



The Value of Vistas

By Linda Browning

Have your friends or family ever asked you, “Why do you live so far away in such a remote area?” The answer most often given is because Clear Creek County has such natural open beauty, clean air, and recreational opportunities.

Citizen input about pleasing views and attractive surroundings are often trivialized or dismissed by those who feel profits and economic criteria are more important than quality of life. But it is precisely the views and surrounding beauty that make Clear Creek County so special.

In the 2003 Clear Creek Citizen Survey, the top reasons for moving to the county were "Peace and Tranquility" and "Views/Natural Beauty." Residents have made it clear that beauty and the tranquility that comes with it are very important.

Furthermore, beauty is important to economic well-being. A study by the National Association of Home Builders found that the surrounding environment is the single most important factor affecting the market value of homes, and it can even affect the market value of commercial property. The right "view" can add up to \$100,000 to a home's value and higher property values yield more in property tax collections. Clearly the home or business owner and the County have a significant financial stake in our aesthetic environment. Dollars are not necessarily more real or important than beauty.

Disregarding the aesthetic factors can even change the entire character of a community. The gaming takeover of historic towns, such as Blackhawk and Central City, has driven out long-time families whose hometowns are no longer recognizable. Driving up Highway 119, the Peak to Peak Scenic Highway, one must pass through a gauntlet of Vegas style casinos that are the antithesis of what would be expected in an area that has unparalleled natural beauty. Noise, light, and air pollution are also devaluing results of such development.

Municipalities that tend to pounce on any business opportunity that comes along only put a band-aid on a their budget deficits. They are benefiting a few people in the real estate/development industries, doing so at the expense (literally and figuratively) of

taxpayers. Long-term infrastructure, maintenance, and service costs are downplayed if not totally ignored, while project revenues are exalted. Short-sighted solutions that permanently destroy valuable and irreplaceable vistas and wildlife habitats is counterproductive to both residents and County coffers.

Inviting the right kind of development or industry to the County should be balanced with the values and economic investments of the current residents. In addition to exploring the fiscal impact, Clear Creek County should also explore the following proven sustainability principles:

-- Assess what type of businesses could be successful in our existing municipalities or on open mixed-zone lands. A deserted storefront benefits no one.

-- Consider existing infrastructure and revitalize older housing and neighborhoods before looking at development in an open area.

--Consider what kind of jobs will enhance the county's image and promote, not sacrifice, our adventurous pristine environment and the outdoor recreation we provide to the front range.

The right kind of development is one that takes into account the characteristics and assets that already exist in the community before considering new development. Our views and surroundings are an essential cultural and economic component of those considerations.

Linda Browning is a Clear Creek County resident, and a member of SOLVE, an organization promoting sustainable land-use practices.