CROSSING THE DIVIDE

What Mountain Communities Can Learn from Open Space Programs on the Urban Interface

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Western State Colorado University
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THE CHALLENGE

• The intermountain West is changing dramatically
• Idaho, Nevada, Utah are top fastest growing states
• Colorado’s population will double by 2050
• Western Slope will grow by 75%
• This foreshadows major challenges for COSA members, like Pitkin County Open Space & Trails
• Pitkin County Open Space & Trails
  • Property-tax funded, manages 20,000 acres
  • Spread out over 50+ miles, four counties, fragmented properties
• 2 full-time, 3 seasonal rangers;
  • Outreach, compliance, emergency response
  • Responsible for much of the on-the-ground concerns
• Code enforcement officers
THE CHALLENGE

- Visitation has increased 18% or 96,000 people since 2013
- EMS incidents have doubled since 2014
- Calls related to homeless camps have quadrupled since 2014
- Commercial permit applications have more than doubled since 2014
- Greater risk, greater demand for rangers
“THE CRYSTAL BALL”

- Open Space programs on the urban-interface can model solutions
  - “Crystal Ball”
- I set out to study how other programs tackle the big challenges facing OST:
  - Homelessness and illegal camping
  - Emergency medical care
  - Ranger safety
  - Public outreach
  - Meeting future demand
IT WAS A STRANGE JOURNEY

Yes, that is a “leg” in a suitcase. The hazards of research.
METHODS

• Assessed needs of Open Space & Trails
  • Trail counter data, ranger records, incident reports, planning documents, media articles
• Carried out:
  • 4 Focus Groups (n = 26)
  • 4 Observational Ride-alongs
  • *Anonymous
• Thematically coded 8-hours of transcripts (Dedoose)
• Reviewed 5 Ranger Manuals;
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top (Mentioned) Challenges</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Top (Mentioned) BMPs</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Ranger Safety</td>
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<td>New Training</td>
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<td>Limit Parking</td>
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FINDINGS: REGIONAL STUDY

• All programs reported similar challenges:
  • **Homelessness**
  • **Increasing visitation and urban development**
  • Threats to ranger safety
  • Politically driven decision-making
HOMELESSNESS

- Homelessness was the most frequently mentioned theme
  - 81% individual ranked as top 5
  - 3 of 4 focus groups
- Ranger safety concerns:
  - Transient contacts, drugs, needles, crime, weapons
  - Wildfire caused by campfires
- BMPs:
  - Eviction/enforcement
  - Specialized training
  - Law enforcement partnerships
  - PPE (ballistic vests, puncture resistant)
  - Health & Human Services
“I think the one big thing about all this is that we can't enforce our way out of homelessness. It's a social and community issue that has to be addressed on a social and community level. And no matter what we do, we can't enforce our way of it... there used to be hardly any camps and now there's even more and we've increased our enforcement, not decreased it, and it's still growing. And so it's just kind of proving that point that it's a community issue and has to be dealt with on a community level.”
INCREASING VISITATION & URBAN DEVELOPMENT

- Second most often mentioned theme
  - 81% individually ranked as top 5 challenge
  - Seen as driver of all challenges
- Discussed as “carrying capacity”
  - Not adequately addressed
- Parking congestion main outcome
- BMPs:
  - Limit parking or increase infrastructure
  - New technology
  - Social media
  - Volunteer programs and partnerships
Continuous Improvement Cycle of Adaptive Project Management

Adapted from The Agile Project Management Academy
Chuck Cobb
HOW COULD PITKIN COUNTY OPEN SPACE & TRAILS ADAPT?

- **Homelessness and illegal camping**
  - Partner with Health & Human Services
  - Coordinate with Pitkin County Sheriff’s Office

- **Emergency medical care**
  - Improve training and evaluate risk posed by river accidents – *in progress*

- **Ranger safety**
  - Pass self-defense policy and offer new training

- **Public outreach**
  - Engage growing Hispanic community
  - Start volunteer programs (i.e. Bike Patrol, Nordic Ambassadors, etc.)

- **Meeting future demand**
  - Consider Resident Ranger position
  - Hire additional winter ranger or (FTE) ranger – *Currently under consideration*
  - Update policies and develop a Ranger Manual
TAKEAWAYS FOR C.O.S.A.

- Mountain communities can use the urban interface as a “Crystal Ball”
  - Reveal regional challenges
  - Identify best practices
- This can be applied to other regions
- Tool for adaptive management
- Practices may be fit to local needs – not a 1:1 translation
- The West is changing, land managers across the region should adapt
Acknowledgements:
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• Sally Thode
• Colorado Open Space Alliance
• Project participants
• Margie & John Haley Foundation
• Friends & Family
HOW CAN WE LEARN FROM EACH OTHER?

- **Brian Long**, Trails System Manager, City of Aspen
- **Bridget Clark**, Natural Areas and Trails Ranger, City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department
- **Bevin Carithers**, Resource Protection Supervisor, Boulder County Parks & Open Space
- **Phil Kirkman**, Ranger, Eagle County Open Space
• What are the top two challenges you face in your line of work?
• How is your agency working to address these challenges?

• How can open space programs in the mountains and on the Front Range collaborate to find solutions?
• How can COSA support this process?
THANK YOU!
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