

Passion, Planning, Perseverance Fuel 40 Years of Open Space

By Margaret T. Chapman

In 1971, gas was 37cents a gallon, the average cost of a new house was \$27,550, and a basic car cost about \$4,500. Economic factors such as these encouraged families to choose the suburbs over cities to raise their families. Jefferson County was no exception to this migration.

In that same year, Jefferson County citizens looked out their windows to see many of the “open spaces” filling in with buildings. PLAN Jeffco became the grassroots organization for citizens not content to lose their cherished landscapes. PLAN Jeffco and citizens all over Jeffco spoke out, studied, organized, campaigned, and achieved a nationally recognized Open Space program.

On Nov. 7, 2012, Jefferson County Open Space celebrated its 40th anniversary. As the 40th anniversary is often recognized with rubies as a symbol of passion, it is fitting that we review and celebrate this passion for the land and environment that drove the Open Space movement.

Starting in 1971, the League of Women Voters became concerned about the “huge growth spurt” in the county, according to Margot Zallen, who later became chair of PLAN Jeffco. She and other activists began meeting in living rooms. The group coalesced and wrote a resolution for the 1972 ballot to create a half-cent sales tax with no expiration date. The County Commissioners who voted to put the issue on the ballot were Jack Trezise, Joe B. Lewis, and Bill Huntsbarger.

The fund would be used to buy Open Space property and provide “trails thereon.” The countywide sales tax promised to support the purchase of “land in its natural state” as well as “greenbelt and agricultural buffer zones,” “wild rivers,” and “wilderness areas,” according to the resolution on which the referendum was based. The sales tax passed easily, with credit going to the hundreds of determined and passionate volunteers who knocked on virtually every door



Trail at Mt. Galbraith Park
Sally L. White

in the county to urge the citizens to vote to tax themselves.

Currently, some \$34 million is collected for Open Space each year. Yearly tax revenues have been combined with the \$160 million in bonds issued in 1999. The tax has generated nearly \$755 million to date. These funds have made possible a registry of 52,000 acres, 28 unincorporated parks, and 227 miles of trails—all open to the public without entry fees.

Tax revenue funds are also shared on an approximate 70/30 split with the County's cities – Arvada, Golden, Lakewood, Lakeside, Littleton, Morrison, Mountain View, Westminster, and Wheat Ridge – after administrative fees have been deducted. The allocations are based on the number of car registrations in each city.

Jeffco manages these properties through the Open Space Division. However, as its newsletter states, PLAN Jeffco continues “working to conserve Jefferson County Open Spaces since 1972.” The group provides – with its continued focused vision – program oversight and active participation by its committed members and effective, consistent, and organized public representation. PLAN Jeffco supported the program for much of the first year, providing volunteer services.

The campaign was expertly managed by Mike Moore of Evergreen. In 1972, Moore was elected the first chairman of PLAN Jeffco and was chair of the Open Space Advisory Committee for five years. Moore said the referendum passed because, “We talked about the things that people saw positively and loved so intuitively, but hadn't reflected and focused on how to preserve this for our children.”

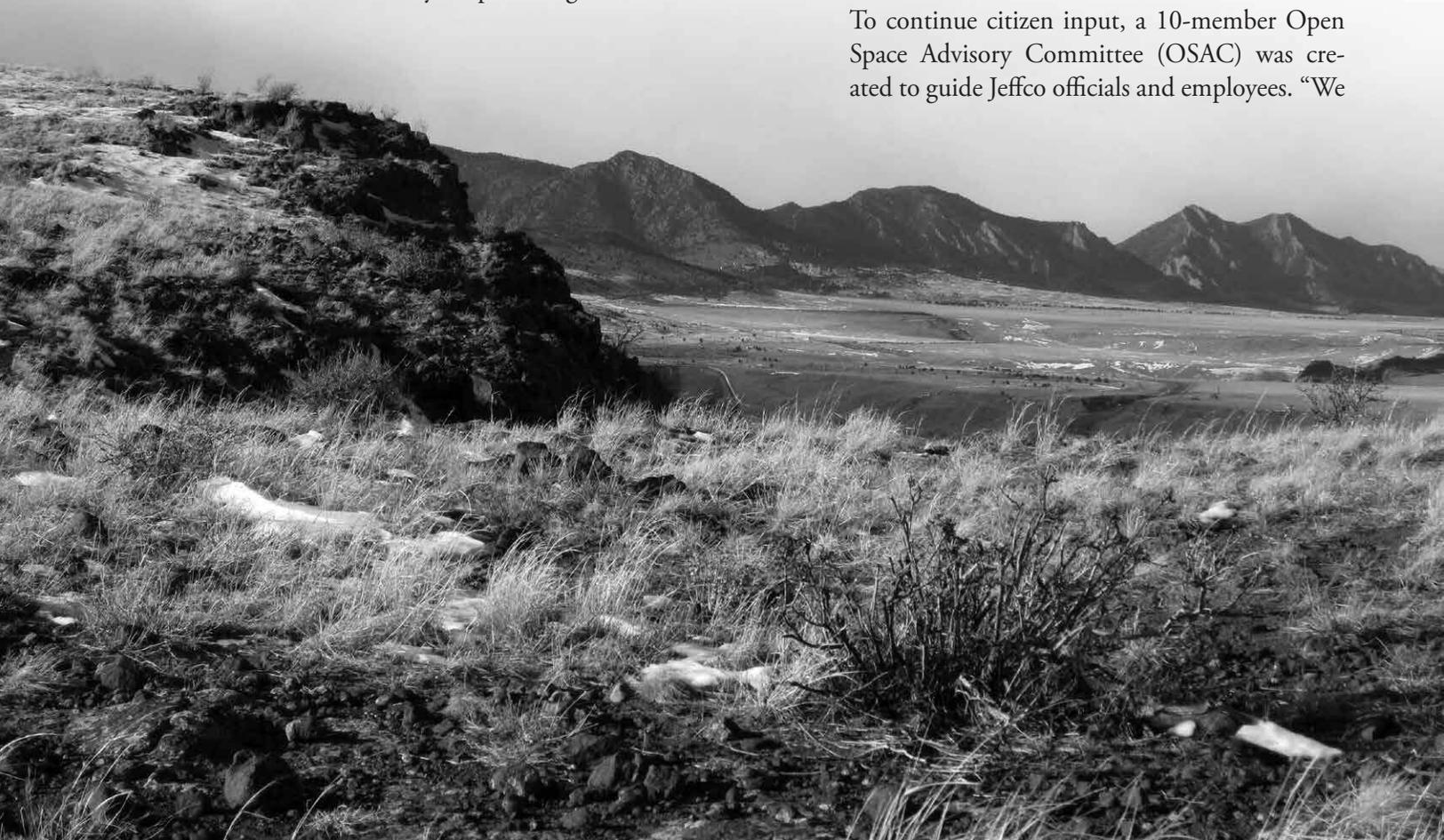
Open Space purchased its first properties, starting in July 1973 with \$155,000 for 68 acres of the Nelson hogback where Alameda Parkway crosses C-470 near Dinosaur Ridge. The next purchases were 1,490 acres on Mount Falcon west of Morrison, and Hiwan Homestead, a historic estate in Evergreen.

Open space purchases are not just a simple matter of responding to real estate advertisements. “Sensitivity to landowners is key,” stated Ralph Schell, Open Space director from 1998 to 2009 – a time of major acquisitions and development within Open Space. He was named County Administrator in December 2009. “We also took a great deal of time to develop relationships with landowners, to blend in business input, and to be respectful of all involved. It just lessens criticism in the long run,” he added.

To continue citizen input, a 10-member Open Space Advisory Committee (OSAC) was created to guide Jeffco officials and employees. “We

View from North Table Mountain, looking north along the Jeffco foothills.

Courtesy of Carbonfibphoto.com.



have always been fortunate to have a high level of talent on OSAC,” Schell explained. He also noted how the OSAC and staff have worked together to create “something of permanence.” The Board of County Commissioners appoints the membership of three at-large members, three from the cities, three from the county, and the final member from a recreational district. Current members are: At Large – Wayne Forman, Chair Jan Wilkins, Co-Vice Chair, and Rebecca Watson; Cities – Ken Morfit, Co-Vice Chair; John Litz, Secretary; and Mike Dungan; County – Kevin Burke; Secretary Pro Tem, Felicity Hannay, and Director, Jeffco Planning and Zoning – John Wolforth; Recreation District – Bob West; Alternates Tookie Nemchak and Janet Shangraw.

The Open Space Advisory Committee monthly meetings are open to the public and are scheduled the first Thursday of each month, beginning at 7p.m. in the Open Space Hearing Room (Ponderosa Room) located at 700 Jefferson County Parkway, Suite 100, Golden.

Until 1978, the activities of Open Space proceeded with little, if any, controversy. Three changes to the enabling resolution were proposed by the Board of County Commissioners and went to the voters in 1978, 1980, and 1998. PLAN Jeffco mobilized to defeat the challenges in 1978 and 1980. Their campaigns were named “Save Open Space.” The first challenge to the Open Space funding was in 1978 when an amendment was proposed to create a 50/50 revenue split between the cities and Jeffco, rather than the existing split of 30/70 based on vehicle registrations

Next was the “jail proposal” in 1980. The proposal would have split Open Space tax revenues for up to 16 years to finance a new \$18 million jail. The commissioners decided to go this route rather than increase property taxes. The jail-diversion referendum lost 82,600 to 70,104. The 1980 election was not a total victory for Plan Jeffco as voters approved a proposal favored by the cities and opposed by PLAN Jeffco. The change allowed Open Space tax revenue to be used for construction, maintenance, and management of parks and recreation facilities instead of limiting the funds to purchasing raw land and providing simple access.

“Many were concerned the department was turning into a countywide recreation district,” Schell said. “The more hard core environmental preservationists wanted to see land preserved rather than used for sports,” he added.

Following this change, PLAN Jeffco created an “ad hoc committee” that filed a report that was accepted by the Open Space Advisory Committee. The report stated: Land acquisition should be the first priority; the county/city revenue split should be maintained; scenic land and simple amenities should be valued over swimming pools, golf courses, and indoor recreation.

The list of acquisitions demonstrates the program’s diverse geographical placement in both the cities and in unincorporated Jeffco, particularly the mountains. The first round of acquisitions, from 1972 to 1989, protected 25,000 acres. In 1994, a county survey found that trails and land preservation were a top priority for Jefferson County citizens.

All this is impressive for a volunteer, novice movement, but PLAN Jeffco was not satisfied. It launched a third campaign to convince voters to finance the purchase of more attractive land using borrowed money. Passage of a countywide referendum in 1998 by 70% of the votes cast enabled the county to sell \$160 million of Open Space bonds. This started the second era of acquisition, advancing the preservation of the mountain backdrop, the North and South Table Mountains, and Clear Creek Canyon.

Schell stated that challenges still face Open Space including costs of maintenance and completing land acquisition around the current holdings on South Table Mountain. “We also have to consider ‘view corridors’ to protect our views of the foothills and the mountains,” Schell explained.

Schell sums up the program: Open Space is a core value for the people of Jefferson County. ☺

With credit to the archives of the “Columbine Courier” and the “Sentinel and Transcript Newspapers,” interview with Jefferson County Administrator Ralph Schell and invaluable assistance from Thea Rock, Communications Manager for Open Space.