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## **Talking About Growth Is Never Easy, But Public Participation Is Key**

By Laura Puckett Daniels, Chair, Gunnison County Board of Commissioners

On August 7 and last week on September 18, Gunnison County held two public hearings regarding the Special Area Regulations (SAR) that are informed by the Gunnison Area Plan (GAP), a state-mandated, community-driven framework that strives to balance development needs with protecting Gunnison's open space, rural character, and values in order to plan appropriately for future growth.

Over 100 people attended between the two hearings, and I would like to thank the residents of Gunnison County who continue to show up and participate in the important conversations about our shared future. Your voices matter, and the Planning Commission and County Commissioners are listening. We deeply value the time, thought, and care our community puts into this dialogue.

### **The Pressures of Growth**

Talking about growth is hard. We love our small towns and rural character; we love our neighbors, quiet streets, and agricultural lands. At the same time, the pressures of growth are real. Many of our friends and neighbors need safe, stable housing they can afford. Some folks want to develop their land, and we have buyers from all over the country vying for our County's homes and lots. Planning for the future enables us to meet these pressures while keeping our values intact.

Housing is one of our most challenging issues. The 2024 Housing Needs Assessment states that we need 1,300 more units of housing to meet current and increased demand by 2029. But where should this housing go, now and far into the future? Many of us agree the best place is

inside our municipalities, and the City of Gunnison is revising their Land Development Code with policies that will encourage this. But there is still pressure in the County to develop, so what do we want our unincorporated County lands to look like 50 years from now?

### **The Threat of Sprawl**

I, for one, want to ensure we still have working cattle ranches far into the future. I want herds of wildlife that can move freely across the landscape and raise healthy young. I want clean and abundant water in our rivers, reservoirs, and wells. But one of the biggest threats to these values is sprawl. Sprawl is what you see when a community allows unplanned, unintentional development in the County. It's one house, one subdivision, one storage unit at a time, creeping out from the municipal boundaries and filling up ag lands. It's what happens when you put one house on one acre (or 5 acres or 35 acres) until you've filled all the developable acres. Sprawl eats up land, eats up wildlife habitat, and eats up water. If you live in that one house on 10 acres, you probably love it, but the opportunities diminish for the hundreds of people currently in our community who need a place to live.

The opposite of sprawl is compact development. Compact development is when you build adjacent to the city and existing communities, concentrating people in order to preserve outlying lands for agriculture and wildlife. It's when you continue the neighborhood streets and the walkability. It's when you tie into existing utilities in order to avoid a multitude of new wells and septic systems that threaten existing water quality and supply.

### **Understanding the Gunnison Area Plan and Special Area Regulations**

The Gunnison Area Plan (GAP) is currently a draft document that states the values and vision for the future of areas within three miles of the City's boundary. The County has designated some of these areas as part of a "Special Area," and we are drafting a regulatory framework for how the land can be used, called Special Area Regulations (SAR). The goals of the GAP and the SAR are multi-fold: to fulfill the legal requirement for Gunnison to have a three-mile plan; to drive development close to our population centers and connected to utilities; to provide more housing locals can afford; and to protect areas farther from population centers for agriculture and wildlife. Just as importantly, it ensures that if development proposals come forward, we have clear, predictable processes for review rather than starting from scratch each time. These are a lot of goals to tackle at one time! But all these issues are interrelated, so this process involves a broad community conversation to try to strike the right balance.

### **Providing Clarity in the Planning Process**

Without the GAP, a developer could approach us at any time to request almost anything, anywhere. The current land development process through the County's Land Use Resolution is pretty straightforward for a single home on a property, but for subdivisions or multiple units, the process can take years. We've heard over and over again from local community members that this process stops the creation of more housing and makes it more expensive. The GAP and accompanying SAR should provide clarity and certainty for developers to make it easier for them to invest in our community, so that we all end up with more housing options.

But it's not just about developers. When the regulations are informed by your voice, then they become a reflection of our community's values and goals, ensuring that future development aligns with what we need and want. Does that mean every person will love 100% of what's in the plan? No, it doesn't. But by listening to your feedback now and incorporating the feedback we've received from years of planning efforts, we hope to make the GAP a clear statement of our values, with the SAR then becoming regulatory framework that supports those values.

### **Clearing Up Misconceptions**

I also want to clear up what the GAP and SAR are not, especially for our neighbors in Dos Rios. The GAP is not a development proposal. Rather, it is a framework—a planning tool designed to guide potential future development within three miles of the City of Gunnison. Some residents believe that a high-density housing development is planned for the Dunbar parcel next to Dos Rios. The fact is, there is no current application by a private entity to develop that property, nor is the County considering building on that property. This plan does not mandate development there or anywhere else. It simply identifies where development could be considered and parameters for what that development should look like, if landowners or developers bring forward proposals in the future.

It's important to understand that what actually gets built in these areas defined by the plan will ultimately depend on developers, landowners, and the marketplace, but the SAR is the regulatory framework that ensures compatibility with our community goals so that we can take a proactive role in steering our community through the pressures and changes we face.

### **A Process Years in the Making**

This work did not begin overnight. The GAP process began in 2022, and over the past few years, County staff, City staff, and community members have been involved in shaping the goals and considerations that now appear in the GAP through open houses, written comment, editorials, work sessions, and public hearings. Last week's September 18 hearing regarding the SAR is only the latest step in our public engagement; the next hearing will be held on October 23, and you can also submit written comment (see below).

Ultimately, thoughtful planning now will help us avoid haphazard or piecemeal decisions later. It will help us solve for our housing needs, while protecting water, wildlife, agriculture, and public safety. By creating a framework that prevents unwanted sprawl, we can streamline future processes, give landowners clarity, and ensure the public continues to have a voice. This effort is about being proactive rather than reactive. It's about creating more places to live, while preserving the places we love.

### **Staying Engaged in the Process**

To be clear, the Board of County Commissioners has not yet voted on adopting the SAR, nor have we made up our minds about all the details. This process is ongoing, and your input is part of what will shape the outcome. As your Commissioner, I remain committed to transparency, open dialogue, and careful decision-making. I encourage all residents to stay engaged, keep asking questions, and continue sharing your views, both verbally in meetings and in writing by

| email ([planning@gunnisoncounty.org](mailto:planning@gunnisoncounty.org)) or mail directly to your Commissioners. Together, we can ensure that growth in Gunnison County reflects our shared priorities and preserves what makes this valley so special.