

2012 Colorado Planning & Management Region Report

Region 4 – El Paso, Park and Teller Counties

INTRODUCTION

Region 4 consists of three counties; El Paso, Park, and Teller. Together, El Paso and Teller Counties comprise the Colorado Springs Metropolitan Statistical Area while Park County is the largest county by area in the Denver Metropolitan Statistical Area. Park County is the 17th most extensive county in the State of Colorado and is the geographic center of the state. Teller County is the 22nd most populous of the 64 counties in the State of Colorado and contains 557 square miles of land and 2 square miles of water. El Paso County contains slightly more than twice the area of the state of Rhode Island and has the largest population of any county in Colorado. It is the 95th most populous county in the United States and the only county in Colorado in the top 100 for highest population.

The region experienced double-digit population growth between 2000 and 2011. El Paso, the largest county, experienced the largest share of growth.

County	Census 2000	July 2011	% Change
El Paso	516,929	637,302	23.29%
Park	14,523	16,079	10.71%
Teller	20,555	23,378	13.73%
Colorado	4,301,261	5,118,526	19.00%

Source: State Demography Office

JOBS & THE ECONOMY

The economy of the region is primarily driven by the military and defense spending. The four largest employers in Region 4 are military bases. Tourism (service), retail, and the high-tech sector are the three largest economic sectors in the region. The region has seen a decline in the economy due in part to the loss of nearly 25,000 primary jobs. Many of these jobs are being replaced with lower income military and service jobs. The regional rate of productivity is declining. The employment base is shrinking. While the unemployment rates in Teller and Park County are stabilizing, El Paso County has an unemployment rate at a two year high and the seasonally adjusted workforce is smaller than it has been since October 2003. Regional payrolls have declined by the biggest percentage in 2½ years, hitting the lowest level in nearly eight years. In response to these challenges, the Colorado Springs Economic Development Corporation and Greater Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce have merged into the Colorado Springs Regional Business Alliance to bring a robust unified approach to growing the region's economy.

The outdoor recreation and a rural lifestyle in Park County are still attractive to second-home buyers. Park County's employment, therefore, is dominated by the services and construction sectors, both of which are influenced by the second home building market and providing services to the individuals buying these homes. Teller County receives most of its income through gaming, tourist accommodation and food services, all part of the services economic sectors that have been very hard hit by the recession and slow recovery.

In El Paso County, the presence of the military creates almost as many jobs for civilians as it does for its active duty personnel. As such, defense jobs place a close third behind service and retail in El Paso County and the region. Although the military component has provided a stabilizing influence for the

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region during economic boom and bust cycles affecting other industry segments, the unemployment rate is still very high. However, with approximately one-third of the regional economy directly dependent upon federal funds means that the Pikes Peak region is especially vulnerable to the looming threat of “sequestration”.

The challenges facing the region include reduced tax collections to support government funding which have directly resulted in cutbacks in local services. The loss of the gaming impact fees has had a significant impact on Teller County.

HOUSING

It appears that the housing market has begun to stabilize and consumer willingness to purchase is increasing. The amount of inventory has improved (declined) and, although the number of homes for sale has been increasing, it is still at much lower levels than 2011. As long as the inventory levels remain at these levels (4 to 5 month supply) and sales remain steady, the market will continue to improve. Last year, Park County had the second highest and Teller County had the ninth highest foreclosure rates in the state. Since then both have seen the rate cut in half, approaching 2006 levels. During the same six-month period El Paso County has reduced the foreclosure rate approximately 20%, similar to the rest of the state. This means that there have been approximately 1,000 home foreclosures. The vacancy rates in rental units in Colorado Springs have dropped, and several new large multi-unit complexes have been developed. Providing temporary housing for the approximately 350 families that lost their homes and other families that have been displaced by the Waldo Canyon fire has further reduced both the number of rental and for sale houses in Colorado Springs. The region lacks affordable housing for low-income and elderly populations. Housing costs that exceed 30% of household income have traditionally been viewed as a housing affordability problem. In the region, 47% of the area’s renting population are paying 30% or more for housing costs. In the City of Colorado Springs, approximately 16,000 households pay 50% or more of their income toward housing, which represents 22% of all households in the city.

AGRICULTURE

Due to the challenging terrain in the Pikes Peak Region, agriculture consists primarily of limited grazing and hay production. While the number of farms has increased in recent years, the total acreage of the farms has decreased. In addition to land and water problems, farmers find it difficult to keep prices competitive while operating costs rise. To compensate for rising production prices, many small farmers have attempted to capitalize on the market for “organic-grown” produce.

CLEAN ENERGY

Momentum for investing in renewable and clean energy is gaining in the Pikes Peak region. Many organizations, businesses and individuals are pushing for more renewable energy and efficiency technologies for residential, commercial, and community buildings. Such projects will provide more

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stable and lower cost energy for citizens while contributing to the economic development in the region by creating new business and job opportunities.

The City of Colorado Springs City Council, acting as the Board of Directors for Colorado Springs Utilities, unanimously approved a new rate structure that will allow community solar gardens in which residents buy a share of a large solar project rather than installing their own panels. This allows for any residential or educational institution, within the Colorado Springs Utilities territory, to own solar panels, produce clean energy and reap the benefits on their electric bills regardless of income level. The first community garden solar array consists of 2,500 solar panels on 2 1/2 acres. It is the largest project of its kind in the country and sold out in less than one year. Additional solar garden cooperatives are underway in the region, including a 43-acre brownfield site. The Templeton Gap Landfill is currently being converted into a renewable energy park that will deliver power to over 250 Colorado Springs Utilities customers.

Colorado Springs currently relies primarily on coal, providing close to 70% of the city's electricity. While there have been advances in cleaner coal technology, heated debate is currently underway as to the fate of the Martin Drake coal-fired power plant located in downtown Colorado Springs. Included in these discussions are prospects of retiring the plant or converting it to gas. At stake is providing the cheapest power possible vs. a greener and cleaner city sky. Upgrading the plant will cost around \$350 million. Even with a new emissions-scrubbing technology that would save close to \$100 million, the plant will probably have to be retired in a decade. A study is being conducted on the plant's fate, taking into consideration new technologies and economic development. The region's utility companies are also making strides to diversify their energy portfolios to include clean and renewable energy sources. Fountain Utilities, serving an area 6-miles south of Colorado Springs, has 20% of its electricity portfolio from renewable sources and is incorporating smart grid technologies as a part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Colorado Springs Utilities (CSU), a municipally-owned utility company serving over 600,000 metered customers, has goals of generate 20% renewable generation by 2020, cutting average electric consumption by 10% and maintaining a 20% cost advantage over nearby utilities. CSU plans to achieve this proposed renewable energy goal with 20 megawatts (MW) of woody biomass (wood pulp from beetle-kill pine), 35.4 MW of hydroelectric, increased solar and wind generation and other potential renewable sources and technologies.

MILITARY

The Army announced that Fort Carson will be the duty station to a new 2,600 person, 115 helicopter aviation brigade. The brigade would be formed at Fort Carson in 2013 and would also bring a large number of civilian jobs because the helicopter unit would require contractors for aircraft maintenance, high-tech weapons and training simulators. All the construction to accommodate the brigade is expected to take four years and cost a total of about \$730 million. The first on-post construction has begun with funding of the \$11 million aviation control tower, a \$45 million aircraft hangar, and \$98 million to build barracks for the brigade.

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The Department of Veterans Affairs has approved the construction of a new clinic to expand services to the increasing number of veterans in the Colorado Springs area. The clinic will replace two existing clinics and be able to serve up to 6,000 additional veterans beginning in 2014. The clinic construction will cost about \$10,000,000 and the facility will be rented by the Department of Veterans affairs for about \$3,000,000 a year.

WALDO CANYON FIRE

The Waldo Canyon wildfire began burning on June 23 and was declared officially contained July 10. The fire forced the evacuation of more than 32,000 people, consumed 18,247 acres, destroyed 346 homes, killed two people and was part of Colorado's [worst wildfire season in a decade](#). How does the fire rank nationally? At the end of September the total cost of fighting the fire and rehabilitating the land was over \$21 million. The destroyed homes were valued at more than \$110 million but this does not include the repair cost of damaged homes, loss of possessions, displacement costs or rebuilding destroyed home at current costs. Total losses from the fire exceed \$350 million. The impact of this fire was immediate; the City of Colorado Springs' sales tax report for July showed that the Lodger's and Automobile Rental Tax collections were down 16.41%, and that includes some support from the families that had lost or had damaged houses staying in hotels. The total loss to small businesses has been estimated to be approximately \$9 million. The Colorado Springs Convention and Visitors Bureau was recently awarded two grants in response to the fire — one from the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration for \$100,000 and one from the Colorado Tourism Office for \$10,000 to increase tourism and promote the region.