

COLORADO'S POPULATION IN 2050

A ROAD PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

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In a remarkable essay, former Colorado Governor Dick Lamm compares the "infinite culture" (which teaches that there are no limits) with the "finite culture" (which contends that the earth has limits to its carrying capacity).

Concludes Lamm, "I believe that the fate of the world depends on our ability to know when to abandon the infinite culture, and shift to the finite culture. Wait too long and we are doomed. Some will say if we shift too soon, we'll give up a lot of fun and exhilaration. I'd rather we shift too soon. Like the Incas, we won't get a chance to shift too late."¹

Not long ago, Colorado was considered a leader in environmental protection, renowned for its long history of safeguarding its open space, high quality of life, and magnificent natural beauty from mining, logging, road construction, pollution, and other environmentally harmful activities. Average citizens and lawmakers alike have banded together to ensure that the lands they cherish are preserved for future generations; with popular support, former Governor Dick Lamm, then a state senator, even turned away the Olympics, fearing the environmental damage the Games would bring to the state.

But now the momentum has turned, and Colorado is quickly losing its foothold at the forefront of environmentalism—in large part because **good intentions have been overwhelmed by the state's staggering population growth.**

Certainly some growth can be beneficial. Early in the twentieth century, when Colorado was sparsely populated, more people meant more jobs and more opportunities. And in a state with considerable land area and few people, every new resident lowers the cost of providing basic services to all. But as an area gets more populated, its infrastructure bumps up against its carrying capacity. Police forces, roads, and schools no longer satisfy the demands of a growing population. Farmland and forests are sacrificed to strip malls and housing developments. And eventually growth no longer lowers the average costs of services, but instead raises it. When this point is reached, growth increases the tax burden on communities; the revenue brought in by new growth is outweighed by the costs it creates.²

Colorado, the third-fastest growing state in the country, has reached this downside to growth. Its open space is vanishing, its highways are clogged with polluting traffic jams, and every hour, ten acres of its farmland and open space are lost to development.³ Residents now rank growth as the state's number one problem.⁴

Yet the discussions of growth that have dominated the news for the past several years rarely address *population* growth; rather, debate focuses on development, sprawl, and "smart growth." But even the best smart growth plans offer only short term solutions while doing nothing to address the root cause: a constantly increasing population. Rather than tackling the problem at its source, "smart growth" programs try desperately to accommodate the problem, packing more and more people into more and more crowded areas.

Denying the impact of population growth may delay uncomfortable discussions for politicians who lack will, and it may placate businesses which benefit from development. But it does nothing to solve Colorado's growth crisis and imperils the state's future. The consequences will be exacted in the not-very-distant future, when overcrowded schools, congestion, and smog turn liveable, earth-friendly Colorado into a thing of the past.

This study explores the detrimental effects of population growth on Colorado, first sketching the dimensions of Colorado's expected population growth and then addressing what these projections mean for the state's infrastructure, environment, and quality of life. The final section works through some strategies for slowing growth—strategies already underway in other states—and preserving the robust economy of the present while also safeguarding Colorado's future.

I. Sketching the Demographic Picture

In 1950, Colorado's population was just over 1.3 million. By 1980, numbers were approaching 3 million. During the 1990s, the state added over one million inhabitants, or about 275 people each day. In 2000, Colorado had ballooned to 4.3 million residents. Thus, over the past 50 years, Colorado's population has more than tripled in size.⁵ In the past ten years alone, it has grown by almost one-third. There are now more people living along the Front Range than there were living in the entire state ten years ago.⁶

What accounts for this growth? Populations grow or shrink as a result of shifts in three demographic variables: fertility, migration, and mortality. Changes in population size are dependent on net migration (people moving into the state minus people moving out of the state) and natural factors (births minus deaths). Between April 1, 1990 and July 1, 1999, natural increase in Colorado accounted for net growth of 288,209. During the same period, the Census Bureau estimates net domestic migration for Colorado at 402,832 and net international migration at 65,380.⁷ Thus, natural increase accounted for 38 percent of all growth during that period, over half came from migration from other states, and the remainder was due to migration from other countries.⁸

In the 1990s, Colorado was home to five of the nation's ten fastest growing counties. Douglas County, the fastest growing county in the nation, almost tripled, growing from 60,000 to 176,000.⁹ Elbert County was third with a 105 percent growth rate and says it fears its population explosion will soon overwhelm the area's law enforcement, roads and bridges, and social services.¹⁰ Park, Custer, and Archuleta were also in the top ten.¹¹

In Summit, the sixth fastest growing county in the state, county commissioner Bill Wallace says the population growth means "we have more traffic lights and more asphalt. A lot more people commute for work. Lots that were vacant are no longer vacant. Housing is expensive. Child care is impossible to find."¹²

Even small towns are being affected. Especially on the Eastern Slope, small mountain towns and hamlets are becoming cities overnight. In Elizabeth, a town of about 1,400 people, new construction is raising concerns; one proposed development would build about 750 new homes, bringing an increase of about 1,900 people.¹³

If the political mood remains as it is today, **Colorado's growth can be expected to continue and the state's population could easily reach and probably surpass the 6.4 million projected for 2025.^{14,15} The seven million mark, or even higher, could be reached by 2050.** These numbers will impact nearly every aspect of life in Colorado.

II. Implications of Demographic Change

Can Colorado support another million people? Or another two million? How will the state's educational system adjust? What will the addition of millions more people do to the environment? Will the state survive the coming onslaught on its transportation infrastructure, particularly its highways? These are some of the questions that Colorado faces as a result of the continued rapid growth in the state's population.

The looming costs of highways, schools, water and sewer projects, and other infrastructure needed to keep pace with growth, as well as environmental losses, will be enormous for all state residents, whether they live in an area experiencing massive growth or not.

Quality of Life

Colorado school enrollment (K-12), which grew by 29 percent in the last decade, will continue to grow rapidly.¹⁶ In just ten years, the number of students could increase by over 100,000—from 790,000 in 2000 to 900,000 in 2010. It could easily surpass one million by 2025.¹⁷

To maintain its 1999 student-teacher ratio, **approximately 5,000 new teachers will have to be hired annually. Another 10,000 public school students per year means building at least 20 new schools every year.** In Douglas County alone, a planning committee has estimated the county will need ten new schools in the next five years to keep up with its ballooning population. The *Denver Rocky Mountain News* reported that construction and renovation to ease overcrowding would cost 165 million to 175 million dollars.¹⁸

In Highlands Ranch, schools have had to bring in portable buildings and extra teachers to accommodate an increasing population. Class schedules are juggled to ease the burden on cafeterias, libraries, hallways, and playgrounds.¹⁹

At the same time it struggles to find more space and teachers, Colorado must still meet basic educational challenges, like reducing dropout rates, raising academic achievement levels, and increasing teacher effectiveness. Yet in 1999, Colorado spent \$5,756 per pupil, ten percent below the national average.²⁰ Further population growth will compound the difficulties that already exist.

* * *

With population growth comes traffic, as any commuter can tell you. If the state's population continues to grow rapidly in the next few decades, the already devastating traffic gridlock in metropolitan Denver will be stretched to other sections of the state. Interstate 25 between Denver and Colorado Springs is already clogged; near the latter, rush hour can last all day.²¹ One stretch of I-25 charted a 22 percent increase in traffic in the last decade.²²

Throughout the state, reports of road rage are up and commuters are spending more time sitting in traffic. Eleven percent of Colorado workers travel more than 40 minutes to work.²³ One study found that elementary and secondary school students are wasting more time than ever before on buses stuck in traffic.²⁴ If trends continue, the average metro area motorist will spend twice as much time in traffic by 2020.²⁵

Colorado already spends hundreds of millions of dollars in highway construction and additional millions to maintain the state's highways. How much more will need to be spent simply to keep up with population growth?

Urban Sprawl

Nationwide and around the state, complaints about urban sprawl are increasing as population rises. In Colorado, 28 percent of voters in a recent Ridder/Braden poll named "sprawl and growth" as the environmental issue they were most concerned about.²⁶ In a March 2001 poll by the Denver-based polling firm, more than two-thirds of Colorado voters said they want more planning and management of growth, and 71 percent say houses are being built too fast in their communities.²⁷

Unfortunately, discussions of sprawl rarely pay attention to the fact that as long as the region's population keeps growing, people are going to have to live somewhere. And many people like to get away from areas of concentrated growth and move to the suburbs, thereby creating even more sprawl. Indeed, history shows that as population grows, people move further away from the centers of growth. Eventually, the suburbs of one city begin meeting the suburbs of another city, which in turn may meet the suburbs of a third city. Town after town discovers that they are merely an extension of the nearby urban center.



Today in Colorado, the suburbs of Denver are meeting the suburbs of Colorado Springs to the south and Fort Collins to the north; eventually this region may become one large megalopolis. Throughout Colorado, residents are concerned that the towns they moved to in order to escape sprawl are quickly taking on the traits of the places they fled.

While sprawl is a problem around the state, the Denver metro area stands out as particularly serious. During the 1990s, the population of metropolitan Denver grew from under 2 million to over 2.4 million. The Denver Regional Council of Government's (DRCOG's) growth forecast for 2020 predicts that more than one million more people will come to the metro area within the next 20 years. More than one in five of the new residents will live in Adams County, meaning Adams County will gain an average of 11,400 new residents a year.²⁸

The Colorado Public Interest Research Group report on sprawl writes, "If we don't take action now, the metro Denver area is well on its way to becoming another L.A."²⁹

What can be done to solve urban sprawl? The answer is obvious, yet seldom mentioned. Place growth limits on counties, limit population growth in Colorado, and most important, put an end to growth in the United States. This will not end suburban growth, but it will significantly retard it. Some people will always prefer the green lawns of the suburbs to the congested streets of the city, but population limitation will dramatically reduce the number of such moves.

While "smart growth" experiments do limit sprawl somewhat, sprawl can never end as long as population growth continues as it has in recent years. **When populations continue to expand, communities must find places to house, educate, and employ new residents and thus, even the best-intentioned smart growth efforts will eventually run up against population pressures.**

The Environmental Impact

The discomforts described above affect everyone's quality of life but do not involve survival. Environmental problems are far more serious.

Eighty-two percent of Colorado residents think the current pace of development and population growth is a serious threat to the state's natural resources, national and state parks, rivers, and open spaces, and the facts support their fears.³⁰ Housing and business developments, as they are built further and further away from the urban centers, are invading wetlands and the natural habitat of various species. The Governor's Commission on Saving Open Spaces, Farms, and Ranches concluded that development pressures on the state's wildlife habitat may cause some species to become endangered.³¹

More people also mean more cars, which are the leading contributors to carbon monoxide and ozone levels. The *Denver Post* reports of pollution levels in Denver, which regularly violates the federal standards for ground-level ozone: "[T]he brown cloud no longer is a winter phenomenon limited to Downtown, but a year-round problem blanketing the entire area."³² These problems extend beyond the metropolitan areas, as suburban sprawl contributes to increased air pollution throughout most of the state.

Population drives water consumption as well. Colorado's fast-growing cities may eventually face water shortages unless local utilities find new supplies.³³

The Governor's Commission on Saving Open Spaces, Farms, and Ranches found, "Rapid growth, inadequate water supply and extremely dry conditions have left cities thirsty for more water. This often means buying out and drying up irrigated lands to meet increasing demands for municipal and industrial water use." Meanwhile, farmers and ranchers—left without water—are forced to sell their land, "for farming and ranching without water in Colorado's dry climate is nearly impossible. It is ironic that as many of Colorado's urban areas try to stop sprawl, the purchase of water rights from farmers by urban communities actually encourages sprawl by making the land of little use for farming—thus encouraging its sale to developers."³⁴

Complicating matters further, drought is a constant threat in Colorado, which is a dry state with an annual precipitation averaging only 17 inches.³⁵ **Since most of Colorado's population growth has occurred since the last major drought (1980-81), the next drought can be expected to affect far more people with far more serious consequences.**

Water conservation, often touted as a solution to water woes, typically yields only a small increase in supply, usually about ten percent.³⁶ As Colorado representatives of the Western States Water Council (WSWC) observed, "Conservation has limited impacts to overall water supply unless the consumptive use is reduced."³⁷ Reducing consumptive use is unlikely to happen if population continues to grow.

III. The Solution

If Colorado is to remain truly liveable, growth must not simply be "managed," but must come to an end.

Fertility

Colorado's total fertility rate is approximately 2.2, ten percent above the national average.³⁸ Public and private agencies alike should work to raise the awareness of all Coloradans about the problems associated with high fertility and population growth, through education, advertising campaigns urging responsible family planning, and wide availability of contraceptives. Schools should teach students the importance of responsible family planning and ensure they have the tools necessary to prevent teenage pregnancy.

Migration

The Census Bureau's new projections indicate that immigration will account for two-thirds of all growth nationwide over the next century.³⁹

In Colorado, most population growth comes from domestic interstate migration (people moving in from other states). Yet this is often caused by immigration (people moving in from other countries), through what is known as secondary migration. **Secondary migration occurs when people leave crowded areas in search of more space. This is happening around the U.S., as massive immigration drives the native population to move to less crowded areas. Colorado has been a magnet for such migrants—notably, Californians trying to escape the effects of the state's record population growth—growth that has been driven by high immigration levels. A full quarter of migration into Colorado in the past decade has come from California.**⁴⁰

Federal solutions: As long as federal immigration levels remain at their present nontraditional highs of nearly one million each year, the pressures that immigration puts on border states will continue to affect every state. On top of legal immigration is the pressure from illegal immigration; it is estimated that over five million illegal aliens reside in the U.S., and 300,000 new illegal aliens settle in the country each year.⁴¹ Colorado ranks eleventh in illegal immigration, with over 45,000 illegal aliens residing in the state as of 1996, the latest year for which numbers are available.⁴²

If federal legislation limiting immigration to more traditional levels of 200,000 to 300,000 annually were passed and if illegal immigration were drastically reduced, migration levels into Colorado could be drastically reduced.

Also of great help would be a moratorium on immigration for a specific number of years, during which time federal immigration policy could be reformulated to reflect the needs of our increasingly overwhelmed states.

State and local solutions: Federal law encourages state cooperation agreements with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in assisting in enforcement of immigration law, including the removal of criminal aliens and agreements to screen the eligibility of non-citizens for a variety of state and federal benefits. Recent court decisions have confirmed that states may enforce immigration laws, as long as there is cooperation with the INS and their enforcement is consistent with federal law.

Federal law requires that states allow officials to turn over information to the INS about an alien's illegal status. Also, there are a variety of federal provisions encouraging states to set up verification requirements for basic identification information, such as those that would support an application for a driver's license, allowing states to play a vital role in the effort to halt illegal immigration.

What of domestic migration? Using aggressive tools to limit growth could become the only recourse for Colorado communities inundated with newcomers. Colorado might consider following the example of Oregon, which has long made it clear that it welcomes visitors but does not particularly want more permanent residents. Oregon residents vote directly on development proposals that will affect their city or county, rather than leaving such decisions up to county commissioners or, as in Colorado, the state legislature and the governor. And in Georgia, a state-level commission is able to reject city or county development permits if it can be shown that these would cause social or environmental harm.

Eben Fodor, an urban planner and author of *Better Not Bigger*, recommends correlating growth with the burden it places on services: "Development impact fees are an increasingly popular means of funding the many types of public infrastructure required by growth. At least 18 states have now adopted enabling legislation that specifically authorizes local governments to collect these fees. With a system of impact fees, developers and new home buyers must pay more of the full cost of their impact on the community ... Unless limited by state law, local governments can charge impact fees for providing the following new or expanded facilities: schools, roads, sewage treatment, storm-water systems, water supply, parks, and open space, recreational facilities, police stations, fire stations, libraries, and other government facilities that must be expanded to serve new growth ... Courts have consistently upheld all reasonable and properly designed impact fees."⁴³

Florida and Washington have mandated that, for a development to be approved, "there must be adequate school, sewer, road, and water capacity in place at the time the project is completed. If a community is unable to afford the new facilities, a developer may be required to pay for them in order to obtain construction permits."⁴⁴ A recent poll shows 89 percent of Colorado voters favor granting local communities the power to require that roads, schools, water, and other public facilities exist before development is approved, and 91 percent favor requiring developers to pay for expansions to such facilities that are necessary to serve new growth.⁴⁵

Colorado could also move more aggressively to buy up tracks of land to ensure the perpetuity of open spaces. In fact, public acquisition of land or the development rights to land can often save taxpayers money.⁴⁶

Support for these measures already exists. **A full 70 percent of Colorado voters say state and federal leaders have a responsibility to enact policies that halt population growth and reduce development.**⁴⁷ It's time for legislators to listen.

IV. Conclusion: Reckoning With Growth

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing Colorado is finding the political leadership to realistically address the complex growth problems the state faces. This is the entire state's problem and responsibility, and residents must prod their legislators into aggressive action. Otherwise, the projections in this report may well prove to be grossly understated. It is time for Colorado to look seriously at the future and ask: What kind of Colorado do we want for the twenty-first century and for our children and grandchildren? The choice is ours, but time is short.



FOOTNOTES

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