

Chaffee County, CO Case Study

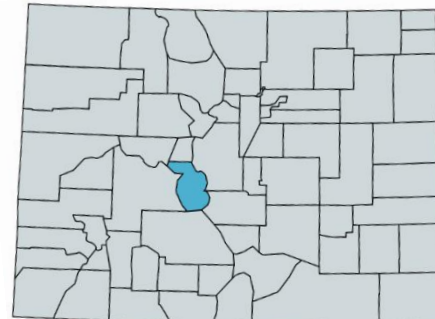
A thoughtful, locally-driven vision 10 years in the making

Essential outcome: \$1.1 million per year in voter-approved funding dedicated to improve forest health, preserve working ranches and farms, and provide greater stewardship for public recreation lands.

Ballot measure snapshot:

- November 6, 2018 General Election
- 15,000 registered voters; three incorporated municipalities (Salida, Buena Vista, Poncha Springs)
- Vote YES for protecting forests, waters and working lands campaign
- ¼-cent sales tax, in perpetuity
- \$1.1 million revenue in first year of collection (2019)
- Purposes devoted: At least 25% to improve forest health, at least 25% to preserve working ranches/farms, at least 5% to provide greater stewardship for public recreation lands
- 52% passage by voters
- The Trust for Public Land services provided: feasibility research, public opinion polling, program recommendations, ballot language construction, campaign organization and support

Map of Chaffee County within Colorado



Source: mapchart.net

Elected Leadership – *“The conversation about a conservation funding measure in Chaffee County goes back at least 10 years. But unlike the more traditional measures passed by voters in many other communities, the interrelated challenges we face here in Chaffee County demand a more integrated response. That became clear to me during my campaign, and subsequently through the engagement of over 1,500 citizens who participated in the Envision Chaffee County process.... The state demographer says we should anticipate another 4,000 people moving into our county by 2030. That’s a lot of people. It will mean more change. Are we prepared? Measure 1A provides funding to meet that growth by strengthening our forests and protecting the community from severe wildfire, conserving our rural lands and the many benefits they provide like clean water, wildlife habitat and scenic vistas, and sustainably managing outdoor recreation.”* **Commissioner Greg Felt**

“Voters will consider County Ballot Issue 1A on Nov. 6 for funding that will help sustain the lifeblood of the special natural resources of Chaffee County. As with any economic base, you have to nurture it to keep it alive and well. This measure will increase the county sales tax by 0.25 percent to raise funding to create direct and grant match money for our forests, waters and working lands. I think this is an investment well worth making and why I voted to refer it to the ballot for passage.” **Commissioner Dave Potts**

“Catastrophic wildfire will be destructive on its own but will likely cause flash floods, debris flows, mudslides and other consequences as with the Arkansas River below Salida, stemming from the 2016 Hayden Pass Fire. I urge you to vote Yes on County Ballot Issue 1A to help improve community fire resilience and protect our water supplies from the potential effects of a severe fire.” **Commissioner Keith Baker**

Background – Chaffee County is located in southwest Colorado along the eastern slope of the Continental Divide in a mountain valley with elevations that range from 7,000 feet to over 14,000 feet. Surrounded by high mountain peaks, this area is graced with alpine rivers and streams, expanses of ranch land and meadows, and landscapes that vary from rolling piñon and juniper forests to rugged wilderness. The Arkansas River runs through the county from north to south and is one of the defining features of the valley both physically and culturally.

This county is home to world-class fly-fishing, resort and back-country skiing, generational ranches that provide a rural vibe with drop-dead vistas, and Brown’s Canyon, the most rafted stretch of whitewater in the world.

With so much at stake to conserve, county residents and elected officials had long been interested in having the necessary local funding at their fingertips to secure their destiny, especially as Chaffee County became an outdoor recreation destination for millennials and retirees.

In 2008, The Trust for Public Land was invited in to conduct feasibility research and assess voter support for creating dedicated county funding. At that time, sufficient support (62 percent) was found for protecting working lands and waters, but the County stepped aside to allow several school measures to advance to the ballot instead. As the recession deepened, by the time we next tested the waters for electoral support, voters had cooled in their enthusiasm for creating conservation funding, and we recommended postponement.

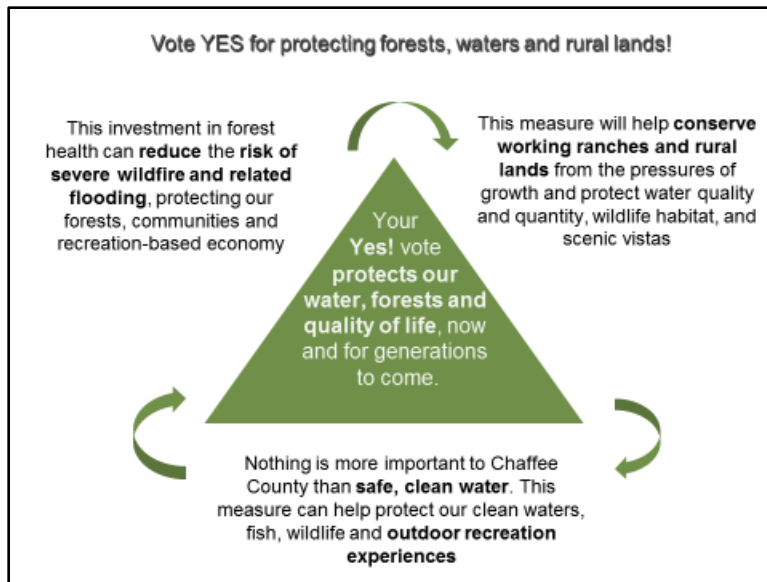
Then in 2016, with local foundation support and renewed energy, county leaders started the Envision Chaffee process which was an 18-month public outreach effort to learn directly from residents what mattered to them to ensure the future of the Chaffee County they had come to know and love. One outcome of that community process was to seek dedicated conservation funding.

Polling & Measure Design – The Trust for Public Land became an official advisor to the County Board of Commissioners again in the spring of 2018. Voter support for conservation funding was assessed by conducting feasibility research and a public opinion poll. Favorable poll results (58 percent support for a proposed sales tax measure, which increased to 62 percent with more information) were followed by a unanimous vote of the three-member Board of Commissioners to place a measure on the November ballot.

Working with the County to design ballot language that reflected voter priorities, final ballot language incorporated funding for improving forest health, preserving working ranches and farms, and providing greater stewardship for public recreation lands.

The ¼-cent sales tax (2 ½-cents on a \$10 purchase) is projected to raise over \$1.1 million/year in its first year of collection (2019) and is estimated to cost the average Chaffee County household \$40/year or about \$3.35/month. Importantly, only 30 percent of the sales tax revenue is generated by local resident households, with 70 percent coming from visitors to Chaffee County, thereby sharing the cost of conserving the essence of why people are visiting Chaffee in the first place.

Campaign Organization & Strategy – The campaign developed messaging that accurately described the benefits of the measure and resonated with voters as determined from the public opinion survey and shown below in the message triangle.



There was a strong earned media focus that adhered to this messaging and came from a range of voices throughout the county: firefighters, outdoor businesses, homeowners in the wildland-urban interface (WUI), water purveyors, ranchers, and all three of the County Commissioners. Both letters-to-the-editor and op-ed columns were vehicles for getting out this message.

Solid, early outreach to civic organizations proved beneficial to provide presentations and answer questions. A basic FAQ sheet and simple handout were basic collateral distributed. A compelling website hosted links to the earned media letters and columns as they were printed as well as basic information about Measure 1A. www.thisschaffee.org

Three waves of professionally developed direct mail went to targeted likely voters in the mid-term 2018 General Election at a total cost under \$14,000. A 60-second radio spot was narrated by County Commissioner Potts and produced with a modest local radio station ad buy. A modest newspaper ad buy was also executed. The total campaign budget was just under \$30,000.

Key Factors & Lessons Learned – As always, but perhaps especially in a small, rural county like Chaffee, elected official support is crucial. The vision and leadership from all three County Commissioners was very important. Given the 52 percent passage by voters, every voice was valued and it was a key factor that all three of the Commissioners heartily endorsed Measure 1A. There is no room for a strong elected “No” voice in a small echo chamber.

Perseverance paid off. Over the ten years since conservation funding was first contemplated, the need for funding only increased. The potential benefits also changed from sole protection of working ranches and farms to sharing funding to protect forest health. These were valuable adjustments that reflected the changing times.

The grassroots public outreach process of Envision Chaffee also was vital in getting the public to understand and articulate what was at stake to safeguard the county’s future quality of life. Envision Chaffee was led by a dedicated and visionary woman who was president of the Central Colorado Conservancy, instrumental as the campaign coordinator, and went on to be honored as the local Chamber of Commerce’s Woman of the Year.

Significance of Chaffee County’s Measure 1A to Forest Health, Reduction of Catastrophic Wildfire, and a Changing Climate – This ballot measure was an important demonstration showing that rural voters are willing to devote local taxpayer dollars to improving the health and resilience of a federal forest in order to prevent and manage the risk of wildfire. Indeed, the risk of wildfire was considered a top threat and serious problem facing Chaffee County and a prime driver of why voters wanted to support new conservation funding.

In a county comprised of 80 percent public lands, where the San Isabel National Forest dominates the landscape voters believed they must take control of their own destiny and be ready to pay for thinning and controlled burns to be sure backyard forests are healthy and resistant to wildfire. The term “climate change” was not needed to bring the case to voters, and in fact, focusing on the threats and impacts of a changing climate was sufficient to secure voter support for new conservation funds.

Decades of “over-management” of forests have made County residents wiser to management practices that can reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire so that mega-fires over 100,000 acres do not become the new normal. Improving forest health will bring fewer fires and will:

- protect air quality
- protect homes and businesses
- prevent human death
- prevent contamination to drinking water
- preserve outdoor recreation opportunities
- protect fish and wildlife habitat
- preserve trees that remove and store carbon pollution
- save taxpayer money otherwise spent on disaster clean-up

Fewer, smaller wildfires enable forests and forest soils to regain and sustain their health, sequester and store carbon pollution, and prevent the major release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere which is produced by severe wildfire. Indeed, this local measure – and precious local taxpayer dollars – will address climate change impacts without ever so stating.