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# Douglas named 2nd most livable

## Study ranks counties in Rocky Mountain region

By Alex C. Pasquarello

Douglas County — a reflection of a new West that trades rugged ranches for convenient suburbia — is one of the most livable metropolitan counties in the Rocky Mountain region. The county scored an A- plus and was ranked as the second most livable metropolitan county in an eight-state region on Colorado College's first "State of the Rockies Report Card".

- "I'm pleased, but not surprised," Douglas County Commissioner Jim Sullivan said. "This is one of the loveliest places to live, and we made sure it stayed that way by allowing good residential and business growth while preserving open space. It makes Douglas County a place where you can live, work, and play."

Including Douglas County, Colorado counties ranked as the top four most livable in the West. Gilpin County came first, followed by Douglas, El Paso, and Larimer.

The report by the Colorado Springs school used census data from the last three decades to examine unemployment, poverty rates, income distribution, small-business growth, education and the environment in each of 280 counties in Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Idaho and Montana. Counties were divided into metropolitan, metropolitan, and rural categories, depending on population distribution. "The effects of rapid growth and shifting demographics were the major themes examined by

the study," said Patrick Holmes, the study's program coordinator.

The Rocky Mountain region has become the fastest-growing in the country, experiencing a 119 percent growth rate in the last 30 years, the study found.

Such growth has created enormous gaps in income levels as booming metropolitan areas drain rural communities of resources, investment and development, Holmes said.

It also endangers open space and recreation areas, amenities that are principal drivers of economic and demographic growth in the Rockies, the study showed.

"This is our first attempt at analyzing which Western communities are dealing effectively with the changes," Holmes said. "We want to see what it means to be winning in a region faced with the numerous challenges of growth."

Douglas County is one of the communities coming out on top.

With a population nearing 176,000, Douglas County experienced 191 percent growth between 1990 and 2000, according to census statistics. During that time, 67 percent of the county's housing units were built.

"From a percentage basis, the growth does look huge," said Betty Allen, Douglas County's assistant director of community development. "But in real numbers, the growth has been manageable compared with that experienced in other Western states."

With the lowest poverty and unemployment rates of any of the region's metropolitan counties— at 1.9 and 1.4 percent, respectively — Douglas County also has attracted a new generation of white-collar Westerners to its communities.

Almost 52 percent of county residents older than 25 have bachelor's degrees or higher, the study found.

"We're lucky to have a highly-educated, employed workforce~? Allen said. "But to some degree, we expect that type of growth based on Douglas County's location between Colorado Springs and Denver, two of the largest employment centers in the state."

Small-business growth is also healthy at 4.3 percent.

Such Douglas County businesses are growing especially fast in Castle Rock, said Meme Martin, executive director of the Castle Rock Economic Development Council.

"Small-business growth is important in our community because it provides diversity in the jobs available," Martin said. "These businesses also have lots of room to grow, and we expect small business growth in Castle Rock will continue to produce more jobs for Douglas County."

And despite rapid growth, the county maintained the second-highest natural amenity score, earning a 7 out of an 8-point scale. The U.S. Department of Agriculture measures natural amenities based on favorable climate, topographic

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variation, open land, and high availability of water.

Douglas County also was found to be the second-most healthy metropolitan county in which to live and work based on the low amounts of per-capita pounds of toxic chemicals released, a low self-rated proportion of adults in poor to fair health, and a high average life expectancy~

Douglas County has worked diligently to maintain its natural beauty, Allen said.

"Parks, open space and recreation opportunities are priorities for community planning," she said. "The county has worked particularly hard to protect its pristine riparian corridors and open views."

Despite the West's rugged land, the study found the Rocky Mountain region's growth has shattered the cowboy myths of the American West, Holmes said.

"Douglas County is one of the areas that exemplifies a new West."

Most Westerners now prefer suburban communities over ranches, ride in SUVs rather than on horse- back and rely on big box chain stores in lieu of local businesses. Only 1.7 percent of 'Westerners earn their living off the land, the study found.

Colorado is a prime example, converting farmland into housing developments faster than any other state studied.

"In Colorado, sprawl gobbles up 10 acres an hour," said Holmes.

But the West remains a vast region. The study found that only 1.4 percent of the region's land has been devoted to urban development.

Colorado College expects its State of the Rockies Report Card and Conference to be an ongoing

study of the, effects of growth on the eight-state Rocky Mountain region.

"A whole new population of Westerners have a stake in the region now," Holmes said. "All the 'Nest's inhabitants can make better decision~ on growth if they understand all its effects."

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