



*"Patriotism is not short,
frenzied outbursts of emotion,
but the tranquil and steady
dedication of a lifetime."
— Adlai Stevenson*

Master plan meeting

By Leslie Sheley

The El Paso County Master Plan, if approved, will replace 10 smaller plans written anywhere from 1977 to 2008. It will also replace 21 sketch plans from 1982 to 1986 that were used as visual aids to accompany specific site plans.

The process of developing an updated comprehensive master plan has been two years in the making; the projected date of approval is the end of May.

Mark Gebhart, deputy director of El Paso County Planning and Community Development; Tom Bailey, planning commission member; and John Houseal, principal and cofounder of Houseal Lavigne Associates (consultants), spoke at the March 31 online public meeting. Bailey said one of the challenges of planning during the past few years is having to follow outdated plans.

Houseal said the draft master plan has been extensively reviewed by county planning staff, the master plan advisory committee and several county departments.

The planning process also engaged the community for their input. Houseal said to date, 3,800 people participated using different social platforms. (According to the United States Census Bureau 2020, the El Paso County population is 737,031.) "It has been a real challenge to bring people into the process; 94 people registered for the March 31 online meeting; 44 attended," Gebhart said.

Houseal said three main components are included in the plan: key areas of the county from a land-use perspective, areas of change and place types (data-driven ways to define and visualize the many aspects of land use-transportation interactions embodied in land use plans).

The 10 key areas in the county were identified as geographically specific, he said. "No matter what happens in or adjacent to those areas, they will have an influence on that growth, planning and development looks like going forward," Houseal said. Examples include military installations, potential areas for annexation, enclaves or near enclaves, small towns and rural communities, Fountain Creek Watershed Flood Control & Greenway District, forested areas, Pikes Peak influence area, Tri-Lakes area, Colorado Springs Airport and uncommon natural resources.

Five key areas of change were identified in the plan. Houseal said even with the anticipated growth of 250,000 more people in El Paso County over the next 25 years, 90% of the county will see little to no change. He said the rest of the land area includes 14% protected/conservation areas, 71% undeveloped areas, 6% current development with little change, 9% new development and 1% transition areas.

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Is the water there, really?

By Leslie Sheley

The Black Squirrel alluvial aquifer extends from Black Forest to just south of Ellicott. The east to west boundaries coincide with the water shed boundaries of Black Squirrel Creek. How much water is left in the aquifer is the big question.

Mike Wireman is the president of Granite Ridge Groundwater LLC in Denver and a hydrogeologist consultant for the Upper Black Squirrel Creek Ground Water Management District. He said he advises them on issues such as groundwater resources, water rights, state laws and more.

Wireman said the Black Squirrel alluvial aquifer has continually been the subject of hydrogeology research. "The Colorado Geological Survey and the U.S. Geological Survey have done a lot of work there, so they know that aquifer very well," Wireman said.

sists of four aquifers: the Dawson, Denver, Arapahoe and Laramie-Fox Hills. The law that governs the use of that water, Senate Bill 5, regulates how much water can be taken out of each of those aquifers, he said. "That's called determination of water rights," Wireman said.

"The second issue is the state is not monitoring the bedrock aquifers in an adequate way to determine if the laws and regulations they have in place are working. We don't know if the water being used is going to dry up those aquifers in 20 years, instead of 100 or 300 years."

Colorado passed a regulation in 2018 called the Aquifer Storage-and-Recovery Plan (HB18-1199). He said this means any of the metropolitan districts can bring water from another source, store it in the alluvial aquifer

time. They measure not just water levels, but water quality.

Jim Nikkel, general manager of Meridian Service Metropolitan District, said they have water rights to the four aquifers; however, they don't take water from all four.

He said at present there are about 2,600 residences in their metropolitan district, which covers an area of about 4 square miles. Nikkel said the amount of water used varies by household.

Water conservation is encouraged and discussed in their newsletters and website. He said what has been most effective is their multi-tiered system; the more water used, the more one pays for that water. "It's that economic hit to the pocketbook that gets people's attention the most," he said.

"Whether you get your water from groundwater or surface water, water is a precious resource; and it's something we should always be cognizant of our use of it."

Dave Doran, board of director president for the Upper Black Squirrel Creek Ground Water Management District, said one of their biggest concerns is inadequate monitoring of the water quality. "We wanted a baseline to make sure there wasn't contamination to some of the most pristine water in the state," Doran said.

In 2009, they were able to put a water quality study in place; the U.S. Geological Survey has been conducting those studies. "They test for all sorts of different constituents; some being very expensive to test for and sometimes controversial, but they test the gamut of what they believe might be a concern in the future," Doran said.

He said to move forward with new development, the state engineer office must provide a water sufficiency report. "For about 20 years, the state has added a disclaimer at the bottom of the letter that says they don't advise using the Denver basin water and recommend finding a renewable source of water," Doran said. "So if the state is not guaranteeing the water will last 100 years, how can the county calculate it to last 300 years?"

Doran said the USGS is also studying the water levels of the Denver basin aquifers. Their impetus for the study is the 300-year county rule. "So far all of those levels have been on paper; we want real scientific data," he said.

"The state is not monitoring the bedrock aquifers in an adequate way to determine if the laws and regulations they have in place are working. We don't know if the water being used is going to dry up those aquifers in 20 years, instead of 100 or 300 years."

— Mike Wireman

"They know its boundaries, thickness and roughly how much water is in it."

Around the 1990s, people began to realize they were taking too much water out of the aquifer, he said. The Colorado Ground Water Commission and the Black Squirrel Ground Water Management District put a number of regulations in place to limit the amount being taken out of the wells. "There's still a lot of water, but the amount that was used from the 1960s to the 90s, most of that for sod farms, is gone for good," Wireman said.

Regulations have helped, but at present there are two issues that continue to add to the problem, he said. One is water sources for new development. Meridian Service Metropolitan District, Woodman Hills Metro District and Cherokee Metropolitan District have rights to take water out of the aquifer. Wireman said all the water in the aquifer is claimed, which means any new development needs to find water elsewhere.

Underlying the alluvial aquifer is the Denver Basin aquifer system, which con-

and take it out as needed, instead of building a reservoir. "That makes some sense; you don't have to build a reservoir, you don't have to deal with evaporation problems," Wireman said. "What they're ignoring, and we hydrogeologists have told them many times, is the chemistry of the water that you're bringing in is likely to be very different from the chemistry of the water in that aquifer." He said that means there is a risk of a chemical reaction between the two waters because of incompatibility.

"The Upper Black Squirrel Creek Ground Water Management District has taken matters into their own hands to deal with all the water issues," Wireman said. They hired the U.S. Geological Survey to measure water levels for the next few years; eventually that monitoring will be turned over to the management district. Wireman said he also designed a program to monitor 30 bedrock wells within the Black Squirrel management district starting this summer; plus, they have been monitoring 50 other wells in the alluvial aquifer for some

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