

# 2010 Colorado Planning & Management Region Report

## Region 14 – Huerfano and Las Animas Counties

### Introduction

Region 14 includes the counties of Huerfano and Las Animas. Las Animas County is located at the southernmost border of Colorado and New Mexico with Huerfano County located north of Trinidad.

Las Animas County is the largest county in the state and the fifth largest in the nation with 4,772 square miles; Trinidad is the county seat. At 6,025 feet in elevation, 300 days of sunshine and the charming brick streets the area is very welcoming to visitors and retirees. Travelers from the south along the I-25 corridor get their first glimpse of “Colorful Colorado” with the Sangre de Cristo Mountain range meaning “Blood of Christ” to the west and the Comanche Grasslands to the east. The area boasts 3 lakes that provide excellent fishing, water activities, camp sites and RV accommodations. Informational programs include bird watching, flora and fauna identification and other educational programs to include youth involvement. The Trinidad Lake State Park amphitheatre provides a venue for demonstrations of horno cooking, a form of adobe oven, bringing the Spanish cooking tradition incorporated into southwest cooking today. The area is also known for the famous Town Marshall, Bat Masterson, petroglyphs, dinosaur tracks and artifacts from Native American communities. The nationally recognized Santa Fe Trail from Missouri to New Mexico was a well established trail conveying thousands to the west and traveled directly through Trinidad. The nationally award winning Cougar Canyon Golf Resort Community and the Trinidad Municipal Golf Course provides challenges to golf enthusiasts across the country. The Southern Colorado Repertory Theatre, winner of four Outer Critics Circle Awards, continues to provide entertainment to thousands from Denver to New Mexico with high quality thespians.

Huerfano County is located approximately 37 miles north of Trinidad along the I-25 corridor. The county is 1,591 square miles; Walsenburg is the county seat. Multiple lakes and streams and the aspen lined roads offer a picturesque trip along State Hwy. 12 a.k.a. “The Scenic Highway of Legends”. The notable Huajatolla Peaks or Spanish Peaks, meaning “Breasts of the Earth” are visible from either Hwy. 12 or I-25 corridor between Huerfano and Las Animas Counties. The Utes, Navajos, Jicarilla Apaches and Comanches believed this is where Mankind first emerged from the womb of the Earth into their version of the Garden of Eden.

### Jobs & the Economy

In Huerfano and Las Animas the national decline in market prices for coal bed methane gas have affected local exploration and production considerably, with a large number of oil and gas employees either relocated out of the area or

laid off. Many ancillary businesses supporting the industry have also been affected; either closing or relocating. As of August, 2010 Las Animas County’s unemployment rate was 8.3% however, this does not accurately reflect the conditions due to the large population relocating out of the area.

The April 2, 2010 closing of the Huerfano County Correctional Facility (HCCF) was detrimental to the county. The 2010 Census count occurred after the closing of HCCF. The 700 inmates and 188 employees not counted will result in the loss of tens of thousands of Federal and State dollars until the 2020 Census. Walsenburg could lose up to \$300,000 a year because of lost utilities, taxes and fees paid by the prison, the City Administrator reported. As of August, 2010 Huerfano County reported a 10.2% unemployment rate.

The New Elk Mine has commenced operations on the western portion of Las Animas County. Cline Mining Corporation, a Toronto based company, has worked diligently to meet the permitting requirements over the past few years. It is anticipated that 500,000 tons of coal will be produced and trucked annually within the first stage. By the third year re-installing the rail system will increase production to plant design capacity of 3 million tons a year. The opening of the mine will improve the current unemployment numbers and economic stability of the area.

### Housing

New home starts are virtually non-existent within the region. Lack of employment opportunities and the cyclic patterns of boom and bust in the oil and gas industry have stymied potential growth trends. Coal Bed Methane value declined nationally, therefore it was not economically feasible to continue to absorb new exploration costs. The largest impact in foreclosures was realized in 2009 due to the industry slow down.

### Foreclosure Filings – Region 14

| County       | 2008       | 2009       | 2010<br>Q1 & Q2 |
|--------------|------------|------------|-----------------|
| Huerfano     | 52         | 55         | 20              |
| Las Animas   | 70         | 104        | 51              |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>122</b> | <b>159</b> | <b>71</b>       |

Source: Colorado Dept. of Local Affairs – Division of Housing

### Agriculture

Ranching is still a predominate activity within the county. Although there is some agriculture in the region it is supportive of the ranching industry; crops are typically alfalfa or corn for livestock feed.

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### Other

Heritage tourism is important in Las Animas and Huerfano Counties, with Trinidad, Walsenburg and La Veta with their rich histories revolving around coal mining and the Santa Fe Trail. There has been an increased focal point on tourism focusing on arts and music in both counties. The Trinidadio Blues Festival is a major draw for Trinidad each August, as is Huerfano's Annual Celtic Festival in late September.

### Clean Energy

Huerfano and Las Animas Counties have approved multiple site locations for wind farms. Additional property owners are in the process of obtaining the proper permits for new wind farms in eastern Las Animas County. The recent hiring of a Community Energy Coordinator provides educational support with energy programs and funding opportunities to expand bi-county interest in Clean Energy.

### Multi-modal Transit Center

The collaboration between the City of Trinidad, the South Central Council of Governments (SCCOG), Colorado Department of Transportation, Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway, Greyhound Bus Lines and Amtrak has resulted in the concept of a centrally located transportation hub. The center will assist travelers via intercity bus, route bus and rail to anywhere in the United States. It is anticipated the construction of the center will begin in 2011.

Additionally the SCCOG Transit Department has expanded local bus service to include medical transportation from Trinidad and Walsenburg to Pueblo for residents requiring specialized medical care. The transportation cost is very affordable and qualifying patients receive financial assistance from Medicare.