

Picture Canon City 2040 - A Pathway to the Future

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Merit - General Planning Project

by: Patrick Mulready, City Planner for the City of Cañon City

Located along the Arkansas River, just a short distance east of the Royal Gorge Bridge, Cañon City was experiencing a bit of identity crisis as it approached its 150th birthday. Is it a rural community? Is it urban? Is it some sort of rural/urban hybrid? What does it want to be? And how is it going to address the fact that even as attractive a community as it is, how can it serve as a destination with no new residential construction in at least two decades?

Complicating these questions were the City's own policy documents: a Comprehensive Plan that had not been updated since 2001, and a set of zoning, subdivision and development regulations that were last overhauled in the 1970s, and had mushroomed into a managerial nightmare over the next several decades. All of this came to a head in 2019, when Cañon City adopted Riverfront Zoning in an effort to take advantage of its relationship with the Arkansas River. The process of Riverfront Zoning adoption

crystalized in the minds of policy makers for Cañon City that the most important tools the City had to guide development were inadequate and badly in need of an update.

That process got underway in February, 2020, when a budget allocation for this project was paired with a matching grant amount from the Colorado Department of Local Affairs to allow Cañon City to update both the Comprehensive Plan and the City's development regulations. The goal was to simplify them, make them user friendly, and ensure they incorporated community aspirations for the future. And that last item was something Cañon City had not done previously.

After a competitive bid process, Cañon City selected the firm of Houseal Lavigne to assist the City in this update process. And the process came with a significant grant constraint: it had to be done by the end of the 2020/2021 Fiscal Year. One year is not a lot of time for a project this big, and it commenced just a pandemic hit. But it did instill upon everyone involved, from elected officials, the local merchants, property owners and other stakeholders, municipal staff and advisors from Houseal Lavigne, the need to remain focused on big picture issues.

Through the balance of 2020, a variety of methods were employed to obtain public input on these big picture issues. Surveys of key personnel at public and quasi-public agencies, interviews with stakeholders in the community across a wide variety of interests, do it yourself meeting kits for neighborhood groups, schools, clubs and associations, and a Design Charette that instantly tabulated the audience responses to visual preference choices, whether they were attending in person, or watching it via videoconference. Jointly overseeing the effort was the City's Planning Commission and City Council. By the end of calendar year 2020, not only had the effort amassed enormous amounts of public comment and feedback, it also engaged in an extensive existing conditions analysis.

The synthesis of this began to express itself in the draft chapters of the new Comprehensive Plan. At the start of the project, it had been established that this was to be Cañon City's pathway to the future. And indeed, that's what the Comprehensive Plan was titled. As the drafts were reviewed and revised, they began to inform how the City's land use regulations would be structured and written. Up to this point, the City had regulations scattered over several titles in the municipal code: subdivisions were part of one chapter, zoning part of another, specific use requirements part of yet another chapter. The first thing this update fixed was unifying these regulations into one chapter, which explains how it came to be called the "Unified Development Code."

With a lot of time, hard work and commitment from Houseal Lavigne, municipal staff and the officials on the Planning Commission and City Council, and a lot of feedback from the public, the final version of the Comprehensive Plan was submitted to an open house on June 21, 2021, and adopted by Council that evening. Two months later, on August 18, 2021, the new Unified Development Code was adopted by Council with an effective date of September 1, 2021. Cañon City had accomplished a major planning initiative in an incredibility short amount of time, and during a major pandemic. And the reactions to this have been extremely supportive, not just from the members of the community, but from outside the community as well.

Cañon City celebrated its sesquicentennial in 2022, and its starting its next 150 years with questions about where the City is, and where it wants to go, confidently answered.