

***DID YOU KNOW? ... THE STORY OF BOULDER, COLORADO:  
ITS STRUGGLES TO RECONCILE GROWTH  
WITH ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION***

*These seven articles first appeared in the Daily Camera in September & October 1997, offering background information for growth issues in the city of Boulder. Other cities and towns in Boulder County confront similar issues.*

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## **Part 1. The Growth Issue: Yesterday and Today**

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The rapid population growth that followed World War II was not without precedent in the city of Boulder. This community began life in 1858 as a small settlement of gold seekers who had camped along the banks of Boulder Creek. Between 1890 and 1900 the population of the town, by now a supply and distribution center as well, nearly doubled, from 3,330 to 6,150.

As the new century opened, the Boulder City Improvement Association, a newly formed organization made up of prominent citizens, became concerned about maintaining the attractiveness of the burgeoning community. They first hired a local landscape architect, W. W. Parce, to prepare a plan for the development of a park at the Chautauqua grounds. The plan was adopted by the city in 1904.

At this time, the City Beautiful movement was sweeping the country. In 1908, the Improvement Association invited Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., a distinguished professor of landscape architecture at Harvard, to visit Boulder. They asked him to suggest what physical improvements within the reach of the city will help to make it increasingly convenient, agreeable, and generally satisfactory as a place in which to live and work. The landmark Olmsted report was published in 1910.

Olmsted made a number of interesting recommendations. Bury utility lines for aesthetic reasons. Prevent the use of the flood plain along Boulder Creek for anything more intensive than the grazing of cattle.

He was much impressed with the beauty and serenity of what he called the City Forest. "In the great tract of unspoiled foothill scenery lying above and beyond the Chautauqua grounds, Boulder has a priceless possession," he wrote. "We have little specific advice to offer beyond the caution not to spoil what a bountiful nature has provided."

But the emphasis then was on increasing the attractiveness of the place in the face of growth pressures. Concern over the need to slow the rate of growth itself would not play a significant role in city policy until the years after World War II, when a number of converging factors focused the attention of the citizens on the problems of rapid growth. University enrollment had more than doubled over the war years. The Boulder-Denver Turnpike (U.S. 36) was completed in 1952 and offered commuters a much shorter, far more direct route to Denver. Just two years later, the federal government relocated the scientific laboratories of the National Bureau of Standards to Boulder.

The first small response to this rapid urbanization had been the formation in 1950 of a Regional Planning Commission, made up of representatives from the county, the city of Boulder, and the

school district. The commission hired planner Trafton Bean as a consultant and began work on a plan for the city and its fringe area. Soon after, in the election of 1951, the city amended its charter to provide a greatly strengthened planning function, and the Regional Planning Commission became inactive.

Taking over the work begun by the Commission, the city prepared its first master plan (1958), the “Guide for Growth.” The name chosen is revealing. Continued growth of the city was at that time considered not only inevitable, but probably desirable. The plan put down on paper the land uses as they then existed in the city and possible future uses beyond the city boundaries. This plan helped to determine where new commercial and industrial development, for example, might best be encouraged to locate. An effort was also made to anticipate the impacts of increased traffic.

Yet the city was quite unprepared for the rapid and sometimes chaotic growth pressures that were soon to follow. The 1960s were to require sterner measures.

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## **Part 2. Growth in Boulder: The Gunbarrel Story**

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In the years just after World War II, the pressures of growth and rapid urbanization on the city of Boulder were unrelenting. In 1960 a new city manager, E. Robert Turner, proposed some novel ideas for managing this growth, in particular through control of the extension of water and sewer lines. He utilized the “revocable permit,” a procedure by which out-of-city users might be provided with city utilities, but only on condition that they pay higher rates and agree to annex to the city as soon as their land was legally eligible.

Turner foresaw that the fringe area surrounding the city was destined to develop, whether the city provided water or not. He felt that it was imperative that the city exert some control over that development, since the county at that time had virtually no power to control land use nor to prevent the formation of autonomous special service districts. The strategy that he recommended to City Council became known as the “Spokes of the Wheel” plan.

In essence, the concept defined the outer limits of a “service area,” beyond which the city would not expect ever to expand. Within that area, utility extensions would radiate outward from the central city in several lines, or “spokes.”

The plan was this: interested developers would be encouraged to finance these utility extensions in return for city water and sewer services. (The utility lines would become the property of the city.) They would develop their projects, according to city standards, at the edge of the future city, thereby defining its area of influence and discouraging the formation of special service

districts. Growth pressures were so strong that the Council fully expected that landowners between the ends of the spokes and the city limits would soon be enticed to hook on to the new lines and become part of the city.

The first such extension reached along the Diagonal Highway to an area northeast of town near the site which IBM had purchased in 1957. The utility extensions were paid for by George and Everett Williams, prominent Boulder developers. Turner had approached them in 1962 with a proposal to help implement the “Spokes of the Wheel” plan by building a new golf course on land that they owned across the highway from the IBM site. The existing city course shared its site on Arapahoe Avenue with the Boulder Country Club, and both needed more room.

The Williams brothers determined that it would not be economically feasible to try to build and operate a golf course without a subsidy of some sort. They had a proposal: move the Country Club to the new site, leaving the city course on Arapahoe Avenue, and they would then build the new golf course and an adjacent residential subdivision to subsidize it. By making access to city water and sewer readily available, the extensions would also solidify the intention of IBM, with its some 5000 jobs, to move here.

The subdivision was built and named Gunbarrel Green. And IBM did move to Boulder. But the “Spokes of the Wheel” plan was soon to be rejected by the citizens. A second utility extension was completed, east along Arapahoe Avenue to Ball Brothers and the school district's new administrative center. But when another developer, Sam Rudd, proposed to extend city water and sewer southward over Davidson Mesa, the citizens rebelled. They took the issue to a referendum in July, 1965, and voters solidly rejected the extension.

The anticipated scenario for the Gunbarrel development never came to pass. There was unexpectedly strong opposition to the annexation and development of the intervening agricultural lands. Part of Gunbarrel, primarily the commercial and industrial developments, including IBM, did become part of the city many years later.

But to this day most Gunbarrel residents have adamantly resisted annexation.

So ended the “Spokes of the Wheel,” but not the citizens' concern. A new strategy for managing growth was clearly needed.

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### **Part 3. Open space history stretches back to 1959**

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In 1910 it was the threat of an amusement park on the summit of Flagstaff Mountain, accessed by an inclined railway. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., engaged by a citizen committee to suggest

long-range plans for the fledgling city of Boulder, reacted in horror. “The scenery of Flagstaff Mountain,” he wrote, “is too noble, too magnificent, too precious, to be wasted in serving as an almost unheeded accompaniment to the fun of roller coasters....”

In 1959 it was the threat of subdivisions and hotels in the city’s treasured mountain backdrop. The City Council had called a special election for that July on a water bond issue that would have financed, among other things, the extension of water distribution lines along the tops of the wooded mesas.

A small group of citizens became greatly alarmed at the prospect. Seeking a way to slow down, if not to prevent, such development, they pushed for a charter amendment to prohibit city water service above a stated contour of elevation (a “Blue Line”). When the City Council refused to put such an amendment to a vote, the citizens organized a successful petition drive that placed the Blue Line amendment on the same ballot as the water bonds. The bond issue failed, and the “Blue Line” won.

Galvanized by this expression of popular support, members of the group organized that same fall as PLAN Boulder (PLAN was an acronym for People’s League for Action Now). Realizing that the Blue Line was at best a stop-gap measure, they decided to explore a surer way to prevent unimpeded development — by the city’s acquiring land before it was developed.

Their efforts were rewarded in 1967, when city manager “Ted” Tedesco, persuaded by their arguments, proposed a ballot issue authorizing an additional sales tax of one cent on the dollar. Sixty percent of the penny tax would be earmarked for streets and thoroughfares; the other forty percent for the acquisition and maintenance of open space lands. The sales tax was approved, and the city’s Open Space program became a reality.

A major threat arose in 1973 when Tedesco left. The acting city manager abolished the citizens Open Space advisory committee and turned the program over to the Parks Department. He claimed that enough land had been acquired and Parks could maintain it. Ever vigilant, the PLAN-Boulder group reacted by drawing up a city charter amendment to create an Open Space Board and Department, and most importantly, to define the program’s purposes. These would include limiting urban sprawl, preserving agriculture and floodplains, and protecting critical areas from development.

The new city manager, Archie Twitchell, avoided the confrontation. He agreed to everything but the Open Space Department and guaranteed an ordinance which would accomplish the same objectives as the proposed charter amendment.

The supporters of Open Space, however, felt that the program was still not secure. A decade later they worked with the city to draft a new charter amendment. In 1986 their amendment was approved by the voters by an impressive margin. It gave the Open Space Board of Trustees

charter status and further protected the program from being weakened by any future city council. In 1989, voters expanded the revenue stream by the addition of another (.33 cent) sales tax.

By early 1997 the city had acquired over 26,000 acres of open space. During its 30 years of existence, the program has enjoyed unparalleled support. Yet today controversy rages.

The first, and only, defeat of a city Open Space measure occurred in the election of 1996, when voters refused to remove the 2004 expiration date for the .33-cent sales tax. Questions of how much Open Space land is enough and how it should be used are hotly debated.

Have we acquired enough land or should we keep on purchasing more? Should dogs be allowed on Open Space? Running free, on leash, or not at all? Can Open Space land be legitimately used to provide a link in the bicycle commuter transportation system?

The debate continues.

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#### **Part 4. Boulder began limiting growth in 1972**

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The “Guide for Growth” of 1958 had been a useful first plan for the fast-growing Boulder community. The almost overwhelming growth pressures of the 1960s, however, dictated a new approach. The first comprehensive plan for the Boulder Valley was adopted in 1970.

This new version of a master plan was more detailed than the Guide for Growth, but still remarkably concise. It required only one large sheet of paper printed on both sides: a map of the Valley on one side and the accompanying text on the other.

It defined the outer limits of the planning area and so staked out the territory beyond which the city did not expect to expand. It is interesting to note that these boundaries are virtually the same as those defining the “service area” in the “Spokes of the Wheel” plan of the 1960s, the plan that resulted in the development of Gunbarrel.

Before we go any further, let us make one thing clear. The Boulder Valley of the comprehensive plan is the planning area for the city. It is much smaller than the Boulder Valley that defines the school district, which comprises the entire southern half of Boulder County.

Primarily a land use map which defined future open space areas around the city, the 1970 Plan also committed to providing diversity in residential housing, increasing overall residential densities, adding “very few” new roads, and studying alternatives to the automobile. The Plan

had a distinguishing characteristic that was unique for its time: it was jointly adopted by the city and county.

Within the boundaries of the planning area, it classified land as belonging to Area I, Area II, or Area III. Area I was the land which was already within the limits of the city. Area II was land adjacent to the city for which annexation and development were foreseen during the 15-year planning period. Area III covered all the remaining land in the planning area, for which no urban development was anticipated during the 15 years covered by the Plan.

Yet for a number of years a serious ambiguity persisted about the ultimate fate of Area III. Even though no immediate urban use of these lands was anticipated, many supporters of the Plan simply assumed that the ultimate development of Area III was inevitable. Others preferred to believe that Area III lands were to be forever off bounds and preserved for agricultural use, wildlife habitat, and open space.

In an effort to resolve this ambiguity, the city and the county in the spring of 1990 convened a two-year study of the future of Area III. The result of the study was an unprecedented agreement that the rural land uses and character of almost all of Area III should be protected under a new designation of “Area III Rural Preservation Area.”

A Planning Reserve Area was to be established for a very small portion of Area III that was close to the Boulder city limits and might be considered for eventual annexation and development. The city and the county accepted these recommendations and they became a part of the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan.

As our land use “constitution” for the Boulder Valley, the Plan provides the over-arching framework for longer range cooperative planning. Both city and county adopt zoning and other planning tools to implement the Plan’s goals and policies, often arousing heated public debate in the process.

Yet through its periodic revisions and updates, the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan has grown in stature. The central goals enunciated in the 1970s remain unchanged. The outer boundaries of Area II, first delineated 20 years ago, have changed little and continue to confine urban growth. Nearly all of Area III lands slated then for preservation remain free of development.

## **Part 5. How Sears spurred Crossroads redevelopment**

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One of the most difficult planning decisions in the city's history faced the Council in 1978, when the threat of a major shopping center just a few miles down the Turnpike and outside the Boulder Valley seemed about to become a reality. The Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan called for the area encompassing both the downtown and the Crossroads Mall to be the only regional center serving the Boulder Valley. In fact, historically the city of Boulder had drawn by far the major share of retail activity in the entire county and hence of sales tax revenues so important to Open Space acquisition and the upgrading of city services. The location of a new center so close to Boulder might well sound the death knell for the future economic vitality of Crossroads.

The downtown had just undergone a miraculous transformation into a thriving pedestrian mall, but the existing Crossroads Center was nearly 17 years old and badly in need of refurbishing. Suddenly that refurbishing took on a new urgency.

The redevelopment and expansion of Crossroads were the culmination of more than a decade of argument and debate over the proper location for what would be the first major regional shopping center in the Boulder Valley. Each proposal to be put forward — by many of the foremost developers in the nation — had failed, either because the city judged the site to be inadequate or inconsistent with the Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan, or because, as became increasingly evident, the cost of assembling enough land in the area of the city designated for regional business was prohibitively high.

Then suddenly in 1978, the owners of Sears, one of the leading department stores in the long search for a location for such a center, announced that it had found the perfect spot: six miles down the Turnpike in the city of Louisville! The Louisville city authorities were overjoyed to accept the proposal from Sears' parent company, Homart, to develop an elegant Centennial Valley Mall on vacant land next to the Turnpike and annex it to the city.

Indeed, in an effort to make their site even more desirable for such a large commercial development, Homart agreed to put up some \$5 million to help finance the reconstruction and improvement of the nearby freeway interchange.

Galvanized into precipitous action, the Boulder City Council promptly created an Urban Renewal Authority (an action shunned by previous Councils as unthinkable) and set in motion the process that — two elections and several years of acrimonious infighting later — finally resulted in the opening of the newly expanded Crossroads Mall. So Boulder retained — for the moment — its edge in sales tax collections.



And the major retail development took place where water and sewer lines, roads, and other necessary infrastructure were already available, instead of out in the proverbial “cornfield.”

Fourteen years have gone by since the grand opening of the expanded Crossroads Mall. Is it time for another refurbishing? The lease of long-time tenant and prime anchor, Montgomery Ward, has ended, as Ward’s itself faces bankruptcy reorganization. Sears has long been chafing at the small space originally allotted to it.

In the meantime, new and more glamorous centers are on the verge of becoming reality, with such attractive anchors as Dillard’s and Nordstrom’s. One is planned just down the Turnpike on the edge of Broomfield. Just a couple of miles further on, at 104th Avenue, Westminster is working hard to facilitate development of a new million-square-foot shopping mall. The fast-growing cities of eastern Boulder County are becoming commercial centers in themselves, drawing sales tax revenues away from the traditional base of Crossroads Mall in Boulder.

What will be the next move?

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## **Part 6. Growth Control: The Story of the Danish Plan**

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A cataclysmic event in the city’s political history was the election of 1971.

Preceded by the ferment of the protests against the Vietnam War, by the invasion of hordes of “flower people,” soon to be labeled transients or street people, and invigorated by the recent granting of the vote to 18-year-olds, the election of 1971 was indeed a watershed election.

Unprecedented in Boulder election history, four of the five incumbents seeking re-election were defeated. In their place the voters chose the first black member of Council, Pen Tate, a human rights activist; the youngest person ever to be elected, Karen Paget, a 26-year-old graduate student; a representative of the flower people, Tim Fuller; and Ken Wright, a stalwart environmentalist.

At the same election, the issue of slowing down -- even capping -- population growth was directly addressed for the first time. Faced with a ballot proposal initiated by Zero Population Growth (ZPG), requiring the City Council to adopt policies that would cap the city's population at around 100,000, the Council referred to the voters a more moderate proposal, directing the city only to take measures to slow population growth to a rate “substantially below that of the 1960's.” ZPG lost, and the city's proposal won.

The immediate outgrowth of that directive was the Council's appointment of the Boulder Area Growth Study Commission, a citizen group which met for several years and produced a monumental 10-volume report which is still very much worth scrutinizing. The city also adopted interim growth policies to be in effect while the staff worked on more definitive approaches.

The staff's progress was much too slow, however, for many of the citizen activists. Paul Danish, who had been elected to City Council in 1975, tried in vain to persuade his fellow council members to put on the ballot a growth control measure based on one recently implemented by the city of Petaluma, California -- an annual limitation on the number of residential building permits. The "Petaluma Plan" had been upheld in the courts as a legally defensible way to slow the pace of residential development in order to permit the city to provide the necessary capital improvements -- like water and sewer -- to serve it.

When the Council on a 5-4 vote refused to agree, he fell back on a petition drive -- as had so many activists before him. The so-called "Danish Plan" was approved by the voters in 1976. It had a built-in five-year life span and limited the number of permits in any one year to 2% of the existing base. It also set up a point system to help in determining which applications would qualify.

When the Danish Plan expired as scheduled in 1981, it was succeeded by a growth management system developed by staff which is similar to the one under which the city now operates. In 1995 the annual limit was reduced to 1% per year.

The Danish Plan, however, addressed only residential growth. In the ensuing years, the City Council would be forced to confront the resulting "jobs/housing imbalance." The number of jobs created within the city kept escalating while the number of new housing units was limited. One of the more dramatic impacts: traffic congestion rapidly worsened, as workers living perforce elsewhere in the county drove daily to their jobs in the city.

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## **Part 7. Citywide Rezoning Project: A Compromise**

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The Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan of 1970 had noted that "there is already enough vacant commercial and industrially zoned land in the Boulder Valley area to support employment needs for a population beyond the 140,000 anticipated in 1990." (In reality, 1990 population would be less than 100,000.) Moreover, the interim growth policies adopted by the City Council after the watershed election of 1971 had included as a key policy the admonition that the city should not encourage any new major employers to move into the Boulder Valley.

In spite of these concerns, the fast pace of residential growth turned out to be the overriding issue. Neither the Danish Plan in 1976 nor the growth management policies that succeeded it addressed the rate of commercial and industrial development. That concern would come into focus only with the Integrated Planning Project (IPP) in 1993.

During the efforts to revise the Comprehensive Plan in 1988-89, it became clear that the ambiguity surrounding the future of Area III, the area in the Boulder Valley still largely rural and undeveloped, had to be resolved. The joint city-county study of Area III which took place in 1990 and 1991 concluded that only a very small portion of land in close proximity to the existing city should ever be annexed. Realizing that the city had very nearly reached its ultimate build-out, the City Council launched an ambitious community visioning effort -- the IPP. They hoped it would answer the question, "What's best for what's left?"

The Integrated Planning Project tried to reconcile conflicting community goals for housing, the environment, transportation, community design, and the economy. Compressed into a seven-month timetable, it included extensive public outreach and discussion.

Among its conclusions, one of the most important was the need to limit employment growth. Between 1970 and 1990, the number of jobs had grown at a rate four times faster than population. At the same time, housing prices within the city had escalated. The resultant increase in the number of workers living elsewhere and commuting into the city contributed significantly to the traffic congestion that was at the top of nearly everyone's list of complaints about Boulder.

Progress was slow, however, in implementing this goal. Impatient with the lack of action, a group of citizens led by Steve Pomerance initiated a petition to place on the ballot the question of slowing down non-residential growth. The SLOW GROWTH! Initiative made it to the ballot in 1995. It would have mandated a limit of 1% per year, for a period of five years, on the number of square feet of additional construction allowed for commercial and industrial uses. The City Council was charged with devising particular strategies to achieve this result.

Alarmed by the possibility that SLOW GROWTH! might actually pass, the Council hastily put together an ordinance of its own. The voters turned down the SLOW GROWTH! Initiative, and the Council proceeded to implement its own ordinance.

The procedures outlined in the ordinance were complicated and unwieldy, and the effort was doomed to failure. Plagued by a backlog of projects hurriedly put "in the pipeline" in order to escape the imposition of the new controls, the city realized that many of them were speculative. Many "home-grown" businesses found themselves at a great disadvantage.

Before the year was out, the Council was looking for alternatives. A suggestion originally put forward by council members Steve Pomerance and Bob Greenlee, usually at odds on growth issues, was embraced with relief by key players in the business community. In place of an annual limit on commercial development, the city would embark on a comprehensive rezoning. Such an

effort had long been planned, but the desire to reduce the total number of potential jobs at build-out catapulted the Council into action.

And so came about the Comprehensive Rezoning Project of 1997.

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