



PRESERVING OUR HERITAGE,
DESIGNING OUR FUTURE

A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR
SAGUACHE COUNTY

SCSEED

Saguache County

Sustainable Environment & Economic Development



Saguache County
Sustainable Environment and Economic Development
P. O. Box 372 • Saguache, CO 81149

OUR PURPOSE:

*To work together as a community
to develop a sustainable economy
that builds on our existing strengths,
contributes to a strong integrated community,
and protects the environment, rural lifestyle,
and character of Saguache County.*

Steering Committee Members

Vickie Ford, Co-Chair, Sunny Valley Farms
Ed Nielsen, Co-Chair, Flying X Cattle
Cathy Baxter, Mountain Valley Lumber
Jim Jaminet, Saguache Town Board
Maria Diaz, Center Chamber of Commerce
Nancy Warner, The Nature Conservancy
Linda Joseph, Manitou Institute
Joanna Dokson, Atalanta Association
Dennis Neuhaus, Crestone-Moffat Business Association
Margaret Finnerty, Saguache County Tourism Board

Rapid Assessment Workgroup Leaders

Amber Shook, Chair Community Assessment
Liza Marron, Chair Economic Assessment
Peggy Godfrey and Kate Booth-Doyle, Co-Chairs Environmental Assessment

Action Plan Workgroup Leaders

Maria Diaz, Strategy #1
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ScSEED Program Consultants:

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Preserving Our Heritage, Designing Our Future: A Strategic Plan for Saguache County is the product of two years of hard work by more than 200 local citizens and their elected officials through a citizen-led group named ScSEED: Saguache County Sustainable Environment & Economic Development.



Moonlight Reflections

*I drive in velvet blackness on an early-April night
Clouds break up and drift apart, suddenly there's light.
Silver threads and pools reflecting the brightness of a moon
Our second greatest resource will be reinvested soon.
Meadows drink the liquid, farmland soaks from pivot shower
Sun and earth combine their efforts, spring is gaining power.
Cow herds double numbers, flocks of sheep better yet
Wildlife multiplies in turn, just watch the crops we get!
High in the San Luis Valley we're willing to take a chance
To bring together the elements for Nature's generous dance.
Oh, yes, I'll bet you're wondering if water is not most dear,
What's our greatest asset?? It's the people living here!!*

Peggy Godfrey



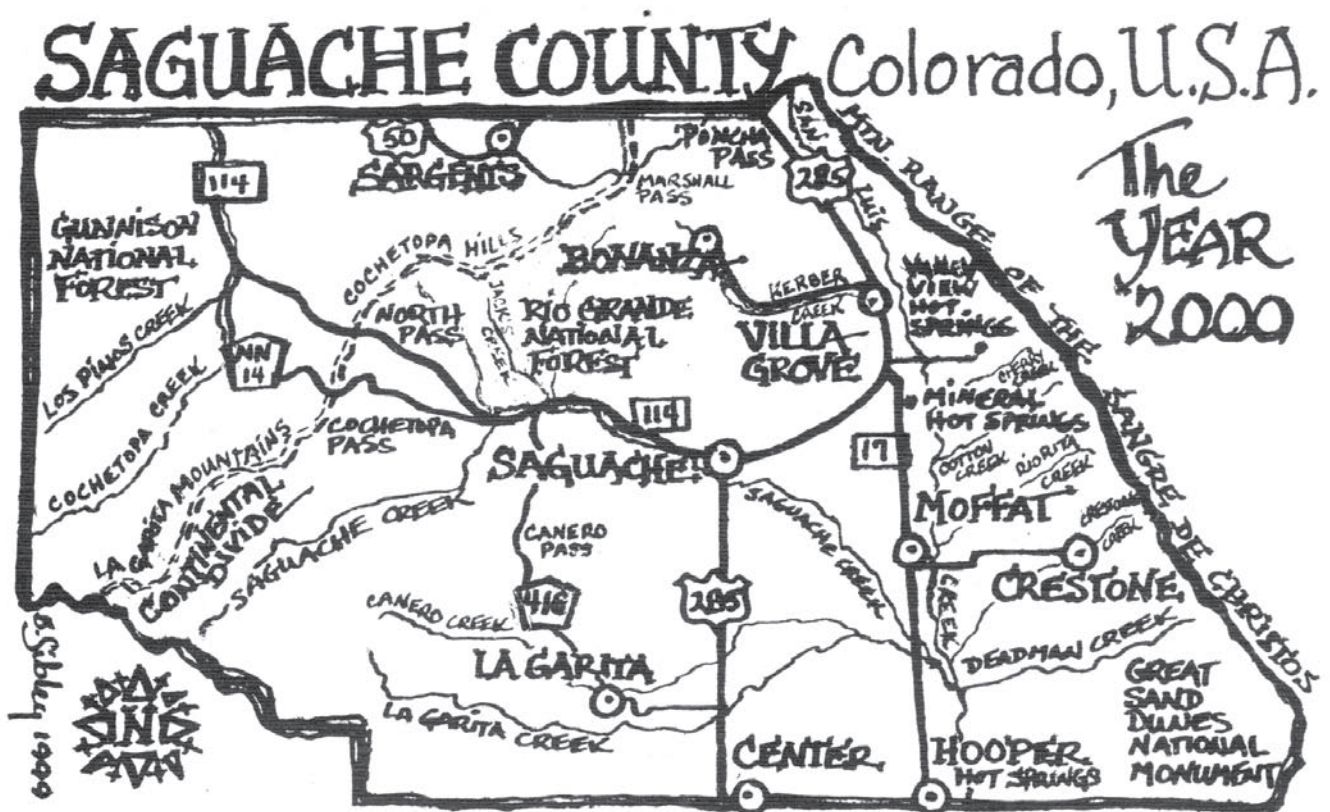
INTRODUCTION

The strategic plan offers a vision and concrete action steps to help Saguache County strengthen its economy, protect its environment and meet pressing community needs. The plan provides an understanding of the social, economic and environmental conditions in Saguache County and how these are likely to change in the coming years. It offers objectives for improving these conditions without putting social, economic and environmental goals in conflict with one another.

While the community received assistance from some outside consultants, the plan is based entirely upon the knowledge and expertise of Saguache County residents, who selected and pursued the priorities for action.

Preserving Our Heritage, Designing Our Future: A Strategic Plan for Saguache County is being presented to the community as a "living" document. The response of Saguache County residents is vital to the success of the strategic plan.

For more information, to make comments, or to get involved in an action for the future, contact ScSEED, phone/fax: 655-2775, or any of the citizens listed in this report.



ooo WITH NINE TOWNS, AND NOT ONE TRAFFIC LIGHT!

Getting Started

In 1997, more than 30 citizen leaders from Saguache County attended a one-day workshop on compatible economic development sponsored by the San Luis Valley Program of The Nature Conservancy and the Center for Compatible Economic Development (CCED). A distinct operating unit of The Nature Conservancy based in Leesburg, Virginia, CCED works with communities to develop businesses, products, and land uses that protect ecosystems, enhance local economies, and meet community needs.

The training session offered a short course on CCED's Pathways: Building A Local Initiative For Compatible Economic Development. With this inspiration, several Saguache County residents later took the Pathways concept to the community to determine if there was interest in pursuing this type of strategic planning process. Backed by the expressed enthusiasm and commitment of diverse community members, this small group of Saguache County citizens decided in December, 1997 to pursue the Pathways process and won one of four, nation-wide CCED fellowships to support their work. The fellowship was made possible through the generous support of the Ford Foundation to The Nature Conservancy's Center for Compatible Economic Development.



The Pathways Steps

The ScSEED effort to engage Saguache County residents in creating a strategic plan for compatible development involved several distinct steps, based on CCED's Pathways approach. While volunteer workgroups were formed to conduct the assessments and draft the plans for action, the vision and strategies for the future of Saguache County were made in community-wide forums open to all.

In completing Pathways, Saguache County citizens:

- Organized a broadly-based group that represents many community interests in Saguache County.
- Completed rapid assessments of the Saguache County community, economy and environment.
- Determined the critical threats and special strengths of Saguache County.
- Created a vision for the future of Saguache County.
- Selected strategies to address the threats, build on the strengths, and achieve the vision.
- Wrote action plans for the primary strategies selected by the community.
- Published the plan.

Now we need your help to make the plan happen!

A working group of Saguache County residents met several times over the course of two months to identify community character, prepare a short community history, gauge the community's capacity for

RAPID COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

action, and determine the threats to the community. The results of this work were presented at two subsequent community forums.

Key Elements of the Community

- Natural beauty and features
- Preservation of open space through agriculture, i.e., ranching and farming
- Historic resources
- Traditional livelihoods (nature tourism, hunting, merchants)
- Rural lifestyle including safety and simplicity

Community Capacity

- Clusters of leadership – business, service, religious, schools, libraries, foundations, ecological concerns
- County commonality – love of nature, common response to threats to water, airspace, and open spaces

Community Weakness

- Lack of communication between towns
- Groups working independently could work together

Stresses to Community

- Fragmentation of farms, ranches, forests
- Economic disparity
- Antiquated water and sewer lines in towns
- Inadequate medical resources
- Loss of safety and security
- Few opportunities for youth to find local employment after graduation
- Low density sprawl
- Increased populations in towns



RAPID ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

A working group of 10 Saguache County residents met over the course of two months to gather data, compare Saguache County economic information to other similar rural communities, analyze results, and to determine threats to the economy. Their information was presented at subsequent community forums.

People

- The estimated 1997 Saguache County population was just under 6,000 people. Approximately 48% of county residents are Hispanic.
- The County's growth rate is largely the result of new residents migrating into the county. The ethnic mix of the new residents is generally consistent with the existing population.
- Between 1980 and 1990 Saguache County experienced a growth rate of almost 18 percent, the highest of all neighboring counties except Gunnison County.
- The population is older. There is a definite loss of post high school age residents, who are forced to look elsewhere for employment.

Economic Performance

- Per Capita Personal Income remains about half the Colorado state average, the lowest of all the San Luis Valley counties.
- Per Capita Income: is less than \$15,000, while median income is just over \$10,000. Average Personal Income, adjusted for inflation, has decreased 17 percent in the last six years.
- Poverty is widespread. More than 30 percent of county residents live below the poverty level. The number of residents in poverty is increasing.
- The unemployment rate is high, usually in the upper teens.

Business Composition & Vitality

- The local economy supports little retail activity in all but the agricultural sector. Very little value is added to local farm, forest, fishery or ranch products.
- The majority of the local work force is employed in the agricultural, forest and fisheries sectors, followed by wholesale and retail trade, and by educational services. The highest average wages are earned in the agricultural sector.



Social Conditions

- Approximately 67 percent of local residents own their own homes. More than 9 percent of available housing is considered substandard.
- Approximately 65 percent of county residents graduated from high school, while about 12 percent are college graduates. These numbers are well below the Colorado state average and are lower than most comparison counties. Most high school graduates must leave the county to find employment.



Threats to the Economy

- Insufficient value-added processing or production of local natural resources
- Insufficient new product development and marketing of existing products to capitalize on existing local resources and profitable niche markets
- Loss or fragmentation of farmland and grazing land
- Low response to opportunities for self improvement
- Insufficient (or poorly spent) investment in physical infrastructure, i.e., communications
- Loss or potential loss of major employer (agriculture and ranching) due to consistent and enduring low markets
- Isolation from major areas of commerce; weak and costly transportation systems connecting Saguache County to these major areas

RAPID ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

A working group of Saguache County residents met over the course of two months to prepare a brief natural history of the county, to identify important renewable natural resources, ecosystems, natural communities and species of animals and plants, and to determine threats to the environment. The results of this work were presented at subsequent community forums.



Renewable Natural Resources, Natural Communities & Species

- **Ground water**
Confined and unconfined aquifers contain at least 2 billion acre-feet of water that supports diverse natural systems.
- **Air quality**
Excellent air quality is highly vulnerable to pollution from smokestack industry or traffic increases. Altitude and high mountain boundaries increase the probability of inversions.
- **Soils**
Nutrient rich soils are highly prone to wind erosion. Extremely alkaline valley bottom soils support the most extensive greasewood-dominated shrub communities in the state.
- **Natural communities**
Riparian forests, grasslands, sand dunes and the most extensive wetlands in the Southern Rocky Mountains support many rare and declining species, migratory birds, and a variety of unique insects, fish, and mammals.
- **Big game**
Game species represent a valuable recreational and economic asset in Saguache County.

Threats to the Environment

- **Incompatible residential development**
Fragments wildlife habitat, changes the surface water hydrology needed to maintain healthy wetlands and leads to the introduction and spread of non-native species, including many weed species
- **Water withdrawal**
Alters the surface and ground water hydrology and poses threats to natural and managed communities from grasslands and shrublands to wetlands and farmlands
- **Water diversion**
Alters the surface water, converts and fragments habitat, leads to the introduction and spread of non-native species
- **Recreational impacts**
Contributes to habitat destruction and fragmentation, disturbance to wildlife, and the introduction of weeds



CRITICAL THREATS & SPECIAL STRENGTHS

The assessment workgroups produced a clear picture of the assets and problems facing Saguache County today and in the future. To lay the foundation for selecting strategies that will preserve these assets and address the problems, the ScSEED steering committee and other residents determined the critical threats to their community along with their special strengths.

Critical Threats to Saguache County

- Proposed ground water export to urban areas outside of the San Luis Valley
- Residential development that erodes the quality of the environment, the rural community character and threatens the agricultural economy
- Growth that outpaces current land use planning and implementation
- Persistent high unemployment
- Dependence on shifting agricultural economy



Special Strengths of Saguache County



- Small town, rural lifestyle and values of the community
- High quality natural features and resources, wildlife, wetlands, mountains
- Traditional livelihoods in farming, ranching, forest products, hunting
- Strong entrepreneurial spirit
- Diverse recreational opportunities



GENERAL VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF SAGUACHE COUNTY

Saguache County citizens worked on a vision for the future of their community at several gatherings throughout the Pathways process. Their vision expresses hopes for what they and their families will continue to enjoy in Saguache County 20 years from now.

Saguache County is characterized by a vibrant community and a healthy economy dependent upon flourishing farms, ranches, small businesses and intact natural systems. Our local communities work together toward their mutual benefit with a high level of internal commerce and social exchange.

Preserving Our Heritage

- Breathtaking views, broad open spaces and a brilliant, unobscured night sky
- Thriving plants, animals and natural communities indicative of environmental health
- Residents who understand and are committed to sustainable land use practices that address sensitive resources, concern for neighbors and aesthetics across the county

Defining Our Future

- A high degree of quality, lifelong medical, educational, cultural and social services and activities
- Commitment to planned growth, including transportation, community, residence, business, recreation and communications systems
- Family-friendly workplaces and wages
- An emphasis on small proprietorships, cooperatives and value-added enterprises; balancing support for existing businesses with the attraction of new ones
- Small scale, environmentally sensitive industries successful in local, regional and national markets

STRATEGIES

At a community forum, residents selected strategies to address the critical threats, build on the strengths and achieve the vision for the future of Saguache County. The steering committee worked with project consultants to distill the results of the workshop into four strategy areas. Volunteer committees were formed to plan, evaluate, disseminate and start implementation of the strategies. Action plans for each strategy follow. Because these plans are moving forward, progress will be reported through the local newspapers and the various agencies involved, including ScSEED.

Strategy #1

Encourage the communities and people of Saguache County to work together for mutual benefit



Strategy #2

Develop small businesses and cooperative enterprises that sustainably use and add value to Saguache County resources



Strategy #3

Preserve and protect community character and the environmental health of Saguache County



Strategy #4

Increase lifelong health care, educational, vocational, recreational, and social opportunities in Saguache County



Strategy # 1

Encourage The Communities And People Of Saguache County To Work Together For Mutual Benefit

Tasks:

Establish ScSEED as a county-wide organization to promote projects and oversee progress toward the community's vision. Initiate fund raising and "fun raising" events, such as community dances and potluck dinners, to provide support for ScSEED projects.

Key Benefits:

- Establishes a county-wide group dedicated to pursuing sustainable economic growth in balance with protection of the environment and the community in Saguache County
- Serves as a role model and inspires other citizen-led, broad-based organizations elsewhere in the San Luis Valley
- Recruits more public participation in Saguache County
- Provides a means to explore new and existing resources for Saguache County, as well as incentives for others to develop potential projects in the county.

Responsibility:

- Organization : ScSEED steering committee
- Lead Person : ScSEED Director or volunteer

Initial Steps 1999 - 2000:

- Develop a job description for a ScSEED program director. Circulate among stakeholders.
- Research other organizations that could provide charitable, tax-exempt status for ScSEED and/or contract an employee to serve as director of ScSEED
- Obtain a grant to fund the ScSEED director's position
- Participate in upcoming community events, e.g., parades and fairs
- Investigate new opportunities to increase awareness and expand participation in ScSEED, such as the harvest festival and local culture and heritage days

Budget Items:

- Part-time salary, administrative support, kiosk materials, food, party supplies, postage, paper, envelopes.

Strategy #2:

Develop Small Businesses And Cooperative Enterprises That Sustainably Use And Add Value To Local Resources

Tasks:

Create a Saguache County Business & Community Resource Guide that provides information on: the Saguache County community, economy and environment; opportunities for and constraints to business growth and development; land stewardship, regulations, conservation groups and educational opportunities.

Key Benefits:

- Helps recruit businesses that use products or by-products of existing businesses in Saguache County
- Serves as a forum to market products and programs, such as Saguache County place mats, local interpretive kiosks, a calendar of local events, etc.
- Creates new jobs by recruiting new businesses and strengthening existing businesses
- Promotes sound stewardship of community assets, values and quality of life

Responsibility:

- Organizations: ScSEED, Saguache County Planning Commissions, Adams State College Business Department, Saguache County chambers of commerce
- Lead Person: Stephanie Steffens, ScSEED steering committee

Initial Steps 1999- 2000:

- Identify local resources that could be used to help design and develop the resource guide
- Organize and conduct a poll of community businesses; learn more about business and educational opportunities and constraints.
- Organize Saguache County into business and regional sectors to assist with information gathering and layout of the resource guide. Identify an individual in each sector who will help gather this information.
- Gather and organize information for the resource guide including community, economic and environmental assessments, threats and opportunities, land use and other regulatory requirements, small business development information, educational opportunities, conservation organizations, and land and water protection tools.

Budget Items:

- Costs associated with mailing polls and layout, graphics, printing and distribution of the resource guide.



Strategy #3: **Preserve And Protect Community Character** **And The Environmental Health Of The County**

Tasks:

Work with the Saguache County Planning Commission to educate county residents about land use, growth issues and compatible development. Contribute to policies and initiatives that preserve local quality of life and the health of the environment.

Key Benefits:

- Identifies priorities for allocation of funds
- Secures long-term protection of the Saguache County environment through planning and management for sustainability
- Develops a proactive approach to growth and land use issues
- Promotes sound stewardship of community assets, values and quality of life
- Ensures compatible residential, agricultural and commercial development patterns
- Builds consensus; considers development and conservation, individual and community interests together



Responsibility:

Organization(s): ScSEED, Saguache County Planning Commission,
Crestone/Baca Planning Commission

Lead Person(s): Linda Joseph with assistance from each planning commission

Initial Steps:

- Encourage participation in the upcoming County land use planning questionnaire.
- Assist County staff in developing countywide recycling.
- Assist Planning Commissions in drafting educational materials on land and water stewardship, protection tools and land use regulations for inclusion in the ScSEED Business & Community Resource Guide.
- Develop a list of planning issues and recommendations to present to the planning commissions for consideration in making policy and regulatory decisions.
- Prepare articles on land use issues for local media, as well as educational programs on land use issues for school groups and citizen forums.
- Develop field trips to unique areas and communities in Saguache County and the San Luis Valley, combining fun and education.

Budget Items:

- Film and developing, projector, graphics, printing.

Strategy #4:

Increase Lifelong Health Care, Educational, Vocational, Recreational And Social Opportunities.

Tasks:

Increase the availability of post-secondary, vocational and educational programs within the individual communities in Saguache County.

Key Benefits:

- Empowers individuals and communities in Saguache County
- Increases local interest in education
- Increases the earning power of local residents

Responsibility:

- Organizations: ScSEED, Center, Moffat and Mountain Valley school districts, Pilots for Prevention
- Lead Persons: Liza Marron with assistance from school district representatives

Initial Steps 1999-2000:

- Set up an advisory council in each community within Saguache County.
- Conduct poll to determine local preferences for course content, location and time, and the need for bilingual presentation. Distribute the poll to households, churches, schools and industry and community leaders throughout the county.
- Identify institutions that are willing and able to provide course credit.
- Identify potential funding sources and apply for funds to initiate new educational programs.

Budget Items:

- Administrative support, mailing and printing





NEXT STEPS

How You Can Get Involved

A host of individuals and institutions are already at work making the strategies outlined in Preserving Our Heritage, Designing Our Future a reality for Saguache County and its citizens.

Here are just a few of the ways you can get involved:

- Tell us what you think, then tell our elected leaders.
Contact any of the people on the ScSEED steering committee or the ScSEED office,
P. O. Box 372, Saguache, CO 81149 Phone/fax: (719) 655-2775.
Let local officials know what strategies you support.
- Get involved in making our dreams come true for Saguache County.
Join the volunteers working on the different strategies outlined in this report.
They need your help!
- Start your own compatible business.
The plan outlines lots of areas that will enhance the economy, protect the environment,
and meet community needs in Saguache County. Consider starting your own business here.
- Shop Saguache County whenever possible.
Every dollar you spend in our community triples the impact on our economy. Rely on the Business
and Community Resource Guide for information on Saguache County businesses, services and
activities when it is published in 2000.
- Participate in ongoing efforts to ensure a prosperous, healthy future for our community.
ScSEED needs new volunteers to continue to pursue strategies for
compatible economic development and the preservation of our Saguache County heritage.



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Sustainable Environment and Economic Development
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Endorsements

Saguache Board of County Commissioners
Saguache County Planning Commissions
Crestone-Moffat Business Association
Center Chamber of Commerce
Saguache Chamber of Commerce
Manitou Institute
Mountain Valley School District
Moffat School District
Saguache Town Board
Crestone Town Council
Town of Center
Saguache County Tourism Board
Baca Grade Property Owner's Association
EarthArt Institute
Villa Grove Area Merchants Association
Atalanta Association
High Mountain Dairy Goat & Sheep Co-op

Design & Production:

Kailash Computing Services, Chuck Warner

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Manitou Institute

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