

THE ASPEN TIMES

Developers aren't gobbling all the land

New report shows conservation outpacing development in Colorado

Scott Condon
Aspen, CO Colorado
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Colorado governments and land trusts were among the most successful in the nation at protecting private land from development in 2006, but a new report shows their collective efforts still will fall short of a conservation goal.

About 167,500 acres of private land were preserved in Colorado last year, according to an annual report by Colorado Conservation Trust, a Denver organization leading preservation efforts. That meant the state was the third most successful in the nation in preserving land, the study said.

Aspen Valley Land Trust, the state's oldest land trust, had a banner year in 2006, when it acquired conservation easements on 5,200 acres in the Roaring Fork and lower Colorado River Valleys.

"Colorado remains one of only two states in the West where more land is protected each year than is lost to development," said the study, called "Colorado Conservation at a Crossroads."

The report's release coincides with a national conference Oct. 3-6 that brought 2,100 people involved in land conservation to Denver. The Land Trust Alliance convened the meeting so people in the field could share innovative strategies for conserving land.

Overall, Colorado land trusts have protected 1.57 million acres of ranches, farms and other open spaces. In many cases, they acquired conservation easements — binding agreements which prohibit or limit development. Local governments programs, like the Pitkin County Trails and Open Space program, have conserved another 380,000 acres, the report said.

But the challenges are as huge as the accomplishments. Colorado added more than 1 million residents between 1990 and 2000, and from 2000 to 2006 it had a population growth rate of 10.5 percent. While most new residents are moving to the Front Range, the natural gas boom in Garfield County and other parts of the state also sent populations soaring. Strong resort economies boosted populations in areas like Pitkin, Eagle and Summit counties.

"The state demographer projects that 5.7 million people will call Colorado 'home' in 2015 — an increase of 827,000 people over our current population," Colorado at a Crossroads said. "By 2030, Colorado is projected to have 7.3 million residents — more than double the number of people who lived here in 1980."

So, even though Colorado is preserving more land than it is developing, its rate of development is also among the highest in the nation. Some estimates indicate 90,000 acres of rural and natural areas are disappearing annually.

About 42 percent of Colorado land is owned by the state or federal governments. Another 55 percent is privately owned. The remaining 3 percent — about 1.95 million acres, is conserved.

Colorado Conservation Trust led a coalition of nonprofits three years ago that set a goal of protecting another 2 million acres in Colorado by 2015. So far, about 340,000 acres has been protected.

“Despite our substantial accomplishments, Colorado's conservation community is falling behind in protecting our most special places,” said Will Shafroth, executive director of Colorado Conservation Trust. “We need to pick up the pace if we are to meet our 2 million-acre goal by 2015.”

The report estimated that \$1.18 billion is needed to reach the preservation goal.

A copy of the report is available on the Colorado Conservation Trust website:
www.coloradoconservationtrust.org.

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