



E: PROGRAM COMPARISON

OVERVIEW

Chapter Outline:

Overview

The following briefly summarizes the key points and best practices for county open space programs (a copy of the full report is available from Arapahoe County Open Space Program). The Comparison of Open Space Programs report defines the results of a survey conducted among five county open space programs in Colorado in the fall of 2009. The five county programs range from a mature, nationally recognized program established by Jefferson County in 1972 to Arapahoe County’s relatively new program initiated in 2004. The three other programs were all initiated in the 1990’s. All five of the programs operate on Colorado’s Front Range, in counties that have experienced rapid growth in the 1990’s and early 2000’s. The chart below summarizes salient features of the five county open space programs.

Characteristic	Adams	Arapahoe	Douglas	Jefferson	Larimer
Year Created	1999	2004	1994	1972	1996
% of county population in urban/suburban area	82	95	88	65	75
Funding Mechanism	¼ sales	¼ sales	1/6 sales	½ sales	¼ sales
Annual Revenue	\$7.8 M	\$20 M	\$7 M	\$33 M	\$9 M
Sunset	2026	2013	2023	none	2018
Land Held in Fee (ac.)	1,208	1,097	13,219	48,746	28,282
Land in Easement ac.	2,338	14,072	30,678	3,177	15,296
Trails: paved mi.	1	4.1	1	20	1.5
Trails: soft surface mi.	1	0	51	179	75
# of Trailheads	1	0	7	87	10
Full Time Staff (FTE)	11 OS, 28 Reg. Parks	8.5 OS & Co Parks	7.5 OS	97 OS & Reg. Parks	51 OS & Reg. Parks

This summary of the full report is organized into twelve key components of a county open space program.

1. Common Elements in County Open Space Resolutions.

All five county enabling resolutions share a number of common elements. These include:

- Use of a 1/6 to 1/2 cent sales tax increase as a funding vehicle.
- Definition of open space values to be protected.
- Creation of a Citizen’s Advisory Board appointed by the BOCC to oversee the program and make project recommendations to BOCC.
- “Shareback” of a significant portion of funds to cities, towns and recreation districts.

- Allocation of remaining funds between county, incorporated cities and towns, grants and other purposes.

While all programs have shareback programs with their municipalities, the percentage amounts vary widely, from 12% to more than 55%. Generally counties are dedicating 30 to 50 % of the funds to shareback. Resolutions that were adopted more recently tend to be more restrictive in the percentage of funds that are available for operating expenses, reflecting a desire on the part of voters to see funds spent directly on land protection. However, these percentage limitations are now creating funding challenges for several programs.

Table 1. Allocation of Funds in County Open Space Resolutions

County	Share-back	Admin	Open Space Protection	Grants	Open Space Improvements & Trails	Management of Open Space	Parks/Active Rec/Heritage
Adams Sunset 2026	30%	Less than 2%	More than 40% in open space grants throughout county	68% to OS and active	Included in OS Protection	Included in OS Protection	Less than 28% in active recreation grants to cities/rec dist
Arapahoe Sunset 2013	50%	3%	28.16% to County for county OS & trails	12% grants to cities and rec. districts	Included in OS Protection	3.24% County Open Space	Up to 3.6% to
Douglas Sunset 2023	12%	Less than 8% for admin & mgmt	80% to County after deduct for admin costs & shareback	No grants	Included in OS Protection & Management	Less than 8% for admin and mgmt	20% after deduct for admin costs & shareback, to County Parks Div.
Jefferson No Sunset	30%	No limit	No limit	Annual \$2 M Joint Venture Grants to cities and rec. dists.	Included in OS Protection, No limit	No limit	No limit
Larimer Sunset 2018	Not less than 55%	Part of	Up to 45% to County; 70% of that amount for OS protection	Small grants program of \$20,000/yr.	Included in OS Protection & Management	Not less than 15% up to 30% of County portion	Up to 15% of County portion to improve regional parks

2. Management and Administrative Costs Increase Over Time

The experience of all county open space programs is that land management and administrative costs (i.e. operating costs) increase, sometimes dramatically, over time. As shown on Table 2 on the next page, the three older open space programs with greater amounts of fee owned land have operating costs (as a percentage of

total revenues) at two to three times the amounts spent by Adams and Arapahoe County. In general this correlates to the amount of fee owned land, extent of public access, amount of developed facilities, desirability of terrain for public use activities, and increasing land management expenses required for natural resource stewardship. Even open space programs that primarily utilize conservation easements will see increases over time as the costs and responsibilities of easement stewardship are recognized. The foregoing indicates that the language of county open space resolutions should be flexible enough to anticipate realistic projections for operating costs.

Table 2.

Allocation of County Open Space Expenditures from Annual Sales Tax Revenues					
	Adams	Arapahoe	Douglas	Jefferson	Larimer
Shareback	30%	50%	14%	30%	56%
Operating	4%	6.24%	14.3%	17%	19%
Admin.	2.3%	3%	7.7%	4%	15%
Management	1.7%	3.24%	6.6%	13%	4%
Acquisition/Debt.	-	28.16%	53%	25.5%	12%
Heritage/Cultural	-	3.6%	-	2.6%	-
Grants	66%	12%	-	11.5%	.1%
OS Parks/Trails	-	Included in	18.7%	13.4%	12.9%
Development		Acquisition			

3. Align Land Protection Approach With Land Management Capacity and Resources

The majority of land in county open space programs is protected in two basic ways: first, by fee acquisition and second by conservation easement. Fee acquisition allows for public access and use but imposes permanent costs on the county for land management, patrol and administration. Conservation easements cost less to acquire, generally do not allow public access but impose far less cost on the county for management of the legal restrictions. The land protection approach for a particular parcel of land should be defined by the purpose, function and proposed use of the land as well as by the goals established by resolution language, management capacity and financial resources. Land protection approaches should align with program objectives and management approach and capacity. Restrictions on management expenses may dictate a protection approach dominated by conservation easements and the public should better understand these tradeoffs.

4. Trend is Towards More Integrated Open Space and Regional Park Systems.

In general, county open space programs were instituted after counties had already established a regional park program or function. In some counties, regional parks and open space remain separate, but related functions. However, the trend is towards creating an integrated county parks and open space department like Arapahoe County. The advantages of this approach are more efficient and coordinated management of county natural resources, greater ability to share staff, expertise and equipment and opportunities to integrate functions on single parcels of land. Managing a transition to an integrated system can be challenging as parks and open space often have separate funding sources, institutional biases and different management challenges. However, the long-term economic and land stewardship benefits to county natural resources merit the transition to an integrated system.

5. Strength in Organizational Structure.

There are two alternative organizational structures being utilized by counties with open space programs. The first is placement of the program within an existing department or divisional structure with complimentary programs and a strong reporting relationship. The second is creation of open space as a special program directly under the BOCC or County Administrator. On balance, the first structure provides greater stability and transparency. The advantages of the departmental structure include: creation of a defined relationship to other county departments; recognition of a significant, dedicated funding source and program; and, the fact that cooperative and coordinated efforts among related agencies can be more easily fostered. Other aspects of county open space programs also function better in a defined organizational structure, including, complex interactions and coordination with other agencies, multi-disciplinary approaches to managing natural resources, and creating interconnected trail systems. The second structure is less formal or defined, and an open space program can suffer when changes in the commitment or composition of the BOCC affect long-term programmatic success.

6. Building Budgets from the Ground Up.

As county open space programs become more mature their budgeting processes generally become more formal and multi-disciplinary. For example, Jefferson and Larimer counties have the most formalized and ground-up processes for producing annual budgets. In each county, management plans for individual open space units are prepared as lands come into the system and these plans help to establish the annual capital and operating budgets. Division leaders within the larger department make up a leadership or management team that reviews and reconciles budget issues before the budget is forwarded to the finance office or BOCC for review.

7. Develop a Strong Land Protection System.

Counties that have a strong, well-articulated land protection system tailored to their local landscape and culture work best. A land protection system consists of three elements: an adopted county open space master plan that articulates open space objectives, a defined process for project selection, and specific criteria for project selection. Most counties that are protecting the majority of their lands through the use of conservation easements, utilize land trusts such as the Trust for Public Land or the Conservation Fund to negotiate their transactions. On the other hand, most counties that protect the majority of their lands through land (fee) acquisition utilize county staff for the negotiations. In either case, a well-defined land protection system utilizing a full range of land protection techniques is critical to its effectiveness and credibility. Counties that have a rigorous process and criteria to select projects report multiple benefits of such an approach.

- **Public Credibility.** The public understands and knows the process and criteria that staff and the CAB are applying to all projects so there is a common understanding that decisions are being made based on natural resource rather than political judgments.
- **Objective Criteria.** A rigorous process and criteria help county staff and the CAB work constructively and more objectively on identified priorities rather than discussing more amorphous “values” that may be hard to compare.

- Signals to Landowners. Having an adopted and rigorous selection process and criteria sends a constructive message to county landowners about the types of property the county wants to protect. This helps to avoid wasted time and effort on the part of both staff and county landowners.

8. Citizen's Advisory Boards (CAB) Are Critical.

CAB's play a critical role in capturing local knowledge important to decision-making, providing direct citizen involvement, ensuring that the process of allocating funds is responsive, fair and balanced, and adopting policies and procedures for the open space program. The advisory boards forward recommendations for acquisition projects to the BOCC for their consideration. Three key factors relate to the effectiveness of CAB's:

- Constructive, and Open-Minded Members. Boards that are balanced in composition, geography and interests and consist of members with constructive, open-minded views work best.
- Strong and Regular Communication Between CAB and BOCC. Strong communication between the CAB and BOCC builds trust and is essential to the functioning of both. In order for this to occur, there needs to be regular communication, through meetings, site tours and work sessions. Strong communication minimizes the amount of second-guessing and crossed signals.
- Role of CAB Well Understood. The functions of the CAB should be well understood by all members of the board. Boards that focus on broad policy, project selection and recommendations to the BOCC work best.

9. Leveraging Shareback Expenditures.

A common feature in all county open space programs is a shareback provision, allocating from 12 to 55% of revenues to the incorporated cities and towns in the county. Shareback provisions are recognition of the fact that municipalities generate the lion's share of sales tax revenue and legitimately want a sizable return of funds for their own use. While most counties have an annual reporting requirement for the cities to account for their expenditure of funds, in reality there is little accountability to the county. Most county open space programs have learned that the best way to influence the use of shareback funds is to provide the municipalities with incentives and to partner with them on regional open space initiatives—projects that work well for both the county and local jurisdictions. In addition, maintaining good communication between the county staff and the municipalities is an excellent way for the county to leverage and influence use of shareback funds.

10. Making County Grants Programs Effective.

Most county open space programs have a grants program available for cities, towns and recreation districts as a component of their overall program. Grants can be an excellent way to provide incentives for multi-jurisdictional partnerships and regional projects. As Adams County has shown, the keys to a great grants program are clear guidelines, accountability and explicit expectations for applicants. Adams County operates almost entirely through its grants program. Prior to establishing rules, regulations and grantee expectations, the program was challenging to administer. Adams County has an application packet that contains strict informational

requirements that work well for both the county and applicant. In addition, grant awards generally are done on a percentage of reimbursable costs basis so that there are fewer accounting problems. Grants programs can also help to connect the open space program to different constituencies thereby increasing support for the overall program. Adams and Larimer County's small and mini-grants programs demonstrate that a small, flexible pot of funds available for creative use and management of open space lands and environmental education can be very effective.

11. Costs of Maintaining Public Facilities are Challenging.

The management and maintenance of facilities (trailheads, trails, structures) challenge all open space programs. Structures that get public use require more maintenance and are subject to vandalism and graffiti that increase maintenance costs. A common complaint of open space managers is the burden of managing and restoring historic structures that are often part of a program's mandate. While the objective of retaining such structures is laudable, the amount of work needed to bring them up to a point where they can accommodate public use may require inordinate resources. This experience indicates the need for very careful and realistic evaluation of options for historic structures when they become part of the system.

12. Fairgrounds Management.

One issue that separates Arapahoe County from other open space programs is that it houses its county fairgrounds within the open space program. None of the other programs do, although their county fairgrounds may be located in a different division within the same department. The experiences of Jefferson and Larimer Counties with fairgrounds are instructive. In Larimer County, the Fair Board went to voters to create a new venue with a greatly expanded mission. The Larimer County Ranch Fair events center, a division within the public works department, is now primarily an events and sports center of which the county fair is a minor piece. The Larimer BOCC strongly supports the events center and both the county and local communities subsidize its operations. In Jefferson County, Fairgrounds and Open Space are separate divisions within the Community Resources Department. Jefferson County has greatly expanded and improved its fairgrounds so that it hosts many events year-round. The BOCC has made the fairgrounds a high priority and subsidizes operations because of its commitment to youth and low fees. The result is that events cover only about a quarter of the expenses of the fairgrounds. Fairgrounds are changing dramatically in their missions, events and costs. Experience in other counties indicates that having the fairgrounds as a separate cost center and division allows it to operate on its merits and allows the BOCC to evaluate its performance as a stand-alone unit.