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Title: Land use planning strategies for improving water efficiency: How growing Colorado communities continue to increase water security and reliability despite limited supplies

Type of presentation: Oral presentation

Relevant topics: How are water users adapting to limited water supplies?
What water management strategies can effectively respond to uncertainty?

Abstract:

Communities throughout the Western United States face significant water supply and demand challenges and uncertainties as populations continue to grow despite limited water resources. This is especially evident in Colorado where populations, primarily in the urban areas of the Front Range, are projected to almost double by 2050. These communities must find ways to adapt and support that growth without adverse impacts to water security, riparian ecosystems, and downstream users. One of the tools many communities have embraced is to integrate their land use planning and water planning processes. Specifically, many communities are embedding water efficiency measures into their zoning, landscape and building codes, as well as their comprehensive plans, because the development choices they make today will have water demand implications for decades. While numerous communities have embraced integrating these two processes, significant opportunities remain, especially along the Front Range in Colorado.

This presentation will describe several Western Resource Advocates (WRA) supported projects to integrate these two processes in Colorado communities, including lessons learned, challenges, and ultimate successes that can be applied in other communities. The goal of the presentation is to demonstrate how communities of many sizes, demographics, and geography can adopt and implement water efficient land use planning strategies that fit their local context. For example, WRA and partners recently helped the Town of Frederick, with a population of 13,400, develop updated landscape regulations that will limit the amount of irrigated turf on new non-residential development to just 4% of the entire lot. In another example project, WRA and partners helped the Town of Severance, with a population of 5,000, incorporate water topics and water conservation throughout their recently updated comprehensive plan. Both projects will help these small, but growing, communities adapt to limited water supplies, increasing water costs, and significant uncertainties in future population growth and water availability. Further, both projects were successfully completed in virtual settings due to COVID-19, demonstrating that water efficiency can still be improved despite less than ideal circumstances.

In addition to these two projects, this presentation will describe more broad lessons learned from WRA's multi-year experiences helping Colorado communities integrate water and land use planning. This includes helping the City of Centennial, City of Greeley, City of Golden, and several others with various water and land use initiatives. The presentation will cover specific enabling conditions that once identified can help communities tackle these types of projects, ultimately helping improve their water reliability and to continually adapt to limited (and declining) water supplies in the coming decades.