

# ‘We’ve been found’

*Three busy summers in a row foretell Chaffee County’s growth*

**JOHNSONS VILLAGE** — On a Friday afternoon in September, liquor store owner Mark Wakefield rings sale after sale as a breeze keeps pushing in through the glass door with a nonstop string of customers.

Traffic has already slowed outside on Highway 285, as weekend visitors make their way through Johnsons Village and on to points west.

An RV turns in ahead of an F350 pulling a trailer with a set of twin ATVs. A Sprinter van comes next, shiny mountain bikes bouncing off the bumper. Then, another RV. Another RV. Another RV.

Getting into the Gunsmoke parking lot is easy since the road heading east is pretty much empty. But to head west, “You gotta shoot the gap,” Wakefield says, as a Suby topped with three yellow kayaks zooms out in front of a semi.

The line of cars backed up on Trout Creek Pass becomes longer as it starts to get dark, forming what Colorado mountain town locals call the Denver “snake.”

“I like seeing the headlights better than the taillights,” Wakefield says, which of course will happen on Sunday as everyone goes home.

Growth is happening in Chaffee County and everyone is experiencing it.

Visitor stays across the county are up by double digits — 21% in 2016 and 14% so far this year — according to lodging tax collections data provided by the Chaffee County Visitors Bureau.

Retail spending in Salida has increased an average of 7% per year, every year since the recession ended in 2010, according to city sales tax collections.

“Chaffee County is at the heart of Colorado’s tourism mecca because we are easily accessible and have a quarter of state’s 14,000 foot peaks,” Chaffee County Economic Development Corp. Director Wendell Pryor said. “Coming over the pass on 285 literally puts these people at our doorstep. That’s unlike any other place in the state.”

Colorado was the second-fastest growing state in the nation from 2010 to 2015. Ninety-five thousand people moved to the state last year, and 3 million more will come by 2050, according to the State Demographer.

More than 85% of the state’s new residents will live in Front Range communities, many located in the Denver and Colorado Springs areas, where Highway 285 provides easy access to the mountains.

“Location-wise, we’re in a great spot,” Pryor said. “We’ve not only been discovered, we’ve been found. They come here and want to figure out a way to be here, either as second homeowners or permanently.”

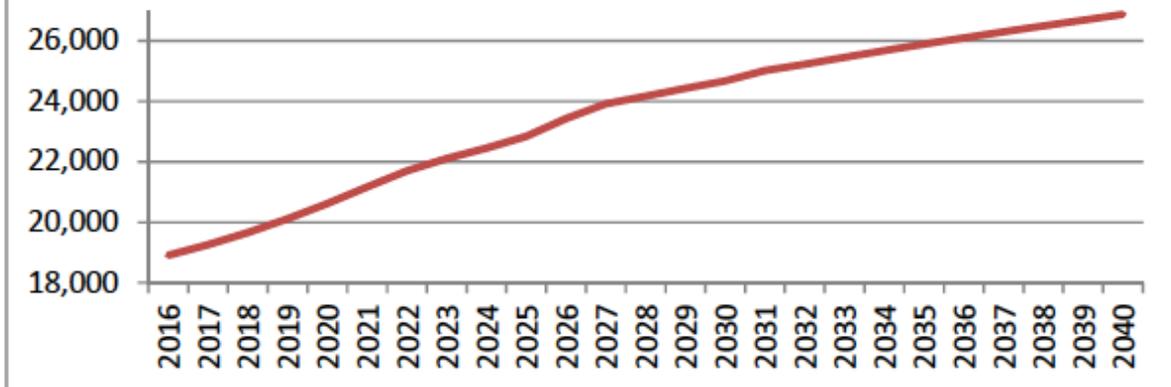
Chaffee County’s population is projected to increase 31% by 2030 and 52% by 2050.

No one sees the growth across every end of the county as much as Sheriff John Spezze, whose drive from Salida to Buena Vista went up by 15 minutes this summer.

His agency is up 20 percent in calls for service in just two years, and calls for backcountry search and rescue are also growing. The volunteer teams conducted five rescue missions in one weekend this summer.

“Our trailheads are full every day,” Spezze said.

## Chaffee County Population Forecast 2016 to 2040



The Sawatch Range gets the highest 14er use in the state, with an estimated 115,000 hiking user days in 2016, according to the Colorado Fourteeners Initiative.

“We offer everything every other county in the Colorado mountains offers, but we’re moderately priced and we don’t offer the congestion yet,” Spezze said. “But now people have found us.”

Wakefield took a bet on the location of High Peaks Liquor when he purchased the store in 2014. It paid off as his sales have grown by 10-20% every year. Like other residents, growth to him is both good and worrisome.

“We’re losing our small town atmosphere but at the same time, BV’s economy is growing,” he said. “I agree with the locals who complain about some of the changes, but I appreciate the tourism at the same time.”

*This story was written by freelance writer Kim Marquis and produced by Envision Chaffee County. It appeared in The Mountain Mail and the Chaffee County Times in November, 2017.*