GILPIN COUNTY MASTER PLAN

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GILPIN COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION
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Credits:
Cover Photo: Peak to Peak Scenic Byway, by D. Mestdagh
Historic Photos provided by the Gilpin Historical Society
Page 23: Bald Eagle in Gilpin County, by D. Mestdagh
1.0 INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Gilpin County is one of the original 17 counties formed with the creation of the Colorado Territory in 1861 and was named for its first territorial governor, William Gilpin. Gilpin is a small, rural, sparsely populated county located in Colorado’s high-country. It is ranked next to last in land area and 17th least populated among the 64 counties of Colorado. Population growth is expected to remain modest. The Colorado State Demographer projects Gilpin County’s population to reach 6,913 by the year 2050, an increase of approximately 1,500 above the 2010 census population.

Gilpin County borders the Continental Divide. With elevations ranging from 6,960 to 13,294 feet above sea level, Gilpin County’s landscape is as diverse as it is spectacular.

Figure 1 – Vicinity Map
Gilpin County’s history is characterized by alternating periods of “boom and bust”. In 1859, gold was discovered by John Gregory. As a result, Gilpin County grew to become one of the most important and influential counties in the State of Colorado. After the gold rush played out in the 1910’s, Gilpin County and its remaining inhabitants endured the hardships of mass emigration and economic recession. In 1990, Colorado voters approved limited stakes gaming, and Gilpin County was revitalized. Gilpin County is now home to two of the three cities in Colorado where limited stakes gaming is legal. Currently, the tourism industry is the County’s biggest employer and single largest source of tax revenue.

Maintaining Gilpin County as a viable rural community is at the center of a long-standing discussion concerning land use policies. The Denver metro area is expected to add over one million people to its present population over the next 20 years. Due to its proximity to the metro area, it is conceivable that Gilpin County could experience considerable growth pressures heretofore unseen. Growth and development is viewed as opportunity by some and detrimental by others.
Potential for growth and development will present challenges for decision makers in their
efforts to maintain Gilpin County’s rural character and mountain environment. This
Master Plan provides two levels of guidance to decision makers. There are three Overall
Principles that are the central key concepts that should guide all decision-making. There
are 11 Goals that provide additional guidance in the form of suggested actions. The
purpose of this Gilpin County Master Plan is to provide guidance and context to those
county officials and individual citizens tasked with evaluating future development
proposals so that their decisions, although pointed to the future, might remain grounded
in the past.
2.0 MASTER PLAN OVERALL PRINCIPLES

2.1 Rural Character – The Unique, Fragile and Rural Mountain Character of the County Should Be Recognized, Preserved and Enhanced.

Change is inevitable. The challenge is to manage change so that the growth of Gilpin County can be positive. There is need to protect our visual mountain character and our overall rural environment. To maintain and protect our environment, the quality of life of our residents and our communities, we must all work together to save and enhance our rural character.

2.2 Non-Impingement – The Impact of New Development on Existing Activities, Neighborhoods and Resources Should Be Minimized.

The County should ensure that as new development occurs, existing activities and resources are protected from potentially adverse impacts of one land use on another.

The County’s Master Plan and development regulations attempt to ensure that existing residents and the natural environment are reasonably protected from potentially adverse impacts.

2.3 Economic Sustainability – The Economy Should Be Diversified to Ensure Long Term Benefit.

At present, Gilpin County relies almost exclusively on the gaming industry for revenue. This revenue source has allowed Gilpin County combined taxes to remain among the lowest in the State.

Although the County should continue to support gaming and related industries, a diverse economic base should also be encouraged so as to limit our dependency on one industry and to better provide business and employment opportunities to our residents.
3.0 GOALS

3.1 Economic Development – The County Should Promote a Strong Economy by Supporting Local Entrepreneurship and Businesses that Promote Local Employment Opportunities.

Reliance on a single source of revenue could compromise the County’s ability to function at its customary levels during economic downturns. Therefore, economic development focusing on alternative tax revenue should be encouraged, especially those that:

- Offer employment to local job seekers
- Enhance the mountain culture of Gilpin County
- Utilize historic or natural resources in a sustainable manner
- Locate within existing and expanded city limits and in and around County Villages

Gilpin County Base Industries

![Gilpin County Base Industries Chart]

Labor Market Information, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages Program, 2017

Figure 3 – Gilpin County Base Industries
3.1.1 Economic Development in County Villages

County Villages should serve existing or historic population clusters and take advantage of existing traffic patterns and historic uses. Identified village centers include the following locations:

- **Braecher Park** (Centered along State Highway 119 at mile marker 15)
  Braecher Park is presently a mix of residential, service and light industry. Such uses should be allowed to grow, but care should be taken to minimize adverse impacts on adjacent uses and to protect the views along this section of the Peak-to-Peak Scenic Byway. Efforts should be made to encourage more retail and service business and to expand recreational opportunities.

- **Dory Hill** (Centered at the junction of Dory Hill Road and State Highway 46)
  Dory Hill is presently predominantly government functions and recreation facilities. Economic development in this center should complement and serve these functions. Preferred development would include additional government use, senior housing and private business that would serve citizens and employees already drawn to this area.

- **Nevadaville** (Centered at House #11, Masonic Temple along Nevadaville Road)
  Nevadaville has some of its original historic commercial district intact.
New economic development of this district should be consistent with its architecture and history. Heritage tourism should be encouraged. Annexation to Central City or high-density PUD mix-use may be appropriate for this area.

- **North Clear Creek** (Centered at mile marker 1.5 on State Highway 119)
The North Clear Creek area of lower State Highway 119 is the most heavily traveled road in Gilpin County. New economic development should utilize the high volume of traffic on this road. Gas, convenience items, food, beverage, hotels and other light commercial ventures dependent on high traffic volumes are the types of businesses that should be expected and encouraged along this corridor. Development of this corridor should be of a scale that could occupy relatively flat benches along North Clear Creek without the need for mass grading. The creek should be incorporated into the overall site design in order to entice residents and visitors to stop and use the services offered.

- **Rollinsville** (Centered at State Highway 119 and Main Street)
Rollinsville is a mix of residences, businesses and light industries. Efforts should be made to encourage more economic development suited for the zoning.

- **Russell Gulch** (Centered at the western junction of Russell Gulch Road and Virginia Canyon Road)
Russell Gulch has potential for growth, especially residential growth with accompanying neighborhood services and retail businesses. However, existing water and sanitation obstacles may require a centralized water and sewer service. The population density needed to pay for such services is potentially greater than would be permitted under current Gilpin County code.

- **Sierra Pines** (On State Highway 119 just north of South Beaver Creek Road)
Sierra Pines should provide goods and services while protecting the view shed from State Highway 119.

- **Tolland** (Centered at Tolland Town site)
Tolland is a historic County Village. New commercial development of this district should be consistent with the architecture and history of the town site. Heritage tourism should be emphasized.
3.1.2 Home Business

Gilpin County should also encourage entrepreneurial activities. The County should permit and encourage non-intrusive home business in our residential neighborhoods. These activities must occur in a way that preserves the essential residential nature of the area in which the activity takes place. A home-based business should look like a home, sound like a home, smell like a home and be a home.
3.2 Residential Development – The County Should Encourage a Mix of Single Family Housing Opportunities in Order to Accommodate All Economic Groups.

Available housing is dominated by older, mid-range priced homes. The County should encourage new home construction in all price ranges. Residential development should be designed to take into account such factors as visual unobtrusiveness, preservation of natural features, and the availability of public and private services, water conservation, improved sanitary systems and compatibility with established land uses.

This plan recognizes the following four general types of residential land uses:

- **Low Density Rural Residential**
  Low density rural residential overall density should be no greater than one unit per 20 acres. Incentives such as the Rural Development Exemption option that encourage conservation development should be made available in place of strict regulation.

- **Moderate Density Semi-Rural Residential**
  Moderate density semi-rural residential developments should be located adjacent to designated County Villages and existing City boundaries. Minimum lot size should not be less than 5 acres.

- **Cluster Housing**
  The conservation of large tracts of open space should be encouraged by permitting cluster housing where moderate density development (two-acre minimum lots) on one part of a site is balanced by open space preservation on another part of a site. Average overall gross densities should not be less than is allowed by the applicable zoning.

- **Senior Housing**
  The fastest growing population in Gilpin County is comprised of residents over 60 years of age. The County should encourage the building of dedicated senior housing units on County and/or private land. Higher density levels including multi-family housing should be permitted on a case by case basis in an effort to contain costs and increase service efficiencies.

3.3 Mining – The Lessons Learned from Our Mining History Should Be Viewed as a Cautionary Tale When Considering New Mining Proposals.

The adverse impacts of past mining activity can only be described as devastating. Gilpin County, The Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment and the
United States Environmental Protection Agency are currently working together to mitigate the lingering effects of gold mining in the Russell Mining District and other isolated areas of the County. The high cost of mitigation is driven by water treatment and site reclamation. Mining projects should be closely scrutinized in terms of operating impacts and post-closing residual impact mitigation.

- **Hard Rock Mining**
  Traditionally, hard rock mining referred to subsurface mining for precious and base metals utilizing shafts and tunnels for access to gold-bearing veins. However, as technology has changed so have gold mining methods. Hard rock mining by hand, as was traditionally done in Gilpin County, is no longer practical or economically feasible as known reserves of high-grade gold bearing veins have been exhausted. Based on present conditions, hard rock mining is not likely to return to Gilpin County. The many tailings piles still remain today. The County should encourage efforts that would recover minerals from this material, provided proper site reclamation is a prominent part of any such mining plan.

- **Open Cut Mining**
  Quarrying and open cut surface mining should be limited to resource areas where all impacts can be sufficiently mitigated. Because quarrying requires mass exportation of material, transportation modes and routes should not add to, interfere, or impede traffic along State Highway 119 or U.S. Highway 6.

- **Placer Mining**
  Under no circumstances should alluvial deposits associated with Gilpin County waterways be mined except in the process of reclamation of past mining disturbance.

3.4 **Historic Preservation – The County Should Preserve, Maintain and Protect Historic Structures and Archaeological Sites from the Ravages of Time and the Impacts of New Growth.**

The County should continue to support the Historic Advisory Committee in their efforts of historic preservation by identifying important historic districts. An inventory of County historic buildings and sites is an appropriate first step. Once inventoried and identified, historic preservation efforts that would regulate activity on private property should apply only to historic buildings and structures associated with delineated historic districts. Historic preservation incentives should be offered in an effort to gain voluntary participation.
3.5 Visual Character – The County Should Protect Identified Vistas and the Visual Character of the Area.

The views and vistas seen from the County’s major roads are important defining elements of Gilpin County’s character, a significant economic asset highly valued by residents and visitors alike. Views of ridgelines and hillsides as seen from these major roads should remain relatively free of imposing development. As a result, road construction should be designed and aligned so that mass cut and fill slopes are not visible.

- **Roadside Views**
  The visual character of the County along its more highly traveled roads and highways is one of our most cherished assets. Special attention should be paid to the protection of these roadside views as development occurs. Identified Visual Character Protection Areas include the roadsides along State Highways 119, 46, and 72; Lake Gulch Road, Virginia Canyon Road, Tolland Road, Mammoth Gulch Road and The Central City Parkway.

- **Scenic Vistas**
  While the roadside view is important, there are several points along these main roads that offer distinctive vistas. It is imperative that these are protected. Such protections should encourage all new development to consider view corridors early in the design phase. It is vital to the rural character of Gilpin County that development not compromise or otherwise impinge upon our public views from public roads and other public spaces.
Figure 6 – Gilpin County Visual Character and Vista Protection Areas
3.6 Conservation – The County Should Protect Open Space and Require All New Development to Respect the Natural Environment.

The natural environment of Gilpin County is a dominating, significant feature in defining the character of the area. Land use activity should be encouraged to restore and protect the natural environment. Developments that have significant adverse environmental impacts or pose potential environmental risk should not be approved unless actual and potential negative impacts are adequately mitigated.

The following are some key environmental issues to be considered in evaluating new development. Other issues of equal or greater importance may come to light as each proposal is examined on a case-by-case basis.

- **Open Space**
  In determining open space priorities, the County should consider its role in conjunction with the role of other agencies. Fifty-two percent of the County’s land area is owned and managed by state and federal agencies. Given the extent of these holdings, it may not be necessary for Gilpin County to duplicate these efforts. The County should consider open space preservation strategies that would guide development as opposed to creating additional recreational opportunities. Open space preservation strategies that should be considered include variations on such proven techniques including:
  - Transfer or purchase of development rights
  - Backcountry development restrictions
  - Minimum access standards
  - Ridgeline and conspicuous slope development limitations
  - Minimum buildable lot size requirements
  - Conservation easements
  - Land purchases

- **Water Supply**
  Water is a vital element in the long-term development of Gilpin County. In considering development proposals the County should consider whether the water supply needs of any proposed land use can be met over the foreseeable future. In addition, the County should ensure that all state and federal requirements for water supply and quality are met as a condition of local approval.

- **Forest Health**
  Public and private forest land provides significant wildlife habitat and
unparalleled outdoor recreation and scenic opportunities. They are important resources to preserve and protect. They also provide an economic benefit as a renewable resource. Proper healthy forest initiatives should be encouraged at the local level. The County should encourage the removal of diseased trees from public and private property.

- **Wetlands**
  Wetland areas are scarce and merit close attention, particularly in high mountain environments. Wetland encroachment should be evaluated in the context of a hierarchy stressing avoidance first and minimum impact second.

- **Floodplains**
  New development should be required to conform to all floodplain requirements. When floodplain encroachment is proposed, existing 100-year base-flood elevation and flow characteristics should be modeled and used to identify potential impacts. Development that would result in upstream or downstream impacts should be denied.

- **Stream Corridors**
  The County should consider ways to encourage the preservation of and public access to stream corridors. This might include incentives and/or requirements that new development dedicate public access to stream corridors as a condition of approval.

- **Wildlife Habitat**
  Gilpin County is rich in wildlife. The protection of both the habitat and its wild inhabitants is important to the continuation of the mountain heritage. When reviewing new development, the cumulative impacts on wildlife from all development should be considered. Habitat fragmentation should be avoided and existing links between wildlife areas should be maintained.

- **Noxious Weeds**
  Native plants and natural areas are key to the numerous and diverse ecosystems of Gilpin County. Noxious weeds are alien to this region and therefore threaten our ecosystems and our entire fragile mountain environment. Native ecosystems should be protected through vigilance, education, and enforcement when necessary. Gilpin County should encourage and enforce all noxious weed laws and regulations. The Gilpin County Noxious Weed Plan is a good source for education and management practices, and can be obtained from the Gilpin County Extension Office. This plan should be highly promoted.
3.7 Roads – The County Should Encourage a Road System Which Is Compatible with the Natural Environment and the Rural Heritage of the Area.

The County has a key role in ensuring the adequacy of the County’s transportation network as well as ensuring that the development and use of that network minimizes adverse impacts on the natural environment and existing land uses.

- **Easements and Right-of-Way Dedications**
  The lack of easements and/or rights-of-way over the vast majority of roads accessing private lands located outside our platted subdivisions is the single greatest obstacle to a more efficient county road system. Acquiring land and/or rights to land for road improvements is paramount. Without such rights, the road network throughout the county will remain somewhat uncertain. The practice of requiring easements and/or right-of-way dedications as a condition of certain land use approvals should be continued and augmented with outright purchases when necessary.

- **Road Maintenance**
  Most Gilpin County roads are unpaved. In general, low-use unpaved roads are less expensive to maintain than higher-use unpaved roads. Unpaved roads are cited by some as one of our most endearing rural characteristics. Before paving our higher-use roads, the cost of road maintenance should be considered, along with maintaining our rural character. As the county continues to grow, road maintenance should be expanded to accommodate the growth.
Figure 7 – Gilpin County Arterials and Collector Roads
3.8 Recreation – The County Should Encourage the Development of Public and Private Recreational Opportunities and Facilities for Use by Local Residents and Visitors.

- **Recreation**
  Gilpin County should concentrate its efforts away from land-intensive passive recreation (e.g. hiking trails) and more toward facility-orientated active recreation. Gilpin County currently maintains ball fields and a state-of-the-art recreation center. Related active recreation opportunities should be expanded.

- **Recreational Sport Shooting**
  Recreational sport shooting is permitted on National Forest System (NFS) land unless prohibited by State statute. Gilpin County should work with the NFS to better manage and control dispersed recreational sport shooting on all NFS lands. The County should also encourage the development of at least one formal shooting range where people can shoot in a safe and controlled environment.

- **Non-Gaming Tourism**
  The large expanse of NFS land in Gilpin County is a huge attraction for outdoor enthusiasts. However, the county must recognize the impacts this type of non-gaming tourism could bring. Over-use of our forests is problematic. As motorized recreational travel becomes more popular, the impacts of, and conflicts with motorized users on public and private property have become more acute. The County should work with other government agencies to monitor and manage these types of potentially high impact activities.

3.9 Utilities and Services – Assure That Adequate Utility Services Are Provided to Support the Overall Land Use Recommendations.

- **Utilities**
  Gilpin County is primarily served by Xcel Energy, Colorado Natural Gas and United Power. Individual onsite propane tanks are still commonly used as well. The County should encourage the expansion of electric and natural gas lines in an effort to reach more areas.

- **Telecommunication**
  Cell and broadband service is limited in both availability and speed. Although the County should let market forces dictate the timing of private sector investment, the County must recognize that our relatively low population density severely limits our ability to attract private sector investment and might therefore partner with private sector providers using tax dollars to attract and assist telecommunication investment.
• **Renewable Energy Sources**
Renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, hydro, biomass and other sources that lower our dependency on oil or oil bi-products should be encouraged, provided the impact of such a use is mitigated. Those who support independent sources of energy should be encouraged to do so. The County should take the lead by example in the utilization of this energy for public buildings. Advantages should be created in zoning and building codes for projects which substantially promote or utilize renewable energy.

• **Public Water Supply**
A means of central water supply in place of the standard individual wells should only be considered in commercial development and some County Villages.

• **Public Waste Disposal System**
A centralized sewage disposal system should only be considered in commercial development or in areas of existing homes in very close proximity which have inadequate or habitually failed systems, and some County Villages.

3.10 **Public Services – Assure That Adequate Public Services Are Provided to Support the Overall Land Use Recommendations.**

• **County Facilities**
The number and quality of County facilities such as the Community Center, Justice Center, Road and Bridge Facility, Old Courthouse, Apex Building and Library are assets to the community. The level of service provided to the public is enhanced by these buildings and is unique considering the small population in the County.

• **Fire Protection**
All areas of the County will be served by a fire protection provider. An all-inclusive Fire Protection Service Plan should be developed that would lessen response time by addressing hazards, road network, proximity of fire stations to development, training of personnel, the type of equipment, and availability of water. New development should be encouraged to conform to all wildfire protection guidelines listed in the Gilpin County Wildfire Protection Plan as well as those developed by the Colorado State Forest Service. Development in wildfire red zones should be discouraged. The use of fire resistant building materials and the creation of defensible space should be highly recommended if not required.
• **Disaster Services**
  The County, state, fire districts, forest service and other agencies should cooperate and update preparedness plans to meet the essential needs of the residents during a time of crisis. Emergency service levels should be maintained and improved as new growth and development occurs.

3.11 Intergovernmental Cooperation – The County Should Maintain Working Relationships with Municipal, County, State, Federal and Other Jurisdictions.

Gilpin County, Central City, Black Hawk, Gilpin School District and the Black Hawk/Central City Sanitation District have all entered into an Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) for joint planning purposes. This agreement will expire and should be renewed in perpetuity. The County should continue to form partnerships with neighboring counties to provide public services that might otherwise be economically unfeasible for any one county working alone.
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