



Denver-Boulder-Greeley, CO CMSA

Regulatory Order/Family: Reform/Growth Control

Summary

Metropolitan Denver has widespread local growth management and growth control. Urban containment programs are universal among the six extensive counties that make up the region, and high-density development is accommodated by almost all jurisdictions. Impact fees assure that growth defrays some of its own costs, and a few jurisdictions also use APFOs for added protection against some infrastructure over-capacity. The region also has the largest share of local governments—about 40 percent of all, accounting for 25 percent of the population—with building permit caps. Despite this, metropolitan Denver maintained its density at about 4 persons per acre between 1982 and 1997, probably thanks to a combination of topography and federal land ownership; reliance on centralized sewer and water, which encourage higher density, to accommodate growth; and permissive high density zoning in many (but not all) jurisdictions.

Governance Framework and Growth Trends

The Denver-Boulder-Greeley CMSA had 2.6 million people in 2000, up 31 percent (600,000 residents) in the 1990s. The two largest jurisdictions are the cities of Denver (550,000 residents) and Aurora (275,000 residents). Jefferson, Arapahoe, and Douglas Counties and the cities of Lakewood, Arvada, and Westminster all have between 100,000 and 200,000 residents. Four other cities (including Boulder) and one county have between 50,000 and 100,000 residents. Fourteen cities and the unincorporated portions of two other counties have populations between 10,000 and 50,000 residents, with 45 small cities (under 10,000) rounding out the jurisdictions with planning and regulatory authority.

According to the National Resources Inventory, the Denver CMSA's population and its developed land area grew at similar rates between 1982 and 1997, both around 34 percent. As a consequence its density held steady at 4.0 persons per urbanized acre, causing it to jump from 31st to 20th among U.S. metro areas, most of which lost density in the 1980s and 1990s. About 20 percent of the CMSA's land was in public ownership in 1992, with 12 percent in federal control, 5 percent in state, and the balance in county and municipal ownership. Public lands may have grown substantially since then, especially in Boulder County, where city and county governments have both aggressively purchased greenbelt areas. The topography of the region, with the steep slopes of the Front Range limiting westward expansion, naturally favors expansion toward the eastern plains, little of which is in public ownership.

Regulatory Environment

We received responses to our survey from 19 cities and 6 counties in the Denver CMSA, accounting for 91 percent of the population and 98 percent of the land area. Our estimates of regional land use practices do not include any estimates for small cities (under 10,000 residents), which add up to about 110,000 residents and 105 square miles of land area.



All the jurisdictions in metropolitan Denver use zoning. None of them has low-density-only zoning and none would bar our hypothetical apartment development. Two thirds of the counties and 85 percent of the cities have a zoning category accommodating development over 15 dwellings per acre. Together, these jurisdictions account for 90 percent of the population and 80 percent of the land area.

Metropolitan Denver also is entirely occupied by jurisdictions with comprehensive plans. Like other western metro areas, local government goes far beyond zoning and planning to embrace various growth management and growth control techniques. Three quarters of the cities report using a growth boundary of some kind, 52 percent use impact fees, and 10 percent use APFOs. The Denver MSA has also been a hot spot for controlled growth, with an estimated 42 percent of cities using permit caps. All six counties use a growth boundary of some kind, five use impact fees, four have APFOs, and one has a permit cap. Three quarters of the residents live in growth-bounded jurisdictions, 85 percent in jurisdictions with APFOs, and a quarter in permit-capped jurisdictions. Only about 40 percent of jurisdictions provide incentives of some kind for affordable housing, but these account for a little over half the metro area's population.