



The Next Bad Thing

Creeping traffic. Strained schools. Dwindling water. Commuters are flocking to Elbert County for a little bit of country, but there isn't much country left.

By Alan Prendergast
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John Dunn stands on the deck of his home, pointing out the virtues of country living. On a 160-acre spread in southern Elbert County, they are many. The view from Dunn's porch is one of undulating hills and gently

sloping grasslands ringed by stands of ponderosa pine. A small pond doubles as a skating rink in winter. The air is clean and crisp, the silence punctuated by the occasional shrill whinny of horses.

"My runway's down there, and my hangar's over there," says Dunn, a retired engineer. "When I told people at Martin Marietta I was moving out here, they thought it was absolute stupidity. Who ever heard of anyone driving an hour to work? But I wanted the rural atmosphere, and I wanted my children to go to school in the country. I flew my own plane to work for nine years, and in good weather, it took me fifteen minutes."

Dunn's friend John Draper, a retired commercial airline pilot, nods appreciatively. Like Dunn, Draper moved to the county in the 1960s and bought 160 acres. He, too, flew his own plane to Stapleton sometimes, but the drive wasn't so bad, either. "In those days," he recalls, "there were no stoplights going into town until you hit Sixth and Havana."

Four decades ago, Elbert County was an isolated place, psychically as well as geographically removed from the cities of the Front Range. The population of the L-shaped county, which spans 1,848 square miles, averaged out to less than two people per square mile. Standard phone service consisted of a four-party line, and virtually every call was long distance. Parker was a wide spot on the road to Denver. There were few paved roads and almost no amenities to speak of. In the winter, Dunn and Draper used their farm tractors to plow roads into Elbert and Elizabeth, with the county's blessing. Later, the pair did a tidy business selling snowmobiles to their neighbors.

Both men were pioneers of a way of life that has become increasingly common in Colorado: the Rural Commuter (*motorist extraurbanus*). But the breed has mutated in recent years, particularly in Elbert County, where a staggering surge in residents, soaring land prices and strained resources have transformed the notion of "country life" into a freakish contradiction, volatile and grotesque, like a science experiment gone berserk.

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John Dunn has weathered forty years of growth in Elbert County.

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Jeff and Connie Lehman sought small-town life in Elizabeth, now a bedroom community for commuters.

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Jesse Yates is battling a proposed subdivision next door.

Mark Manger



Elizabeth's main drag teems with real estate and mortgage offices.

Between 1970 and 1990, the population of the county more than doubled, from 3,903 to 9,646 people; in the following decade, it doubled again. At one point, Elbert was the second-fastest-growing county in the nation, right behind burgeoning Douglas County. The blistering pace has slowed since 2001 because of the economic slump, but today there are more than 22,000 residents in the county, with thousands more expected in the next few years. According to the latest census data, Elbert is one of only three counties on the eastern plains that actually gained in population last year.

The new arrivals are mostly commuters. Few have planes or tractors. Chances are good, though, that they have an SUV, a pickup or both, plus a hankering for a new house on ten or five or even two acres, with a three-car garage and a long driveway and room for a horse or a set of swings. And they want it, ideally, in the northwest corner of the county, a teeth-gnashing but tolerable drive from Castle Rock and Parker and the farthest stretches of Aurora.

If they have the bucks, they spring for a McMansion on one of the high, pine-studded ridges that offer stunning vistas of the Front Range -- there are places at the county's western edge where the elevation hits 7,300 feet, stout fortresses of rock and timber above the grasslands -- and declare themselves masters of all they survey. If not, they settle for a more modest estate, a patch of suburbia scratched onto the high plains, and steel themselves for the commute. They want the quiet and the wide-open spaces and the fabled rural atmosphere, and they want it something fierce -- even if that dogged pursuit dooms the land and obliterates the very magic they seek.

Dunn's place is more than twenty miles from the epicenter of the housing boom. The sheer size of his property insulates him somewhat from the commuter invasion; one of his closest neighbors is cable tycoon John Malone, who owns more than 40,000 acres in the county and has been an enthusiastic exponent of preserving its natural beauty. Yet even the landed gentry are feeling the aftershocks of the boom, from tax bills to traffic to choked schools. Prime land that sold for \$180 an acre in the 1960s now commands \$6,000 to \$8,000 an acre. On paper, at least, men like Dunn and Draper are millionaires, but they say they aren't interested in selling -- if they can only hang on to the qualities that brought them to the country in the first place.

"Financially, the quicker it develops, the better it is for somebody sitting on a lot of acreage," Draper notes. "But that's not much of a deal in the long run. It used to be I could look out from where we built our house and count on one hand the number of homes. And almost nobody commuted. Now it's hard to find somebody that doesn't commute. And if you have to go to Denver, it takes forty minutes longer to make a round trip because of the traffic."

"In the morning I see a solid line of cars, from 5 a.m. to 7:30, all going into Colorado Springs," Dunn says. "That's not my idea of rural life."

Some of the impacts are even closer to home. No tour of Dunn's spread would be complete without a nod to the homely pump that makes it all possible. In a county with few streams and scant rainfall, almost everyone depends on water from shallow wells that produce from bedrock aquifers -- water that is trapped in layers of rock and sand and is replenished not in decades or even centuries, but over unfathomable stretches of geologic time.

Dunn drilled his 200-foot well in 1963. "Everybody thought we had unlimited water out here, but that's not the case," he says. "My well's down forty feet now. I've lost twenty of it in the last seven years. They're sucking the water out of here."

Head north from Dunn's place, and it's not hard to grasp his concerns about what "they" are doing.

Past the snug hamlet of Elbert, past postcard-perfect horse farms and dozing llamas and fields of alfalfa watered by enormous wheeled sprinklers, lies Kiowa, the county seat. The sleepy ag town now has an unsightly collection of colorless, low-slung tract homes grafted onto its hind end, a numbing procession of driveways and privacy fences, each with a single scrawny sapling blowing in the wind. One of the string of real-estate offices along the main drag calls itself Country Dreams; another welcomes inquiries about a "new ranch home on 10 beautiful acres forest ridge \$315,000." But you can pick up larger lots for considerably less money if beauty is not an issue.

West of Kiowa, past an industrial park stuffed with porta-potties, is Elizabeth, a community of 1,600 that has borne the brunt of the invasion. The town still has its antique shops and well-shaded clapboard homes, but its quaintness is fading amid a hustle of title, real-estate and mortgage businesses; one company's electric sign flashes time, temperature and current loan rates. The place has even acquired its own edge city, a strip mall on the west end of town featuring a Safeway, gas pumps, drive-thru banking, drive-thru hamburgers and, of course, home loans.

North of Elizabeth, ranches are being replaced by ranchettes. They hug the edges of the remaining stables and farms and mimic their stately white fences. But the country life seems to falter farther up the road, as the lots shrink and the intention grows incoherent. The rural subdivisions have folksy names, with an extra "e" on every "wilde" feature and references to stags and woods and coursing rivers; but the trees are sparse, the water dear, the wildlife chased away.

At the still-emerging Deer Creek Farm, the modest yards have a parched and unfinished look, and the view of the mountains is tempered by the sprawl in the foreground. Like the houses themselves, the new streets -- North Farmhouse Circle, Pine Meadow Avenue -- seem utterly random, an alien design imposed on the high lonesome in the hope that it would stick. Rusty farm machinery and hay bales are parked as decoration along the side of the road, and tiny windmills spin wildly outside the model homes, as if to lure prospects seeking a throwback to a simpler time. But the overall impression is one of something raw and monstrous struggling to be born amid the weeds and construction trash.

Not far from the Deer Creek subdivision, down a pothole-plagued road swept by tumbleweeds, is an even stranger sight: an eighteen-hole golf course with its own restaurant and lounge, and sprinklers jetting arcs of water across the fairways. The Spring Valley course is a swath of fussed-over green hemmed in by brown prairie.

Developer Ron Heggemeier plans to build nearly 1,200 homes around the course, on lots ranging from half an acre to 2.5 acres. To achieve such a high density, Heggemeier intends to tap into existing water sources only for the water needed *inside* the homes; the new lawns and other external uses will be supplied with sewer water that's been recycled through the development's own effluent treatment plant. This bold experiment in country living, which has never before been tried in the state, has already been approved by the Elbert County commissioners; it's now awaiting an okay from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

From Spring Valley, it's only a few miles to the Douglas County line -- and from there, less than ten minutes to the high-density, high-traffic madness of unincorporated Parker. The metro area now stands poised at Elbert County's doorstep. In fact, the western third of the county is feeling the pinch of growth pressures from three directions: from Colorado Springs commuters coming in from the south, from Castle Rock and Parker to the west, and from Aurora to the north.

Some people in the county are already resigned to the notion that its scenic western edge will ultimately be swallowed up in the sprawl; it's merely a question of how much open space can be preserved, they say, how much tribute can be exacted from the developers and waves of eager commuters. But others insist there's still time to avoid the costly, water-draining blunders of their neighbors in Douglas County. Growth may be inevitable, they say, but it doesn't have to turn out like

Highlands Ranch.

When locals talk about the "right kind of growth," they're usually referring to pushing for economic development, new jobs and industries, to go along with the new homes. The county has no sales tax and little commercial base, aside from ranching and farming; property taxes alone can't keep up with the demand for new roads, schools and other services brought on by the surge in population.

"We've become a bedroom community like you wouldn't believe," says John Metli, one of three county commissioners. Out of roughly \$2 billion in tax assessments in the county, \$1.8 billion consists of residential property taxes.

Adding a sales tax would have little effect, Metli contends, since the county has little retail activity. "Sixty percent of our population drives by the Wal-Mart in Parker every day," he grumbles.

Metli represents the vast, thinly populated eastern district of the county. He's keen on trying to shape an agritech and business development district along the I-70 corridor, one that would produce energy from wind farms and biomass and draw on local farms for other products -- biodegradable containers made from corn, for example. But he's also been a supporter of higher-density housing developments, such as Spring Valley, in exchange for concessions on water use or open space. "Why should we use taxpayer money for open space when we can have it given to us?" he asks.

That approach hasn't sat well with anti-growth forces in the western end of the county, who say the current commissioners have failed to craft a coherent vision of how to handle growth and have been too quick to appease big developers. The dispute has led to some surprising fractures in the heavily Republican county, along with a search for new ways to cope with the threats posed by rapid commuterization.

In January the county adopted a \$2,500-per-home increase in the impact fees it assesses for new developments. It's not much, Metli says, but it's a start; to hike impact fees too rapidly would invite lawsuits. "We need to stay within the law so we don't go to court," he notes. "We have to prove it's not overbearing."

Others say the county could afford to be a lot tougher with its suitors. "There are things that can be done," declares John Dunn, a former county commissioner himself -- as well as a vocal critic of the current officeholders. "I would accept responsible growth that pays its own way."

But does growth ever pay for what it takes away?

Twenty-five years ago, Jeff and Connie Lehman found the pace of life in west Denver becoming too frantic. They went for a picnic in the country and ended up settling in Elizabeth, where Connie, a textile artist, keeps a studio.

For several years, Jeff served on the town board. Although he's seen his share of annexation proposals and much-amended master plans, he says he's never come across a reasonable and reliable blueprint for how growth should be managed in Elbert County.

"I've seen a lot of satellite developments that seem to spring up overnight," he says. "I've always had the feeling that there was no plan, either for the town or the county. We are hit with waves of proposals, and whether they go forward seems to depend more on the economy than anything else."

Lehman believes that Elizabeth, despite lean budget times and periodic tumultuous recalls of local officials, has managed to keep up with the population explosion on most fronts. Its school district has extracted sufficient taxes and fees from new developments to erect a roomy new high school and middle school, and welcome new businesses are cropping up in town, from a day spa to a proposed

candy factory. But the morning bumper-to-bumper rush hour along Colorado Highway 86, which runs through the center of the town, has old-timers shaking their heads in disbelief.

"Aside from the congestion, I think it's still a pretty nice place to live," Lehman says. "We haven't had to face a complete change of character yet, which I think would come with a large, Douglas County-type development."

Recently, a proposed high-density development to the west of town was drastically scaled back, but some regard that victory as only a temporary reprieve. Richard Wright, a veteran of the local growth wars, says the influx of newcomers has irrevocably altered the town's outlook and sense of community.

"It's changed the quality of life for the worse," Wright says. "The traffic is a nightmare, and there's no small-town feel at all anymore. I've lived here 34 years, and I know four families in this town now."

Wright and his wife, Lucy, both retired schoolteachers, live in an old farmhouse on the edge of Elizabeth. After teaching high school science in Douglas County for decades, Wright knew it was time to hang it up when he found his drive to work in Highlands Ranch took him through eighteen stoplights. One evening he got lost driving in Daniels Park, a once-pristine area he thought he knew well, now clogged with subdivisions.

Eight years ago, Wright found himself at the forefront of the battle against Phillips Ranch. Developer Jim Nicholson, the former Republican National Committee chairman (and now Bush's ambassador to the Vatican), had sought to put 730 houses on 400 acres across the road from Wright's home. "There was a huge movement to stop it," Wright recalls. "People packed the town board meetings."

Despite overwhelming opposition, the board approved the proposed annexation. Five of the six boardmembers who backed Phillips Ranch were promptly voted out of office. A subsequent popular referendum put the brakes on the whole project and imposed a growth cap on new homes within the existing town. Nicholson sold the property to a local philanthropist (who so far has kept it undeveloped) -- but not before filing lawsuits against several of his critics, including Wright, claiming harassment. A lien was slapped on Wright's property; he had to hire a lawyer to get it removed.

In 1997, many of the same local activists tried to rally opposition to the Safeway strip mall at the edge of town. "They knew what would happen," Wright says. "The town moves to the outskirts."

But many locals wanted the convenience of a suburban-style grocery chain, even though it meant driving a local grocer out of business; town officials were practically salivating at the prospective tax base. The anti-growth forces lost that battle -- and many since.

Wright takes no comfort in the county's master plan. The mere mention of the document, which is more of a guide than an ironclad set of regulations, produces a bitter chuckle. "The commissioners change it every time they have a meeting," he says. "Parker had a master plan, and look at the abomination they have there. People come out and talk about the water issue at meeting after meeting, and it doesn't make any difference. The people who've got money do whatever they want. They just throw money at you until they win."

In recent years, the Wrights have spent more time at a vacation home in Wisconsin and less in Colorado. The Wisconsin town is bigger than Elizabeth but feels smaller, somehow; the pace is slower, the infrastructure better established. And neighbors tend to know each other -- a stark contrast to the commuter culture that is emerging in Elbert County.

"If you built a privacy fence in Wisconsin, your neighbors would be highly offended," Wright says. "That's the first thing people do in Colorado. They get up at six and leave for work, come back at six and stay in their houses. They don't want to know anybody."

Wright doubts that the people in the beige tract homes now dotting the landscape west and north of town have much connection to the community he once knew.

"Elizabeth is at the breaking point," he says. "It's stuck in a sea of beige sprawl. And once the beige subdivisions become a majority, it's over. This is the *good life* to them. If they wanted to build Phillips Ranch now, I don't think there would be anyone to fight it."

The pernicious economics of sprawl have been likened to a runaway train, a Martian invasion, a cancer, a virus. The biological metaphors are probably most appropriate; even the term "subdivision" evokes images of a malignant cell that replicates itself -- first slowly, then at an exponential pace, until its host sickens and dies.

Decades ago Colorado legislators came up with what's known as the 35-acre rule, an effort to invoke some regulatory control over the process of splitting up land into residential lots of less than 35 acres. The intent was to curb rip-and-run developments by requiring that minimal infrastructure and services -- streets, utilities, fire protection and so on -- accompany the new construction. But the law had unintended consequences; it became an engine of sprawl.

Cutting up ranchland into 35-acre parcels requires no particular talent, but it does raise the market value of that land -- and the land around it. In time the rising land values make the notion of smaller lots more attractive, then inevitable. Ten acres, then five, then two, then one. New roads and utility lines make the process even more viable economically, increasing the demand for more lots, more infrastructure and more services.

In Elbert County today, a developer doesn't have to hook buyers up to a central water supply (as opposed to an individual well) unless the lots are under ten acres; he doesn't have to provide a central sewer line unless they're under five acres, which has resulted in a proliferation of septic systems. But that hasn't dissuaded the new arrivals from expecting -- and demanding -- the kind of county services they knew in the suburbs, from paved roads to snowplows to prompt police and fire service.

"They buy a new home on a dirt road because it's Utopia," says Wright. "Then the first time it snows, they're at the county commissioner meetings bitching about the mud."

Years ago, the absence of big-city amenities might have dissuaded folks from moving to the county, but not any more. "For a long time, about one out of five families who moved out here would stick," says Draper. "It wasn't what they thought it would be. They had to fight the elements and commute and so on. But now they've got better vehicles, better roads -- and most of the time, better weather."

"We never get snow like we used to," Dunn laments. "If we got snow like we had twenty years ago, it would shut down half the houses in this county."

When epic snows like last spring's blizzard do occur, the clamor for snowplows can get ugly. As a county commissioner, Dunn spent more time than he wants to calculate trying to explain to irate citizens that, on the high plains, plows often have to wait until the wind subsides before clearing the roads.

"The first thing they do is buy a four-wheel drive," he says. "Then it snows, and they've got to get to work, so they get up and leave early, before we can get the roads plowed out. They get that goddamn four-wheel drive stuck in the road and leave it there and walk back. I don't know how many times we've hit their vehicles with a snowplow and knocked 'em clear in their yards."

Other critical county services have also struggled to keep pace. Last fall's fatal mauling of a woman by three pit bulls owned by an Elbert County couple drew widespread media scrutiny of short staffing in the sheriff's office and its antiquated 911 system. The only sheriff's deputy on patrol that morning was

ted up with another call when the first report of the dog attack came in; it took other officers more than an hour to receive the call for assistance from the 911 dispatcher and respond to the scene.

Just days earlier, Sheriff William Frangis, who was short three deputies because of a hiring freeze, had delivered a stern letter to the county commissioners, complaining that lack of funding had left his officers without backup, "depending on an obsolete and ineffective 911 communication system.... Inaction is a deliberate indifference to the safety of my employees and the citizens of Elbert County."

The pit-bull incident is symptomatic of the way his rural law-enforcement office is being overwhelmed by the county's growth, Frangis says. The amount budgeted for his agency's salaries is actually \$55,000 less than it was two years ago, even though the caseload keeps rising. Domestic-violence calls are up. So are burglaries, drunk driving, sexual assaults on children -- just about every category of social malfunction.

"It's a mess," the sheriff says. "We're in the position Douglas County was in twenty years ago. Once they hit a population of 25,000, they knew they had to not only catch up, but start planning for the future."

Frangis says the newcomers have "huge expectations" of his agency -- especially the ones who leave their homes empty during the day, prime targets for thieves and vandals, while commuting back and forth to the metroplex to pay the mortgage. "They're buying new homes in the \$300,000-to-\$500,000 range," he says. "They're from the metro area, and they're used to a certain level of service. I refer to them as my high-maintenance residents. They expect immediate response, and they expect a patrol car to drive through the subdivision once a day. I don't have anybody to do that."

The sheriff isn't the only one feeling squeezed by the boom. The court docket is overloaded, resulting in longer and longer waits for civil cases, since criminal matters take priority. County officials say they've fallen years behind in road building and maintenance. Other offices, including that of the county assessor and the clerk, are also getting crunched. But it's the 911 problem that seems to have captured public outrage, highlighting the peculiar hazards of life in the country.

Frangis has his critics among the county commissioners, who have remained largely unmoved by his urgent requests for more funding. ("The sheriff has big ideas," says Metli.) Through federal grants and fees accumulated from phone service, the county has the funds to build a modern 911 dispatch center but no budget for the new hires required to staff it. Frangis is optimistic that the shortfall can be made up with a proposed sales tax, but for now the emergency response time is still not up to suburban standards.

"It's a crapshoot," Frangis says. "It depends on where the officer is and where the call originates. If the officer is forty miles away, it's going to be a while before he gets there."

Five years ago, a team of researchers from what was then called the Denver Museum of Natural History embarked on a historic research project at the Elbert County Fairgrounds in Kiowa. While a group of elementary-school students watched from the bleachers, chanting "Drill! Drill! Drill!," a coring rig explored the secrets hidden nearly half a mile beneath the ground.

The drilling continued around the clock for weeks, stopping only for equipment repairs and other adjustments. After five weeks, it reached its target depth of 2,256 feet -- deep enough for extensive study of the formations that make up the bedrock aquifers at the center of the Denver Basin, the source of much of the water used in Elbert and several adjoining counties.

A collaboration among museum researchers and an array of federal, regional, state and county agencies, the Denver Basin Research Project had multiple objectives. One was to learn more about the geologic history of the region by obtaining core samples. The data buried in the rocks would shed

additional light on what the place was like 50 million to 70 million years ago -- a time when the sea retreated, the Front Range rose, and tropical rainforests spread across what is now prairie.

But the research team was also intent on learning more about the region's future, by examining aquifer characteristics and monitoring the deep well's water level.

"The fact is that water is a finite resource," says geologist Bob Reynolds, one of the project leaders. "There's considerably less water in the Denver Basin -- 30 percent less -- than state engineers thought. And the water is not being replenished; it's being depleted. There's recharge over geologic time, but not on a human scale."

Raynolds has been an outspoken revisionist on the water question, challenging the assumptions that have led to over-reliance on Denver Basin aquifers for runaway growth along the Front Range. "Elbert County may not be where it's going to hit the fan first," he says. "Certainly not before Douglas and El Paso counties. There's going to be anguish in those places in our lifetimes. The infrastructure changes that are required take a long time."

The fairground project has been of particular interest to Jerry Koch, a geologist who lives in Elizabeth. A few years ago, when John Dunn was a county commissioner, he asked Koch to head a water advisory board charged with assessing the state of the precious resource in the county. Koch's 1999 report, based on available data at the time, paints a less grim picture than the subsequent Denver Basin Research Project -- but even its modest recommendations on limiting development to ensure a so-called 300-year supply, as well as its warnings about the exponential cost of drilling deeper and deeper wells as the shallow wells peter out, have been shunted aside and the water board disbanded.

"Basically, it was ignored," says Koch. "[Commissioner] Metli tried to tear it to pieces. He sat down with some amateur hydrologists and came up with some different numbers."

Metli says he's satisfied that the monitoring done by the Colorado Division of Water Resources at 23 wells across the county indicates no dramatic changes in the available supply. "The biggest problem with Highlands Ranch is that they put the wells too close to each other," he says. "We're doing it differently."

Koch says he's sometimes referred to as "the water guy nobody listens to." That title could also go to Robert Ransom, a retired petrophysics expert and Elizabeth resident who's written a series of scathing columns in the *Elbert County News* about shortsighted water policy -- to little response, he says. Ransom points out that the comforting talk of 100-year or 300-year supplies is based on dubious calculations about the theoretical capacity of water within an aquifer, which ignore the practical problems in actually extracting that water for surface use.

"There's no scientific background for it," he says. "The volume of water, if you could get it out, might produce a 300-year supply. But you can't get it out."

The water board found that a "realistic" estimate of residential water use in the county is an average of .7 to 1.0 acre-feet per household per year. But the commissioners have downsized those numbers when it suits them, Koch notes, particularly in the proposed Spring Valley Ranch development, where the water allocation for 1,186 homes works out to .4 acre-feet per household. "They've embraced this concept at Spring Valley where you define the use, even if it's not what they actually use, and go by that," he says.

But Spring Valley developer Ron Heggemeier says the smaller number is a realistic one, given that up to 60 percent of residential water use is for irrigation. His development will use treated sewer water for lawns and other outside uses -- a recycling scheme that's been used in more populous states but has never been tried in a residential community in Colorado before.

"I not only think it's the wave of the future, I think it's going to be demanded by jurisdictions down the road," Heggemeier says. "This is one way of getting further use of the existing aquifers. The downside is that you have to use two completely different water systems. The upside is that the cost of drilling wells is very expensive, and you eliminate or slow that need."

The proposal has triggered concerns among some nearby residents about giardia and other health risks. Jesse Yates, a business consultant and member of the county planning commission, has read up on effluent treatment studies done by the Environmental Protection Agency and other agencies that suggest Spring Valley's plan deserves closer scrutiny.

"Every study I have read says it's hazardous to apply this on residential lawns," Yates says. "It shouldn't be applied near where food is being prepared or in high-traffic areas. But these guys are going to allow people to wash their cars and let their kids play in the sprinklers with this stuff. It's crazy."

When Yates shared his information with the county commissioners a few months ago, he got a chilly reception. "It was either over their heads, or they'd already made their minds up," he says. "The county knew what Spring Valley was doing, but the citizens didn't know it. It's all about politics and resources, not health."

Heggemeier says he's "absolutely confident" that the treatment process poses no health risks, and the commissioners agree with him. "They can get that water down to where it's all but drinkable," Metli says. The Colorado health department is expected to rule on the proposal in a few weeks.

Yates estimates that Spring Valley Ranch would bring an additional 3,500 residents to the county, adding an additional 8,000 trips per day to the roads; the projected 1,200 additional students in the schools would hike district operating costs by \$8 million. Heggemeier says his company is prepared to meet all the requisite impact fees and more, including an additional \$400,000 payment to the Elizabeth School District and other payments to the sheriff's office, the county's economic development board and various other groups.

"We're definitely paying our own way," he says. "We've volunteered over and above what was required of us."

Metli is particularly pleased with the plan to set aside 1,000 acres of the 2,232-acre development as open space. But both he and Heggemeier readily acknowledge that more than a quarter of that space could become a second golf course, if demand warrants it.

And it probably will. Spring Valley's houses will range in price from \$275,000 to \$500,000, and the high-end buyers may expect two golf courses. "We believe the person coming out here is looking for low crime, a little bit of the country," Heggemeier says. "But they're also looking for some of the amenities they have in town."

But when do the amenities take over and the country disappears?

That's what Jesse Yates would like to know. He moved his family to Elbert County five years ago, fleeing the sprawl of Parker. "We didn't like the way it was growing, and fourteen miles east of us was a nice piece of land," he recalls.

Now he faces the prospect of a high-density subdivision practically next door, built by the same company responsible for the 3,200-unit Canterbury Estates in east Parker. He's put up a website (www.stopspringvalleyranch.com) and even purchased space on billboards in the area to try to alert his neighbors to the "traumatic" effects Spring Valley could have on already crowded schools and roads. But most of his neighbors seem oblivious to his protests.

"These are individuals who moved out here because they don't want to be bothered," Yates says. "They don't see how it's going to affect them down the road. The tipping point may be the next Spring Valley, or the one after that."

Tim Lyons builds spec and pre-sold houses on ten-acre lots outside of Elizabeth. A 2,400-square-foot home, with enough land for a horse and breathing space from your neighbor, goes for around \$375,000.

"I like growth," he says. "That's my livelihood. I'd like it to look better than Highlands Ranch."

Yet as larger developers set their sights on the northwest corner of the county, Lyons wonders about the increasing strains on services and quality of life that high-density growth will bring. "Most of the small developers live out here, and they do a good job," he says. "I could make a lot more money doing smaller lots, but it's a burden on the county. Do I have to take every dollar to the grave?"

Lyons lives in the same area in which he builds. His wife is on the local school board, and he served on the county planning commission for eight years. "Elbert County is a blank canvas," he says. "The planning department does the best it can with the resources it has. But political leadership in this county, whether it's pro- or anti-growth -- there's no real foresight. People run for political office for all the wrong reasons. I've watched the leadership flounder around. There's been a lack of imagination and creativity in addressing the problem."

John Dunn hardly ever voted to approve residential developments during his years as a county commissioner, but he was frequently outvoted. He, too, believes that the growth problem requires better and more unified leadership. He and his friend Draper belong to a watchdog group that's determined to put new blood in the commissioner seats this fall, now that two of the three seats are up for grabs.

"This is a critical election," he says. "We have to have people in there who can recognize the problems and take the proper actions while there's still time."

Dunn and Draper say they were ostracized by the local GOP leadership two years ago for the heresy of backing a Democratic candidate for commissioner. (She lost.) "A Republican has to be a dead dog lying in the street not to be elected in this county," Draper notes.

This time around, the watchdog group believes it's found a slate of candidates who happen to be Republican and, perhaps, less gung-ho about adding rooftops than the current bunch. One contender who's won their approval is Ben Duke, a rancher who raises beef cattle south of Elizabeth and works part-time at Urban Peak in Denver.

Duke is hardly an anti-growth fanatic. With Elizabeth already transformed into a bedroom community, he says, it's difficult to bar the door to a rising tide of commuters. "It's unrealistic to say there should be no growth," he points out. "I'm in favor of balanced growth. We're never going to have the outlet malls or Park Meadows. But we could have more small shops, clean industries and offices for people who want to live and work here."

Duke would like to see county planners develop a tougher master plan, one that takes into account the "huge concerns" about water resources and establishes firm, impact-mitigating requirements for new development. His own experience has taught him the need for such a document. Back in 1997, Duke was part of a local group that attempted to negotiate design modifications for the proposed Safeway strip mall in Elizabeth. Safeway's representative rejected their suggestions, pointing out that existing building codes didn't require him to follow any of them.

"He was a little haughty about it, but he was right," Duke says. "You can't change the rules in the

middle of the game. That provided an important lesson to me. If you want them to do it a certain way, you have to put it in writing."

He believes there's still time to do just that. "We're not Douglas County," he says. "We can preserve the rural atmosphere, if we're proactive in how we manage it and work with developers. We need to look at even open space as market-driven."

But getting some kind of consensus-building vision of what Elbert County should be on paper is more difficult than it sounds. "It's been a challenge to engage the citizens," Duke admits. "Suddenly, they wake up when the development is across the fence from them. People in urban areas take it for granted that government is going to take care of these issues; we're not in that position yet. We have to stop operating in a crisis mode and work systematically."

In the land of privacy fences, "wilde" tract homes and commuter angst, people generally agree about what they *don't* want: They don't want another Highlands Ranch, another Douglas County. Figuring out what they *do* want is another matter. In the mind's eye of the questing commuters, the little bit of country they seek is somehow empty of the very people doing the seeking. But in Elbert County, it's getting harder to conjure a vision of the future that doesn't include all those other people ten, five or two acres away.

"We do need to define it," Duke says. "One of the things we need to do better is talk to each other."

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