

# Keith Baker reflects on Envision's potential

*'I'm compiling a task list,' the county commissioner says as the project develops action plans on growth*

**By Kim Marquis**

Feb. 12, 2018 — Chaffee County Commissioner Keith Baker spent 16 hours attending Envision Chaffee County meetings during the last week of January.

Since signing off on a proclamation to convene the grant-funded, countywide project in September with the two other BOCC members, Baker has attended every one of the nine sets of meetings that led the project to its second phase.

Baker's fellow board member, Commissioner Greg Felt, launched Envision with a group of eight additional citizens concerned about growth. They won \$100,000 in funding from a private foundation that helps rural areas complete community planning in the West.

The project held two introductory meetings in September, and then began planning efforts to define what the community values most about living in Chaffee County. Three sets of facilitated work sessions were attended by about 250 people from October to the beginning of January, and a community survey taken by 1,200 people — more than 6 percent of the population — gathered additional public input to create four vision statements that define what the community said is important to maintain as the county grows.

The vision statements focus on four areas: healthy public lands maintained in balance with outdoor recreation; livability with



Chaffee County Commissioner participates in an Envision Chaffee County work session on Nov. 10, 2017, at the Buena Vista Community Center.

economic diversity and affordable housing; a sense of small-town community; and a sustainable agricultural community with growth focused in and around towns. The community visions are driving the rest of the project's work, which will result in action plans in each focus area by May, according to the project's volunteer co-leader, Cindy Williams.

At the halfway point, Baker said the project is going well.

"It is being well facilitated and there is a good broad spectrum of attendance," he said. "I'm impressed by the breadth of the members of the community attending, including people that are well informed about community planning and the growth challenges any locality faces."

Baker said that although the survey respondents could not be scientifically randomized, participation was high and the resulting vision statements are on target.

“If you go back over 40 years to the initial comprehensive plan the county did back in the ’70s, what these vision statements say is pretty close to what was said then, and the comp plan issued in early 2000 based on work done in ’97 also pretty much says the same thing,” Baker said.

“The high-level visionary things are what people value over long, long periods of time,” he added. “The Envision process has validated that but it is something we needed to know.”

Baker said that moving forward, the project would give him direction as an elected official.

“For me as a commissioner, this is a large number of people giving me a task list of things they want me to do,” he said. “These are really big, vital strategic-level objectives that if we don’t do these, the nature of our community is going to change into something we don’t want. This is a lot of people saying, ‘Here is what we want you to accomplish on our behalf.’”

Baker said that from the beginning, he wanted to see Envision lead to an update of the comprehensive plan, a document that defines the desired future direction of the county. While actions have not yet been decided by the project, Baker said that in addition to the county being statutorily required to have a plan, there are practical reasons to update it.

“We want to come up with a useful document that people can read and understand, whether they are local residents or people contemplating moving here, so that they understand what this community is about and what kind of growth and development

and businesses will be welcome here,” he said.

More than 150 people signed up to participate in the next phase of Envision planning, which is designed to create action plans around each community vision by May. The four action teams had their first meetings during the last week of January, discussing topics ranging from transportation to childcare.

Baker said he is especially interested in development but that the issues are interconnected.

“What can be done by extending services to lands adjacent to the municipalities?” he asked. “Could this lower the cost of construction and help provide more housing? Can we look at density patterns around existing development — including Nathrop, Maysville and Granite? We have the ‘missing middle’ housing problem, so can we encourage multi-family units, bungalow developments and manor-built apartments so that we’re not creating a transportation burden, and taking agriculture out of production, by putting a lot of housing in the rural areas?”

The big-picture visioning went well through the Envision process but the plans will have to be implemented, he added.

“If results do not match our vision, we will fail,” he said, adding that state and local governments and the private sector are constantly operating in a resource-constrained environment. “We’ll need to evaluate what we’re going to propose: Is it adequate, will it really address the problem? Is it feasible, do we have the personnel, money and the time? Is it acceptable to our community, is it something current residents will support, and do the people who want to make a home here share this vision?”

All those questions lead to more questions about taxes, fees, road widths, traffic signals, and a slew of other details as well as decisions about fiscal priorities, but Baker said he is reluctant to get too far ahead of the community.

“Until growth becomes very real to people, until they have a sense of fear or urgency — that metallic taste in your mouth — a lot of people are not going to be induced into action,” he said.

Paraphrasing General MacArthur, he cautioned against a lack of action: “The

history of failure in warfare can be summarized in two words — too late.”

Baker said he does not think Chaffee County is too late to maintain the community’s best assets as the county grows.

“Concrete steps will have to be taken soon,” he said. “We are one of the last places left that has a chance to not let an overwhelming number of bad consequences happen.”

*Baker won his seat on the commission representing District 1 in November 2016. He ran on a platform that included balanced growth.*