

Smart projects in Colorado

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Two "smart" projects involving the Environmental Protection Agency — one focused on smart growth and the other on smart energy use — are helping to design a brighter future for Colorado and the Front Range.

Up to 2.5 million more people are expected in Colorado by 2030. More than 1 million of them — enough to populate a new Denver, Aurora, Colorado Springs and Boulder combined — will settle in the metro area. Where are these new people going to live? What impact will they have on the quality of life of those of us who are already struggling with traffic congestion, water shortages and air pollution? How can civic leaders ensure that growth happens with the least impact on neighboring areas and the environment?

The nonprofit Urban Land Institute may have a partial solution. With a grant from the EPA, ULI has partnered with 16 other agencies and organizations to form the Colorado Tomorrow Alliance, which will evaluate proposals for new developments and recognize those that exhibit principles of "smart growth."

Cindy Cristensen, ULI community outreach assistant, says the alliance is based on a model that began in 2004 in Washington, D.C. There, and in Philadelphia, recognition programs are garnering support for new developments and helping smart-growth projects move through the development process more quickly

→ The criteria for an award from the alliance includes development in a location designated for growth; a mix of land uses in the project or nearby; choices in transportation, such as walking, biking and public transit; sustainable building designs and materials; water conservation and preservation of open space; a percentage of affordable housing, and involvement of neighboring residents during the planning phase.

→ Earlier this year, the alliance recognized its first smart-growth project: the proposed Abilene Station development along I-225 in Aurora. The development is near a future light rail station and employment and educational centers, and will include retail development as well as four-story condos and apartments.

In addition to educating neighbors and elected officials about the principles of smart growth, the alliance's recognition program is educational for developers. According to Christensen, "Just going through the application process has led some developers to make their projects more environmental and more pedestrian-friendly "

A second "smart" project involving the EPA has been announced by the Governor's Energy Office. Its Energy Star New Homes program is designed to increase the energy efficiency of homes built across Colorado. Tom Plant, director of the GEO, says the program's goal is to educate communities, builders and home buyers that energy efficiency helps control costs, reduce pollution and lead to more comfortable homes.

The matching-funds grant program will have local governments encouraging home builders to build to the EPA's Energy Star standards. Homes certified for the Energy Star label are at least 15 percent more energy-efficient than those built under 2004 building codes, and have energy-saving features that make them up to 30 percent more efficient than standard homes.

Twelve sets of city-county partnerships received Energy Star New Homes grants in February. In the metro area, grants went to Boulder and Longmont, Denver and Parker. While it's not entirely clear what energy-efficiency activities each community will undertake, it is clear that the cheapest and most environmentally friendly energy is that which doesn't have to be generated in the first place.

These two projects represent small but important steps. To the extent these and other "smart" initiatives succeed, Colorado's environment — and all of us — will be the winners.