

Pueblo plans for population growth through planning, targeted zoning

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While Pueblo is not experiencing the explosive growth occurring in other parts of Colorado, the county is still on track for steady population increase.

The county has a current population of 168,543, according to the state demographer's office. Over the next dec-

ade, the office predicts the county's population to reach a bit over 181,000. Looking further out, the office expects the county to grow to over 210,000 by 2050.

Of course, these are only estimates. The release of official U.S. Census data later this summer will give a clearer picture of Pueblo County's growth, which areas are growing faster and the types of residents moving in.

"I think (180,000) in the next 10 years isn't too far off," said Scott Hobson, the city of Pueblo's acting director of planning and community development. "We're kind of wondering, though, that maybe the growth might be increasing more than the state is predicting."

He pointed to the number of inquiries the city has received from housing de-

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An arial view of Main Street in downtown Pueblo on Feb. 27. Consumer purchasing patterns and preferences may signal to businesses different business practices and models are needed, according to recent findings by the Pueblo Business Economic Recovery Team. CHIEFTAIN
DRONE PHOTO/ZACHARY ALLEN

Growth

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velopers, which he said is more in the last six months than he's seen in his 22 years working for the city. Of course, the city gets many more inquiries than actual permit applications. He said that at the current rate, however, the city should sign off on about 200 housing building permits this year, compared to about 150 last year.

"The other thing is we're getting builders from outside of Pueblo that are coming in and having discussions on pretty significant new subdivisions in areas that have already been annexed into the city," he said.

That includes areas east and north of Colorado State University Pueblo.

Pueblo has annexed over 4,300 acres since the 1990s, and Hobson said that about 90% of that land will most likely end up residential. All of those additions — the 1,500-acre-Southpointe, 600-acre Villa Bella and 1,100-acre North Vista annexations — are currently serviceable and don't require major roadway extensions.

"That's enough area, that if it was developed, could serve about 50,000 people. And that's already been annexed," Hobson said.

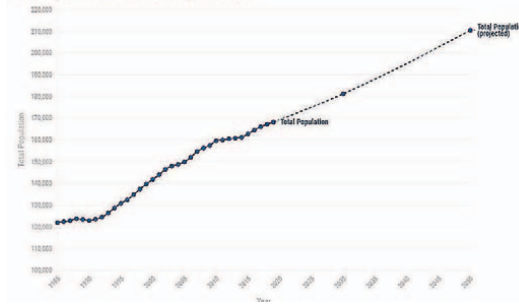
A regional plan to direct growth

One strategy to ensure sustainability is guiding development through zoning and working to prevent sprawl, Pueblo County Director of Planning and Development Carmen Howard said. The regional comprehensive plan, which is still in the works, will be key in directing growth.

"Right now, the county doesn't have a lot of sustainable measures or things that are in place yet that would lead to sustainability," Howard said. "We are relying on the comprehensive plan to help guide us with respect to what the citizens want to see here in the future."

The comprehensive plan will eventually take data with respect to growth, infrastructure and land capacity and then

Total Population in Pueblo County Since 1985



provide the county a "guide" for the future. The county is planning to hold open houses for public input on the plan from 11:30 a.m. until 1:30 p.m. at the Robert Hoag Rawlings Public Library branch and from 5 to 7 p.m. at the Sangre de Cristo Arts Center, both on July 15.

Howard said it's better for Pueblo overall when development is concentrated in areas that already have water, sewer and electric service, or are easy to build those services out to. It makes sense then that the areas most poised for growth are ones closer to the existing city centers.

"If you're going way out into the outskirts where there aren't those services, then you end up with issues related to the subdivision that essentially can't service the households that are growing there," she said. A family could build their dream house, for example, but then have no way to power it.

"When you have sprawl, you're dealing with having to provide infrastructure to those areas, and it's very costly."

That philosophy is present at both the county and city level.

"If we just let growth take place willy-nilly, then our cost as a community to pay for the services that we need to provide — it doesn't really direct or focus the most economical or efficient way to provide city services," Hobson said.

Pueblo West doubled in size since 2000

Pueblo West has experienced the highest rate of growth in the county, es-

entially doubling in size over the last 20 years, according to Tyler Purvis, the Pueblo West Metro District's economic development specialist. He said that in 2000, the area had 5,242 households; in 2019, it had 11,443.

Purvis said that Pueblo West has experienced a 3.5% growth rate over the last 10 years, with an "exponential" rate over the past few years.

Hobson, the city's planner, estimated that over the previous 30 years, about 60% of the building permits have gone to developments in Pueblo West.

"It's been exciting and very eye-opening as well as far as 'OK, this is a lot of people coming in. What do we need to do?'" Purvis said.

And while Pueblo West was developed with a master plan and it hasn't yet exceeded its expected population numbers, it can still be hard to meet the cost of maintaining services. Primarily, that means roads, but it also affects water service and public safety.

"We hear from community members often that they want to see the roads fixed," Purvis said.

It gets tricky, however, when those maintenance costs continue to increase. As a special district, Pueblo West relies heavily on its partnerships with entities like the county to meet needs.

It can't, for example, impose an impact fee on developers that will mitigate future road maintenance costs. What Pueblo West ends up doing is putting a lot of the new infrastructure costs, such as for a new road, on the developer during the front-end of a project.

The state demographer predicts that Pueblo County will have a population of 210,507 by 2050. SARA WILSON

Pueblo Water says it has plenty of capacity

With population growth comes a concern over utility capacity. Pueblo Water says it's ready for the anticipated growth and then some.

"Pueblo has been good ever since the 1950s about acquitting water rights and planning and making sure they have an abundant supply," said Emily Logan, a water resources engineer with Pueblo Water. "That history of planning well has stuck with us, so we're really in a great position to grow, from a water standpoint."

Part of that planning is using an operations model that takes climate change into account. Pueblo Water oversees a wide range of simulations for various hydrology and population growth predictions to see how it affects their storage and service capacity.

The bottom line, Logan said, is to have a long planning horizon.

"We're thinking 50, 100 years out and we're always anticipating more growth," Logan said.

It also helps that Pueblo has very senior water rights along an over-appropriated Arkansas River.

On the extreme ends of things, growth and climate change could result in an earlier snow melt and need for more water storage. Additionally, a growing population and a rise in average temperature will increase demand, also necessitating more storage.

In that instance, Pueblo Water is looking at the possibility of expanding storage reservoirs. Pueblo Water owns and operates Clear Creek Reservoir north of Buena Vista. It also owns water in Pueblo Reservoir and Twin Lakes.

"We're constantly thinking about, if the time comes, if we need to expand [Clear Creek]. That could be an option," Logan said.

She said that even if Pueblo experiences a sudden, unexpected population increase, the area is prepared from a water perspective.

"Even if the demographer's numbers are a little low, we're still preparing for significantly more than that, just in case," Logan said.