



Growth in La Plata County requires investment

February 5, 2017

As La Plata County Commissioners, we believe that we have a vibrant county built on a history of entrepreneurship, harnessing our resources, and reflecting the unique and diverse character that defines our community. This legacy will also shape our future as we respond to the changes we will face in the years to come. La Plata County's population is expected to grow over the next two decades, and with that influx comes new businesses, ideas and resources to invest in the community.

The other side of that coin is that growth requires sufficient roads, water and high-speed Internet access to support those future residents and their businesses. We can't have these things without investment from some source – more likely multiple sources, as has been La Plata County's track record of building community partnerships and our increasingly tight financial position.

We wrestle with this puzzle every day at La Plata County, looking around every corner for opportunities to ensure that future residents have adequate roads, water and broadband access and to bolster these resources' availability and quality for those already here. Solutions are not exactly easy to find.

The problem is largely lack of resources – money, to be specific – to make the investments needed to increase water availability in areas of the county where water is limited, or to improve county roads to support the growing traffic flow that we are seeing throughout La Plata County – or even to adequately maintain them. There are also many areas in the county that lack reliable high-speed Internet service, which is a major impediment to building the diverse economy that we will depend on in the future.

As a member of the Southwest Colorado Council of Governments, La Plata County is working with our partners on a plan to expand broadband availability throughout the region, through the Southwest Colorado Action Network project. This project aims to provide abundant and affordable Internet service to residents, businesses and visitors to Southwest Colorado through policies that promote expanded service, leveraging partnerships with utilities, other governmental entities, health care providers, and businesses to invest in broadband, and finding money to support that investment. This is a long-game approach, but we are committed to closing the broadband gaps in La Plata County and in our broader rural region.

Water availability and delivery has been a challenge in La Plata County for decades and will be a factor in future growth. The county has never been in the business of supplying water to customers, but we certainly recognize its importance – and applaud the efforts taken by various providers to expand the reach of water in the county. In January we hosted a workshop with Winrock International, a firm that works with governments, nonprofits and business to coordinate and find resources to address infrastructure challenges and facilitate entrepreneurship. Winrock provided this workshop free of charge, giving the county, water providers, ditch companies, and various area governments a chance to talk about our shared priorities around water availability.

The water issue and our county roads' condition are big topics of discussion in the Land Use Code revision process as well. As we update the code to make it more predictable and usable, with clear development standards, identifying where there is – or can be – enough water or road capacity to accommodate growth is important.

Of course all of this takes place in a fiscal climate that finds La Plata County long on demands and short on the money to meet them. With the fourth-lowest mill levy rate in Colorado and a legacy of providing service levels higher than what better-funded counties offer – ranging from law enforcement to road maintenance and improvements to child protection services to elections to assessing property value to emergency management to building permits and inspections – La Plata County stretches your dollars farther each year, now that property tax from oil and gas production has plummeted.

Your county commissioners are committed to being proactive in meeting future growth and managing your tax dollars responsibly. This means we are looking at our circumstances from all angles, and taking a long view of where the county is headed and how to help it on its way. Please join us for the many conversations we will be having about these critical issues throughout the year, beginning with the State of the County address from 6-8 p.m. on Monday, Feb. 27 in the Board Room of the County Administration Building, 1101 E. 2nd Ave. in Durango.

Please feel free to contact any of the commissioners with questions, comments or concerns. Call our office at (970) 382-6219 or email us: I can be reached at julie.westendorff@co.laplata.co.us; Vice Chair Gwen Lachelt at gwen.lachelt@co.laplata.co.us, and Commissioner Brad Blake at brad.blake@co.laplata.co.us.

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