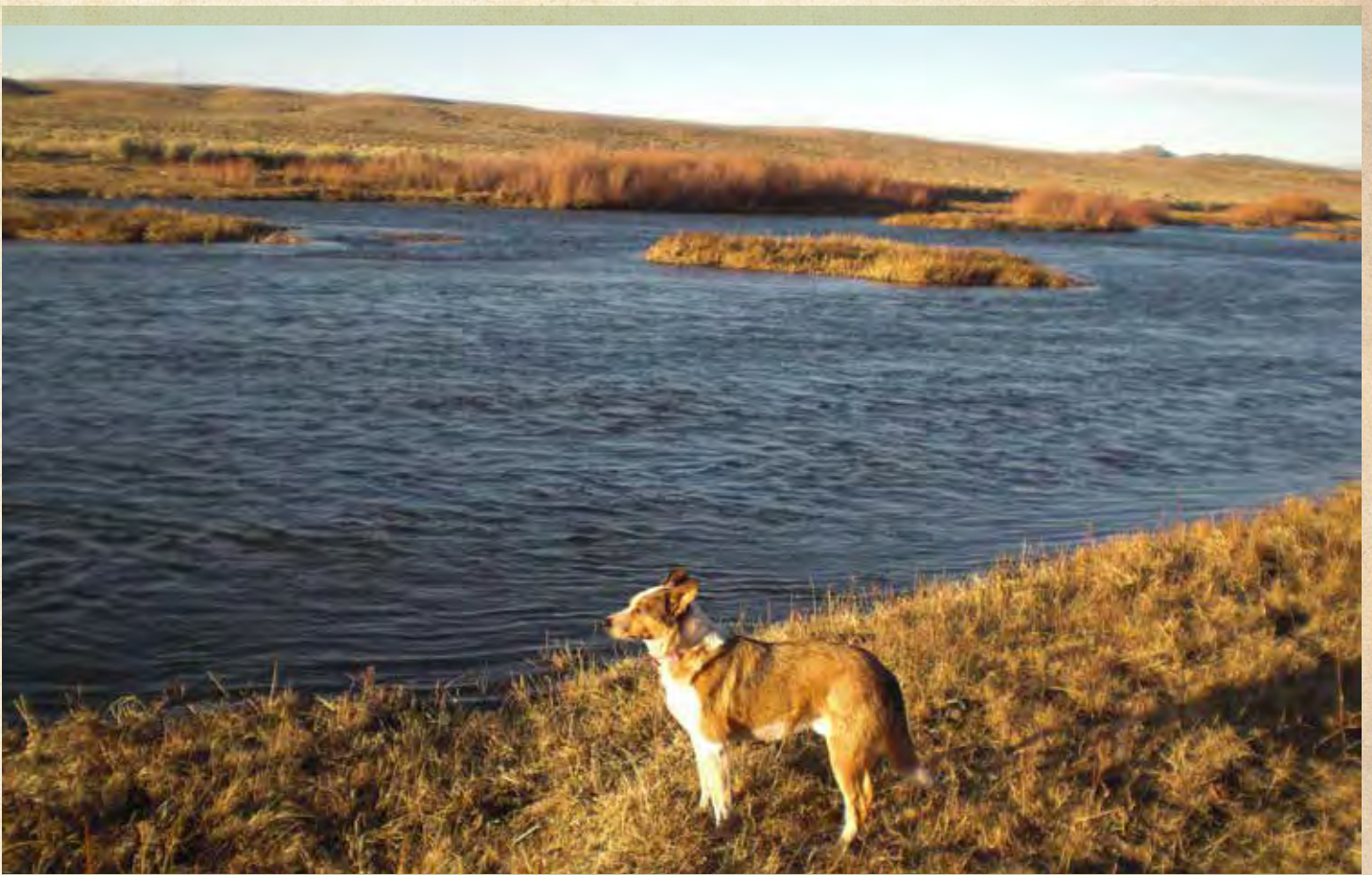


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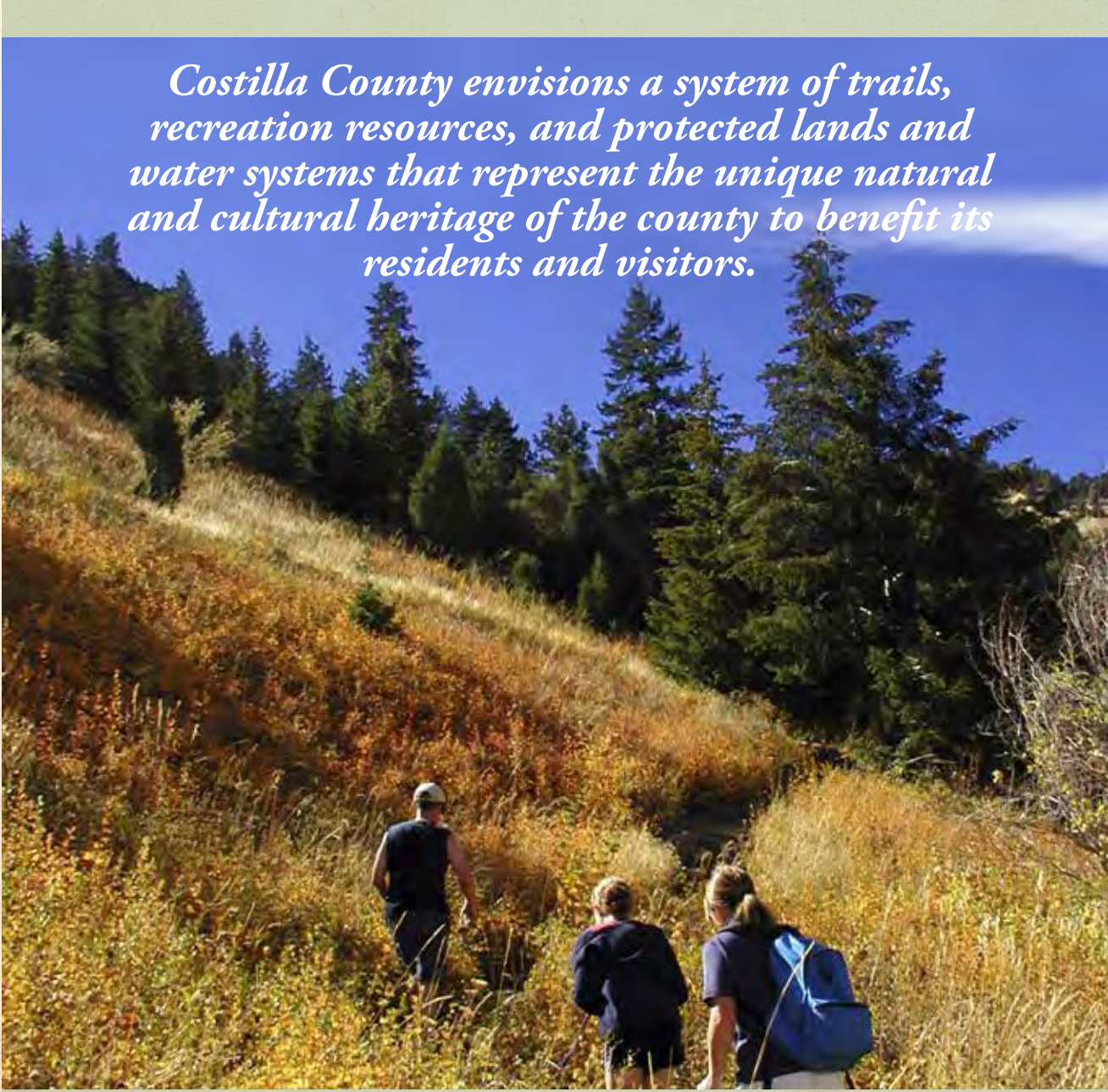
Vision and Goals



Rio Grande Greenbelt

THE COSTILLA COUNTY VISION

The vision and set of goals were developed through a collective process integrating feedback from stakeholders representing a variety of community organizations. The goal of the Master Plan is to enhance outdoor experiences, promote healthy and active lifestyles and protect the unique qualities of Costilla County. This will be accomplished with the creation of a system of trails, recreational spaces and opportunities, and conserving strategic parcels of land.



Costilla County envisions a system of trails, recreation resources, and protected lands and water systems that represent the unique natural and cultural heritage of the county to benefit its residents and visitors.

Un sistema de senderos, recursos recreativos, y tierra protegidas y sistemas de aguas que representan la herencia natural y cultural única del condado para los beneficios de residentes y visitantes.

GOALS FOR THE COSTILLA COUNTY TRAILS, RECREATION, AND OPEN SPACE MASTER PLAN

A. CREATE A SYSTEM OF TRAILS THAT ENHANCE OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES AND CONNECTS EXISTING CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES USING MULTI-USE TRAILS AND WALKING PATHS TO SERVE COMMUNITY RESIDENTS AND VISITORS.

B. CREATE RECREATIONAL SPACES AND PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES IN PUBLIC AREAS AND/OR PRIVATE LANDS IN ORDER TO PROVIDE DIFFERENT RECREATIONAL EXPERIENCES TO PROMOTE HEALTHY AND ACTIVE LIFESTYLES.

C. CONSERVE STRATEGIC PARCELS OF LAND THAT PROTECT VIEWSHEDS, UNIQUE NATURAL RESOURCES, TRAIL CORRIDORS, HISTORIC STRUCTURES, AGRICULTURAL OPERATIONS AND ASSOCIATED WATER RIGHTS, WILDLIFE HABITAT, AND CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT PLACES.



Autumn in the Culebra Range

Trails, Recreation

Chapter 3:

and Open Space Plan

Trails, Recreation, and Open Space Plan : Benefits



Trinchera Ranch Elk (© John Fiedler)

CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH NATURE, HERITAGE, AND COMMUNITY

When people connect with nature, the benefits can be very personal – a feeling of calm, a spiritual connection, a sense of renewal – however, another benefit of connecting to nature is that it can also connect us to community and to our heritage. When we have spaces where we can be outside together, whether it is to go for a walk with a friend or to have a family BBQ, we interact with people in a way that binds us.

Costilla County's unique heritage is linked to the history of the land. Ironically, this history created a county that is one of the least densely populated, but one in which there are few places for its residents to recreate because it is almost entirely comprised of private ownership. For many residents, time spent outdoors is usually associated with agriculture, whether it is a primary occupation, secondary occupation, or hunting, fishing, or barbecuing on the land of a friend or relative. This common experience connects residents with nature, heritage, and community.

Within Costilla County, it is critical to protect agricultural lands and wildlife habitat so that the residents continue to have the opportunity to work and recreate in these natural and working landscapes, but it is also important to identify other recreational wants and needs of residents so that there are even more opportunities for people to connect to heritage and community.

By protecting existing resources and expanding opportunities, we also ensure that future generations have these same abilities to connect. There is a growing concern that if future generations do not have a connection to nature, they may not have an innate desire to protect it and may not be adequately equipped to appreciate complex natural resource issues. The same argument may hold for cultural heritage – if a child does not learn about or appreciate their heritage what incentive do they have to maintain traditions? In Costilla County, natural and cultural heritage are intertwined; consequently, by protecting these resources now, we ensure that current and future generations have the opportunity to enjoy and steward the unique heritage.

PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

Costilla County has a diversity of landforms from the Rio Grande River that forms the western border, to the Culebra



Sanchez Reservoir, a State Wildlife Area

Mountains on the eastern border. The natural environment is a unique system that faces the challenges of being 99% private land with little to no public lands. Increased accessibility to trails and availability of open space provides a significant opportunity to protect this environment for future generations to enjoy and appreciate.

Protecting a community's natural environment reduces environmental impacts. Wetlands and riparian habitats filter contaminants in surface runoff which in return protect entire watersheds and drinking water sources. Trees and shrubs cleanse the air. Open space and trail corridors provide sanctuaries for trees and shrubs to grow.

Land designated as open space is permanently protected and can be characterized as land left in a primarily natural state containing significant natural, aesthetic, or cultural features that warrant protection. Trails are defined as linear open space which provides linkages between open space areas and public access to open space areas.

Unique natural environments along trails and within open spaces provide a community with great opportunities for education programs. Youth can learn about wildlife, habitat and geology in a safe environment. They provide adults and educators opportunities to teach local youth to be responsible for the environment and to be good neighbors.

ALTERNATIVE TRANSPORTATION ROUTES

Surveys by the Federal Highway Administration show that Americans are willing to walk as far as two miles to a destination and bicycle as far as five miles. However, only approximately 7% of the population in the state of Colorado, are choosing to walk, take public transportation, or select other means for commuting to work. In Costilla County, a 1999 County Comprehensive Plan indicated that the majority of county residents work within a relatively short distance from their homes. The county residents who don't live within short distances and have to commute, do so in a single occupant vehicle, and the approximately 20 percent of the workforce carpool while another five percent walk or bicycle to work. This is evidence that an alternative transportation system in the county connecting homes, workplaces, schools, parks, businesses, cultural sites and outdoor recreation could be an attractive alternative.

Alternative transportation routes such as safe bicycle routes and walking paths will provide residents with a safe option to complete routine daily tasks while also getting exercise. Establishing connections such as greenways would also contribute to alternative transportation links in rural areas of the county that are further away from towns and cities that have limited access to recreational resources. Residents, who live in more rural areas of the county, will be able to

walk or bike for recreational purposes without having to drive a long distance.

Other benefits to using alternative transportation routes include:

- Saving money. The cost of gas, maintenance on vehicles and insurance greatly decreases the less you use your vehicle and the more you walk and/or bike to destinations.
- Helping the Environment. Vehicle emissions are greatly reduced with fewer vehicles on the road. The less pollution created by vehicles and traffic, the more likelihood of clean air.
- Better physical and mental health. Increasing safe walking and bicycle routes to homes, workplaces, schools, businesses, and other attractive community resources increases a community's ability to get exercise. More exercise reduces the risk of diabetes, mental stresses, and heart-related diseases.

RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Parks and open space are more than places to recreate and relate to nature. Strong, established parks and open space areas are focal points of communities. The enhancement and development of additional parks, trails and recreational



Fort Garland Town Park

activities provide a variety of benefits and fulfill a variety of needs within a community such as:

- Increase a variety of activities for different age groups and users.
- Connect to the community and each other with safe pedestrian access.
- Provide opportunities for passive and active recreation.
- Help reinforce a sense of community.
- Provide places for members of the community to gather and interact.
- Parks can be a symbol of vitality and character which enhance a community's image and quality of life.
- Parks and recreation programs offer a multitude of opportunities to engage in arts, music, and sports.

The community's highest priority is the need for more recreation opportunities close to home. Many people currently travel to nearby communities for their indoor and outdoor recreation needs. This is true for all ages and user groups.

IMPROVED HEALTH THROUGH PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES

Parks, playgrounds, greenbelts, trails and community open spaces encourage people and their communities to be physical and mentally fit and healthy. People of all ages need physical activity to maintain fitness and health. There are many benefits to a community increasing access to indoor and outdoor recreational activities and programs.

- Physical activity increases strength, flexibility, and endurance. For example, childhood participation in organized fitness and sports programs helps attain higher bone density establishing a strong health base to combat osteoporosis later in life.
- Reduces the likelihood of disease. An estimated 66,000 U.S. deaths from coronary heart disease, colon cancer and diabetes could be prevented annually if one half of the sedentary people became active on a regular basis. Each additional mile walked or run by a sedentary person would give him or her an extra 21 minutes of life.
- Positive and enjoyable recreation experiences can decrease stress and enhance psychological well-being and improves mood. In Nationwide polls, 89% of

all Americans report that they often experience high levels of stress and 59% claimed that they feel great stress at least once a week. Leisure activities provide people with the opportunity to expel energy and emotion not being released in other aspects of their lives. Psychologists found that activities such as a walk in the woods gave a boost to the immune system that lasted two or three days.



A growing body of evidence also shows that nature plays a vital role in human health and well-being, and that parks and nature reserves play a significant role by providing access to nature for individuals. Contact with nature can be experienced through a variety of means including viewing natural scenes, being in natural settings, encountering plants and animals, participating in recreational activities, and undertaking environmental conservation work.

Fortunately, strong evidence shows that when people have access to parks, trails and open spaces they are more likely to exercise. However, the proximity of a park to where people live is not the only factor that influences whether they will exercise there. Features such as adequate lighting, availability of toilets and drinking water, and park design and maintenance all affect how much the park will be used.

Greenbelt areas are a way to fulfill the goals of healthy living. Greenbelt areas in a community have been shown in several studies to increase regular physical activity, particularly among people that live nearby. The Safe Route to School program provides youth and families with walking and biking zones separate from vehicular traffic and can teach young people good attitudes toward exercise while they are young and impressionable.

Nature can be seen as an under-utilized public resource in terms of human health and well-being with the use of parks and natural areas offering a huge potential value for population health promotion. In this light, natural areas can be seen as one of our most vital health resources and providing access to enjoying nature and other physical activities provide numerous benefits to a community.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION AREAS

CONSERVATION AND RECREATION AS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TOOLS

Costilla County is blessed with extraordinary views, which is why the route south and then west across the county was designated as part of the Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway. Its rich cultural heritage earned it recognition as a National Heritage Area. Both of these designations are useful tools to promote tourism as an industry within the County. However, while tourists are encouraged to drive through and maybe stop at one of the historic or cultural sites, there are no visible opportunities for them to get out of their cars and enjoy the natural resources that they see out their window. Developing and maintaining trails and parks that are accessible, clean, and well-signed and advertised would encourage these visitors to “stay and play” in the county.

CONSERVATION AS COST-SAVINGS

Farms, ranches, and forests are among the most common U.S. lands to be developed. For more than 15 years economists have been assessing the net economic benefit to communities of developing such lands, known as “costs of community services” (COCS) studies. The studies weigh anticipated economic benefits from various forms of development against the cost of delivering infrastructure and services to the development, such as schools, roads, and fire and police protection. The American Farmland Trust (AFT) has conducted 128 COCS studies in 25 states between 1989 and 2007. Averaging the results of those studies reveals that for every dollar communities realized from residential development, they had to deliver \$1.16 in services. On average, lands developed for commercial or industrial use required communities to deliver only \$0.29 in services for every dollar realized. On the other hand, farms and ranches demanded only \$0.37 in community services for each dollar of economic benefit. Specific results differ from community to community, of course. But in



Productive agricultural land (© Devon Pena)

general, results show that delivering services to residential development almost always costs more than the community can expect to realize in taxes and other benefits.

More generally, researchers have identified economic benefits that can come from protecting productive agricultural land. These include: .

1. A viable, local agricultural industry with employment opportunities,
2. Rural and environmental amenities, including viewsheds and wildlife habitat,
3. Local and national food security

CONSERVATION AS A MEANS OF PRESERVING ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

Intact natural systems perform multiple critical services that have an economic value. These include providing drinkable water, breathable air, and a stable climate; recycling waste; pollinating food crops; and providing physical buffers against storms. Though these services are difficult to monetarily value, they are critical. For example, in Costilla County, limiting road development in the higher elevations reduces erosion and sediment build-up in irrigation structures on the lower lands.

