective use of the media to publicize the project.

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