

PLANNING MATTERS



American Planning Association
Colorado Chapter

Making Great Communities Happen

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Planning Innovation





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Planning Innovation in Small Towns as a Function of Necessity and Uniqueness

by Hannah Klausman, AICP, Director of Economic and
Community Development, City of Glenwood Springs

Amending regulations in a municipal code can be a challenging and time-consuming process, as many municipal planners know. However, smaller communities, like Glenwood Springs, Colorado, are uniquely positioned to respond quickly in the face of changing conditions and emerging community needs, relying on their community attributes.

Nestled in the heart of the Western Slope, Glenwood Springs is home to 10,000 residents and is known for its hot springs and outdoor recreational offerings. Not unlike other resort communities in the Rocky Mountain region, the city grapples with soaring living costs and housing prices. For example, single-family median home sale prices for 2023 were listed at \$919,000 according to the Association of Realtors, and 38% of Glenwood Springs households are cost-burdened, spending more than 30% of their incomes on housing according to the recently completed Strategic Housing Plan Needs Assessment. The housing crisis has amplified staffing challenges across all sectors including critical services such as healthcare, education, transit and local government.

In particular, the Roaring Fork Transportation Authority (RFTA), a vital link for commuters traversing the 70-mile rural service region, faces severe staffing shortages, prompting significant route reductions and operational challenges. Though Glenwood Springs has grappled with housing affordability for years, the growing employment crisis created a rising need for quick action.

Over the last five years, the City of Glenwood Springs Community Development department has fielded inquiries from various for-profit developers interested in converting older hotels into residential units. Despite having that stock available given the community's century-old status as a top-notch destination for visitors seeking relaxation and renewal, the conclusion was always the same: the process was cumbersome and too expensive to complete. With heightened employer concerns growing louder, city planning staff recognized that it was pertinent to rethink hotel standards to better accommodate the changing landscape. Upon that conclusion, City staff set up meetings with area developers to gain insight on the exact perceived and actual barriers to converting a hotel. Staff also met with local employers, including RFTA, to assess the type of product they needed. Employers pointed to a need for interim housing for employees while they searched for long term housing options, as well as seasonal arrangements of six months to accommodate the ski, tourist, and transit industry jobs. Developers identified the high cost of system improvement fees at roughly \$6,000 a unit, the need to retrofit fire suppression/fire sprinkler systems, process timelines and challenges related to parking as the top barriers. Another issue was that the City's municipal development code did not have a category for extended stay hotels to codify stays beyond 30 days in a commercial establishment.



After researching and finding few comparable jurisdictional examples tackling the same issues and code limitations, Planning staff set about designing a brand new program unique to our community. Staff proposed two strategies for hotel conversions, one commercial and one residential with the goal of making the process easier for hotels to convert to the type of product necessary to help employers stabilize their employee housing. The timeline for adoption of this conversion code amendment was just under six months from start to finish. The final adopted code change included the following:

- Creation of a new commercial use category for Extended Stay Hotels for stays up to 180 days, with requirements regarding kitchenettes, bathrooms and clothes washing facilities on site.
- Allowance of governmental or quasi-governmental entity to exceed 180 days stays with rental agreements.
- Creation of an exemption for extended-stay hotels that were previously another lodging use from the requirement to provide the additional number of parking stalls previously required, when the existing footprint of the structure does not change and when the hotel is proximate to transit (750 feet of an active transit stop) and when the number of units doesn't increase from the previous number of rooms.
- Removal of two parking lot upgrade requirements for any nonconforming uses with the provision of a parking management plan. This included the requirement to upgrade and existing parking lot with current landscape standards.
- Requirement that extended-stay hotels have deed restrictions requiring 35% of the units be leased at an average of 100 percent area median income.
- Allowance of a short delay of the installation of a fire suppression sprinkler system of 90-days.

Since adoption of the Code in July 2022, the City has two hotel conversions under construction with a combined total of 106 units being converted to residences. One location with 42 units is a RFTA project for employees. The hotel conversion code amendment is one of many tools the City of Glenwood Springs is utilizing to tackle the housing crisis. This path has included early adoption of vacation rental permit caps and distance buffers in 2019 that enabled Glenwood Springs to maintain a manageable balance of approximately 120 permitted vacation rentals. Staff also drafted new Accessory Dwelling Unit standards adopted in 2021 to encourage production through relaxed lot location standards, size increases, and flexible setback options. Other code changes have increased the Inclusionary Zoning percentage requirements for rental product to 20% deed restricted affordability, and adding resident occupancy and affordability as requirement categories for housing diversity standards above what the Inclusionary Zoning ordinance requires. The City also continues to explore next steps with a proposed code amendment to allow duplexes and triplexes as a use by right in all zone districts with reduced minimum lot size standards and

revision to the City's density bonus program that is currently undergoing public input and review. There is still much work to be done, but we think Glenwood Springs exemplifies a dynamic approach towards addressing housing challenges, underscoring the pivotal role of local strategic policy interventions in shaping sustainable urban development in service of thriving rural communities.

Are you a 'small town' planner or planning advocate? We recommend taking a look at the special qualities of your community to inspire with solutions to local issues. One might be surprised by what can be accomplished with assets already in place!

Hannah Klausman, AICP, is the Director of Economic and Community Development for the City of Glenwood Springs, Colorado and serves on the board of directors for the West Mountain Regional Housing Coalition.



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APA Colorado also has a number of committees that allow members to get involved in more specific aspects of planning in Colorado. Available committees are listed below and a full description of each committee can be found on our website.

Committees:

- American Planning Association for Students (APAS)
- Awards Committee
- Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Committee (EDI)
- Emerging Planning Professionals (EPP)
- Great Places Committee
- Healthy Communities Committee
- Legislative Committee
- Membership Committee
- Nominating Committee
- Outreach & Communications Committee
- Professional Development Committee
- Sustainability Committee
- Youth in Planning

Colorado May Not Be Ready For Well-intentioned Innovation

by Jena Skinner, AICP, Planning Manager, and Emily Block, Development Coordinator, Town of Avons

Not too long ago, the Town of Avon purchased new Volkswagen ID 4s – a fully-electric crossover SUV automobile – for use by government employees. Outside of our workplace exist four electric vehicle (EV) chargers, with more over by a popular park, and anticipated sites located elsewhere for our town with a population of about 6,000. Our neighboring towns all have EV chargers, and rapid chargers can even be found at local gas stations. We speculated that the urban areas of the Front Range are even more saturated with EV chargers than our little mountain towns here in Eagle County. Then, we went to the Colorado Planning Conference 2023 in Colorado Springs.

On the way down, we coasted in on ‘electric fumes,’ if you will, only to find no chargers at the Cheyenne Mountain Resort. One member of our team had to drive five miles down the road only to encounter a slow charger and miss part of the event while he waited for some juice to get back to the conference. Charging options were slim as we planned for our return. We had enough charge to get to a charging location, and based on one app, there should have been open chargers there when we got lunch. The only available charger was broken. The other chargers in use. No luck. Discouraged, we plugged into a slow charger at a restaurant. An hour and a half or so



later we got to 30% charged – not enough to get us home. If we were shopping for the day at an area commercial center we visited, the seven hours needed to recharge would have been no problem, but there was a two-hour limit on the charger for us because it was for customers. So, we took the back roads to the next town, as you don't burn through the battery as much going slower. Could we make it to the other side of the tunnel? At this point we were frustrated, to say the least. No chargers found. With 20% left on our battery, we still had 62 miles to get home, and two battery-sucking mountain passes to tackle. On a wing and a prayer, we made it to the west side of the tunnel where luckily, we could recharge going downhill. Finding a rapid charger, all it took was 20 minutes and \$20 dollars and the car was fully charged so we could finally get home.

There is anxiety that can come with EV use, which was all too real for us. Because we weren't the owners of the car, we did not have the experience to fully understand how complex and timely it is to travel with an EV outside of our region. Now we know to find rapid chargers in advance of traveling because otherwise, charging is a time luxury. A regular three-hour drive turned into a six-and-a-half-hour drive sprinkled with stress, and now we're planning to use a gas-powered vehicle when leaving the mountains. A real bummer, as those EV VWs are slick!

As we migrate to an electric future in Colorado, slowly over time it seems, it is important for planners to be aware of the experiences some have with EVs as the topic comes up in discussion – remembering to meet constituents 'where they are at.' While those who own single-family homes where charging is a breeze find EVs easy to use, it is a different story for those using EVs for business and in many other variable circumstances. While the push towards EVs is certainly well intentioned, we aren't there yet.

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