

Down-sizing county's dream homes

Exploding size of houses fuels debate

By [Laura Snider](#)

The largest home in Boulder County, whose owner couldn't be reached for this story, sits near the shore of Highland Reservoir northwest of Longmont. The house is 24,953 square feet. The median house size in Boulder County was 6,290 square feet in 2006, up from 2,881 square feet in 1990.

The cracked fingers of a single work glove -- pulled over a metal fence post -- have weathered into a permanent curl, welcoming visitors to 6969 Rabbit Mountain Road east of Lyons with a half-hearted wave. Rusted barbed wire traces the edge of the 35-acre plot of knee-high grasses, encircling the lone shoebox of a house that sits near the center of the plot.

Earlier this month, Boulder County commissioners denied a request to raze the 962-square-foot house and replace it with a home 20 times the size. At 19,441 square feet, the proposed house would have been curled in the northeast corner of the lot, branding the land in a nearly closed circle of roof-lines and towers.

The technical reason for the denial was complex: The parcel of land is part of a wildlife migration corridor; the house would teeter on important riparian habitat; the land is designated of "statewide agricultural importance"; and the house would not exist "harmoniously" with its neighborhood, among other arguments.

But Commissioner Will Toor pretty much summed it up when the house plan came before the board Jan. 10: "I think it's just too big," he said.

Unimpressed by the ruling, land owner Robert Fisher says he's caught in a bureaucratic nightmare that's costing him a fortune and depriving his family of their dream house.

The intersection of palatial dream homes and the local government's sustainability initiative recently has turned unincorporated Boulder County into a messy battle between personal property rights and the perceived communal good.

In the last year, two controversial county programs that will make it more difficult to build giant homes on unincorporated lots have wound their way through the dozens of panels, public meetings, study sessions and working groups necessary before they can officially be put on the books. Together, the

programs would create green-building standards that get stricter as a house gets larger, and place thresholds on the total square-footage of new construction.

Feelings about the proposed restrictions have run deep and hot, and people are questioning whether a "big-house" problem really exists; whether large houses can ever really be "green"; and whether new government mandates are the way to fix the dilemma.

A solution without a problem?

One of the proposed mandates -- the "expanded transfer of development rights," or TDR, program -- would limit house sizes in unincorporated Boulder County depending on where the lot is located. Houses on the plains would be limited to a total of 5,500 square feet, and houses in the mountains would be limited to 3,500 square feet.

In both areas, houses could be built larger if the owners bought "development rights" from undeveloped lots or from people who build a smaller home and sell their excess square footage.

The genesis of the plan came, at least in part, from the county commissioners, who wanted to see the county's rural character protected. But from the outset, the TDR program has met feisty and devoted opposition from the public, many of whom say the commissioners are out to fix an imaginary dilemma.

"It proposes a solution to a problem that does not exist," Allenspark resident Lindsey Lamson said at a public hearing in January.

Lamson's sentiments were echoed over and over as dozens of people took their turns at the microphone in front of a packed audience.

Although a healthy argument could be had about the definition of "rural character," it is difficult to defend the position that more giant houses aren't being cultivated on the once-productive croplands of eastern Boulder County.

House sizes across the country have been swelling since the 1950s, when the average single-family home built in the United States was just over 1,000 square feet, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

By 1980, the median size was 1,570 square feet. A decade later, the number was 1,890 square feet, and the median new house size expanded to 2,237 square feet in 2006, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Palaces on the prairie

Boulder County's housing trend is like a steroidal caricature of the national movement to build bigger.

In 1990, the new median house size in the unincorporated county was 2,881 square feet. By 2000, the median size had risen to 4,470 square feet. And just six years later, enough large homes were being built in the county to raise the median to 6,290 square feet -- nearly three times the nationwide number.

And the median wasn't pushed up solely by houses in the 6,000-square-foot range. Giant homes freckle the county's landscape, including a 24,953-square-foot mansion -- the largest house in Boulder County -- on the edge of Highland Reservoir, a castle watching over its 150 acres.

That house -- swimming pool, basketball court and all -- is only four miles from the home proposed on Rabbit Mountain Road for the Fishers, who weren't the only family requesting approval from the commissioners to build a huge house.

At least three other families filed site plan reviews with the county in 2007 that detailed houses bigger than 13,000 square feet, and another half-dozen requested permission to build houses in the 9,000- to 12,000-square-foot range.

Unlike the Fishers, whose original vision was a 30,000-square-foot home, most of these house plans were accepted.

Seeking "harmony"

The Fishers' house plan was denied under the county's current procedures -- the often-excruciatingly drawn-out Site Plan Review. The process evaluates how the proposed structure would fit into the area's "harmony," including its impacts on the environment, its neighbors and the character of the area.

Some people argue that additional house-size rules aren't necessary because passing the rigorous review is hoop enough to jump through, and large houses rarely get the go-ahead.

"The county said the house is just too big. It just doesn't fit in. It's not in harmony with the property," said builder Mike West, who would have built the Fishers' house. "Let's define harmony. What is harmony?"

The lack of clarity around "harmony" and "neighborhood character" is actually one of the reasons the house size limits were created. County staffers say the new programs, which will likely pass this year, will give clarity to the whole building process.

More clarity might have saved the Fishers the small savings they've already sunk into the land on Rabbit Mountain Road.

"We've already taken three or four runs at it," Fisher said. "I'm already into it a million five. That's how much money I've spent, but that's no longer the value of the land. Nobody else is ever going to pay what I paid for it if they can't build on it."

Money aside, there's the question of property rights, as West pointed out to commissioners at the January hearing: "The Fishers deserve every right to live in the house of their dreams."

How to judge a dream

Many city dwellers -- who vote for the county commissioners but who won't be affected by the county's proposed building regulations -- just don't understand why someone needs such a big house, according to the August family, who wanted to build an 8,500-square-foot house on their mountain property.

But the Augusts want to know: Who are the city folk, the county staff or the commissioners to judge their dreams?

"I've dreamed of a big home since I was a little girl," Fran August, whose grandparents settled in Boulder County in the late 1800s, told commissioners at a public meeting last year. "I don't understand this power that you're trying to take."

The Augusts own 25 acres above Boulder, and they've lived next door to that land since 1966. Their house design has been turned down twice, and they're waiting for their next hearing in March.

"Fran picked out the spot for this house in 1955," Jim August said. "Somewhere in the early 1980s, our daughter designed a house to fit that property, that spot. We did not find the plans until after our daughter was killed. The outside architecture is partially a memorial to her."

The Augusts have already cut their proposed house size by half, and if they get turned down again, they say they'll move out of state, leaving their century-old roots.

"Big is just an excuse," Jim August said. "The reason they do not want us to build is because it's in the mountains."

"They have this idea, backed up by the population out of Boulder, that the mountains are purely for the enjoyment of the people out in the plains."

An environmental question

Supporters of down-sizing, however, say that building big affects a lot more than just the lot or the neighborhood that becomes home to a mansion.

"If everybody in the world tried to build a 20,000-square-foot house, the world would fall apart," said Jim Logan, who has been designing environmentally friendly buildings since the 1970s. "Basically, if you have an unlimited amount of money, you can buy enough photovoltaics that you can make enough electricity that you can export more electricity than you're using. But there's still an environmental cost."

The cost -- called embodied energy -- is in things like resource extraction, dirty cement factories, bamboo floors shipped from China and marble countertops imported from Italy, according to Logan.

"To make that concrete, we dig a big hole outside of Lyons (at the Cemex plant) and pollute their air," he said. "For the amount of concrete used in some of those houses, I could build an apartment house that 10 families could live in."

Logan and his architecture firm no longer accept clients who want to build houses larger than 4,000 or 5,000 square feet. Logan also plans to give up his own house, which he calls "very green," because it's not close enough to town and he considers the fossil-fuel consumption from his commute too great.

"I want to move into a 1,200-square-foot house in town that has a giant (photovoltaic) system so we're actually exporting electricity," he said.

The big green

Mitigating the environmental costs of home-building is the idea behind the county's second planned proposal, BuildSmart. The green-building program may lead the country in its strictness, particularly for big homes.

"It's definitely going to make houses in the county some of the most-energy-efficient anywhere in the country," said Michelle Krezek, who has headed the project for the land use department.

Still, according to some green-building devotees, a house can't be both big and green.

"It takes more resources to build them -- the actual brick and mortar -- and the energy use increases as the house gets bigger," Krezek said.

That's partly because having an energy-efficient home doesn't mean, for example, that the owner will turn out the lights when she isn't in the room, Krezek said. And even if owners are conscious of the details, such as flipping light switches and turning down the thermostat, homes built to the same standards use more energy as they get larger.

A 5,000-square-foot home built to the minimum building codes uses 2.3 times the energy of a 2,000-square-foot home built to the same standards, according to a study commissioned by the city of Boulder.

But while demand still exists, some Boulder builders are creating the greenest big houses possible, even before the county's BuildSmart program goes into effect.

For architect Andy Johnson, that looks like a house he's building in Summerset Meadows outside of Longmont.

The nearly 8,000-square-foot house -- with half of that space sunk into an unfinished basement -- will have all kinds of green bells and whistles such as a gray water reclamation system, solar-thermal warming for 100 percent of the domestic hot water, photovoltaic panels on the roof and high-efficiency appliances.

The building will be one of only a handful of houses in the state to earn the stringent LEED green-building certification for homes, and it will be 66 percent more efficient than a similarly sized home built to the standard codes.

"It's built entirely on green principles," Johnson said. "If all you're doing is putting renewables on your roof, you're probably doing something wrong."

The three-legged stool

By this summer, both of the county's new programs will likely be approved by county commissioners in some form, and all builders in Boulder County will have to be thinking green. Many will be thinking smaller.

"It'll be a three-legged stool: BuildSmart, the TDR program and site plan review," said Krezek, of the land use department.

All three legs support Boulder County's over-arching goal of sustainability, which involves balancing people's property rights today and the rights of future generations of Boulderites, Krezek said.

But the next few months won't be an easy fight.

For landowners with big-house dreams that are already bogged down in the permitting process, they'll have to work on figuring out "harmony" on their own.

For Fisher, that looks like scrapping his plans, cutting his losses and building a 1,700-square-foot "bungalow" on the property to try to save his property values.

"Everyone told me, 'Hey, you're crazy to even think about building anything or even living in Boulder unless you buy something that's run-down and cover it in solar. Then they'll love you,'" he said. "But I didn't really believe the squeeze could be that tough."

BUILDSMART BASICS

Earlier this month, the county commissioners voted unanimously to write BuildSmart into the building codes. The program defines mandatory green-building guidelines for residential development in unincorporated Boulder County, and is likely one of the most stringent programs in the country.

Houses in the city of Boulder are not affected by BuildSmart, but the city has its own Green Points program, which was updated last fall. The two programs have many similarities, but the county program is stricter.

Once the principles of the BuildSmart program are translated into the existing county codes, the commissioners will vote one more time on the finished product, probably in March or April.

The bare bones:

Deconstruction: All existing structures on the property must be "deconstructed" to salvage as many materials as possible. The builders must create a deconstruction plan, which will, at a minimum, save all reusable cabinets, doors, windows, flooring and fixtures as well as lumber and wood sheathing.

Reuse and recycling: Extra wood, scrap metal, cardboard and concrete from construction must be recycled on site, sent to a recycling facility or donated to a building-materials exchange.

Energy efficiency: New homes must be built to meet energy-efficiency requirements established by the nationally recognized Home Energy Rating System Index. A home that meets the minimum standards of the 2004 International Energy Conservation Code scores a 100 on the "HERS Index." A net-zero energy home -- or the most-efficient home possible -- gets a score of zero.

BuildSmart will require homes between 1,000 and 3,000 square feet to have a HERS score of 60. Homes between 3,000 and 4,000 square feet will need to have a score of 40, and homes between

4,000 and 5,000 square feet will need a score of 25. All houses larger than 5,000 square feet will need a HERS rating of 10.

On-site renewable energy: In addition, the larger the home, the more on-site renewable energy -- such as photovoltaic or geothermal -- is required.

Water conservation: Water-saving fixtures such as low-flow toilets and shower heads must be used inside the house.

TDR BASICS

The "Expanded Transfer of Development Rights," or TDR, program sets thresholds for new houses built in unincorporated Boulder County, above which people must buy development rights from smaller houses or vacant lots. The idea is that large houses offset their impact by guaranteeing that other parts of the county either won't be developed or will keep smaller houses.

The program also has potential to help homeowners who can't afford or don't want a large house to subsidize their own smaller home by selling their unused square footage.

The Planning Commission is still shaping the TDR program, and it's likely that the plan won't go before county commissioners until the beginning of March.

The regulations in the current draft of the program divide the count into three areas:

The plains and suburban foothills area includes the eastern part of the county and the subdivisions just west of the city of Boulder. In this area, houses can be built up to 5,500 square feet, including the basement and all "residential" structures, such as studios or attached garages.

The mountain area generally includes areas west of Colo. 93, west of Boulder city limits and west of U.S. 36 on the north end of town. Houses in this area will be limited to 3,500 square feet, including all residential structures.

Special character areas include the communities of Gold Hill, Eldorado Springs, Eldora, Allenspark and Hygiene, and will have regulations that help preserve each community's unique character. The specific regulations for each community have not been finished, and until they are, the Planning Commission is proposing that the current site plan review process be used for additions beginning at 500 square feet.

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