A. The Mesa Countywide Land Use Plan

The Mesa Countywide Land Use Plan provides a new direction for Mesa County. It is the first land use plan ever prepared countywide as a guide for future land use and development. This land use plan is the product of a unique planning process set in motion in September 1994 by Mesa County’s Board of County Commissioners. The board’s charge was to discover and reflect the land uses that the citizens of Mesa County wanted for their future.

The Mesa Countywide Land Use Plan was initiated with the realization that traditional planning methods do not effectively embody the needs and desires of the people. Often the public is invited only to participate at the end of a land use planning process, to review and react to the plan during public hearings. Mesa County chose to engage the public from the very beginning of this project and maintain their interest and input throughout this process. Mesa County built the plan around a countywide consensus, not on the advice of a few professional planners and consultants. Mesa County’s citizens were asked to express concerns and develop their own ideas. Mesa County challenged a representative steering committee (see Mesa Countywide Steering Committee Chapter Two) and other leaders from within each community to refine these issues and work with a consultant team to develop policies and action plans needed to produce the land use plan.

The Mesa Countywide Land Use Plan actively engaged the public in more than 50 meetings, bringing county residents together in public workshops, steering committee meetings, and discussions to share ideas and participate in defining Mesa County’s course for the future. People came from throughout the county and kept coming back to participate in subsequent meetings. They wanted to ensure that their comments and suggestions were considered.

Out of this process came specific proposals and suggestions. One of the early resounding public sentiments was that the City of Grand Junction Urban Area Plan process, which was paralleling the county planning process, be combined with the Mesa Countywide Land Use Plan process for the urbanizing area around the City of Grand Junction. In response, both entities collaborated on a joint land use process, the results of which are reflected in this document as the Future Land Use Plan, Joint Urban Planning Area (see Chapter Five).

Once they heard citizen concerns and visions for Mesa County, the Mesa Countywide Steering Committee refined proposals into a series of clear alternatives. Interested citizens, representatives of the business community, special interest groups, and institutions who will live with and realize the plans comprised the steering committee. The steering committee used this inclusive and interactive process to then refine alternatives using community input to form a final plan, complete with a set of policies and practical action plans.

Mesa County is a diverse landscape of beautiful valleys, mesas and plateaus. Equal to its natural diversity is its rich culture and heritage that must be respected as plans are created for the future. The future land use plan protects existing private property rights and respects many other individual issues. It also recognizes that future generations may want and require different land use goals and policies than are included in this plan. The Mesa Countywide Land Use Plan is the result of a two year planning process which drew heavily on community differences and strengths in its development. While not perfect, the land use plan fairly reflects the land use hopes and values of Mesa County’s citizens.
B. Why Mesa County Needs a Land Use Plan

Mesa County covers approximately 3,300 square miles in Western Colorado. Approximately 76 percent is publicly owned and controlled, primarily by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. The county's 1995 population was approximately 100,000. The county seat, the City of Grand Junction, is the largest urban area between Denver, Colorado and Salt Lake City, Utah. For the large geographic area of western Colorado and eastern Utah, Grand Junction is a center for banking, health care services, and retail trade.

Mesa County is experiencing many growth pressures and trends that have led to the need for a countywide land use plan. The following provides a few key indicators, with more detail provided on existing conditions and trends in Chapter Three and in the Appendix:

- Widespread perceptions and fears that Mesa County is rapidly losing its rural and agricultural lifestyle.

- Much of the new job growth has been (and forecasts predict this will continue) in the lower-paying segments of the economy such as the retail and service sectors.

- The county's population growth is taking place increasingly in the urbanizing areas surrounding Grand Junction. In 1980, 70 percent of the county's population lived in the city and surrounding urban area. By 1990 this area had captured 77 percent of the population. The urbanizing area outside the city limits grew 27 percent over this period, or 2.4 percent per year on average, while the county as a whole experienced a 14 percent change.

- The need for expression of common community values and a clear guide to land use decision-making for the future.

- The lack of a Countywide Land Use Plan to direct and guide future growth throughout the county.

The absence of a single land use plan for the county has been problematic for both public policy-makers and the private sector. Without an overall land use plan, the county, municipalities, special districts, and other entities have had no common basis for future land use, zoning, and capital improvement decisions. Similarly, without such a plan, the private sector has been forced to make many decisions pertaining to land use and development within a vacuum of public policy. This situation has produced an array of land use, zoning, and development decisions by both the public and private sectors which have not always been consistent.

The county expressed interest in preparing a community-wide visioning and strategic planning process. This would have required a comprehensive look at all the community systems currently in place and would need to be accomplished through a highly public and interactive process. The Board of County Commissioners has chosen to address the various planning issues one at a time on a priority basis. The issues of land use and zoning are central to many other outstanding issues. Without establishing the plan for land use first, many issues, such as capital facility plans, cannot be properly addressed.
Mesa County is a statutory county which derives its elected official structure from the Colorado Constitution and its powers from the state through enabling legislation. The three-member Board of County Commissioners serves as the legislative, policy-making, and administrative body governing the unincorporated area of Mesa County. Commissioners are elected at large from each of three geographical districts and serve staggered four-year terms.

Historically, the Mesa County Planning Commission has adopted area plans for specific portions of the county to serve as elements of the Mesa County Master Plan and known as the Mesa County Land Use and Development Policies. The policies also include general policies applicable to the entire unincorporated county regarding services, agricultural land, energy development, procedures, and standards for development; however, no comprehensive land use element exists in the document. Although some parts of the county are "planned" by virtue of the existence of county-adopted neighborhood or area plans, existing area plans may be out of date and are not necessarily consistent with one another or sensitive to the land use and zoning needs of the entire county.

In December 1993 the Mesa County Board of County Commissioners developed a list of five general goals for the land use plan. In February 1994 Mesa County requested the submission of statements of qualifications from professional planning firms for the preparation of a countywide land use plan for the unincorporated areas of the county. Proposals were submitted in April, with interviews and selection of a consultant team completed in May. In September 1994 the Mesa County Board of County Commissioners approved a professional services contract with Design Studios West, Inc. of Denver, Colorado to assist in the preparation of a countywide land use plan as the first step towards developing a countywide master plan.

C. Goals of the Mesa County Board of County Commissioners

In December 1993 the Board of County Commissioners adopted the following five general goals for the land use plan. The Mesa Countywide Land Use Plan will:

1. Reflect the current culture of Mesa County as well as its past customs.

2. Serve as both a practical and philosophical framework for the future. It will be based on the protection of private property rights and the free market concept in concert with community values.

3. Consider both public and private lands within its boundaries, promote full participation in all land use planning processes, and provide a framework for all area plans.

4. Maximize public/citizen input in the planning process.

5. Recognize that there are limits to available resources and develop a process to maintain current inventories of those resources.

On September 3, 1996, the Mesa County Planning Commission adopted the following general goal to supplement the five goals previously adopted by the BOCC.

6. Through monitoring and evaluation, ensure prompt recognition and appropriate response to changed conditions related to factors such as shifting demographics, altered public attitudes and values, different economic conditions, or other
pertinent factors.

D. The Legal Authority of the County to Plan

Colorado statute provides the legal basis for the preparation of the Mesa Countywide Land Use Plan (CRS 30-28-106 et seq.). The authority to make and adopt such a master plan is given to the Mesa County Planning Commission (Planning Commission) by virtue of the statute. The Planning Commission is charged with preparing and adopting a master plan capable of guiding the physical development of the unincorporated portions of the county. The master plan represents the planning commission's vision of the most desirable land uses and serves as a guide for development rather than as an instrument to control land use. It may cover the whole county or subareas of the county. It may also address specific planning considerations such as drainage, transportation, flooding, etc. The master plan is an advisory document only and has no regulatory effect.

E. The Relationship of this Plan to the Existing Land Use and Development Policies (Mesa County Master Plan), Area Plans, and Existing Zoning and Subdivision Regulations

Mesa County Master Plan

The Mesa Countywide Land Use Plan will serve as a guide to development within unincorporated Mesa County. This plan is advisory only and has no regulatory effect. It does, however, include land use and development policies and implementation strategies which will guide the preparation of both regulatory and voluntary mechanisms used for implementation of the plan. The existing Mesa County Land Use and Development Policies should remain in effect except where inconsistent with these new policies. In such cases these policies prevail.

Area Plans

The contents of this plan are intended to provide a general framework for future countywide land use decision-making. This Countywide Land Use Plan creates a future vision for the county that is more current than the adopted area plans, many of which were adopted five to ten years ago. The most recent, the Orchard Mesa Area Plan, is reflected in the urban planning area land use plan. All existing and future area plans should follow the policies and desired land uses as expressed by the Mesa Countywide Land Use Plan. Further, area plans are good vehicles for focusing on smaller segments of the county and add more detail to land use recommendations (see Exhibits 1 and 2).

The Mesa County Land Use and Development Policies document contains several adopted area plans, namely:

Policy #24: Powderhorn - June 21, 1984
Policy #27: Lower Valley (Fruita, Loma, Mack) - March 21, 1985
Policy #28: Clifton (Clifton, Fruitvale, Pear Park, Central Grand Valley) - April 25, 1985
Policy #30: Redlands - April 17, 1986
Policy #31: Glade Park - December 22, 1988
Policy #33: Mid-Valley/Appleton - June 28, 1990
Policy #36: Grand Mesa Slopes Management Area Plan - January 27, 1994
Policy #38: Orchard Mesa - March 1995
Exhibit 1
Existing Urban Area Plans
Exhibit 2
Existing Master and Area Plans Countywide
Existing Zoning and Subdivision Regulations

The Mesa Countywide Land Use Plan does not change existing zoning. The future land use plan and policies contained herein will serve as a guide for reviewing new development applications and for implementing any new land development regulations (zoning and subdivision) desired. Any changes to zoning or subdivision regulations would require proper notice and public hearings before adoption or approval.

F. How this Plan is Organized

This plan is organized into five chapters and includes an appendix and summary under separate cover. The plan contains a large amount of information and guidance. It is designed to assist those who wish to build projects in the county, staff personnel who must review project proposals, and decision-makers who are called upon to act on these projects.

1. The Introduction chapter (Chapter One) provides a broad overview of the plan’s goals, authority, background, and relationship to other documents and their organization.

2. The Planning Process chapter (Chapter Two) provides an overview on planning methodology, the three planning areas, the 11 community areas, the role of the steering committee, the joint city and county planning process for the urban planning area, and the land use classification system.

3. The Existing Conditions chapter (Chapter Three) summarizes the county’s history, population trends and projections, economic trends, environmental characteristics, service capacity, and provides the results of an opinion survey.

4. The Rural Planning Area (Chapter Four) and Joint Urban Planning Area (Chapter Five) chapters describe the future land use plan and land use policies. These chapters clearly identify the urban planning area as the joint urban planning area in and around the City of Grand Junction and includes the same text and policies in the City of Grand Junction Urban Area Plan. The two rural planning areas (east and west) are formatted to express countywide policies, actions and plans. This material provides guidance in land use decision-making, but it is not regulatory.

5. The Future Land Use Plan Review and Updates chapter (Chapter Six) identifies the process for reviewing, updating and amending the land use plan.

6. The Mesa County Land Use Incentives, Final Report (Chapter Seven) explores and recommends techniques for implementing the land use plan through positive incentive approaches.

7. The Glossary lists terms, phrases and acronyms used throughout the plan document.

8. The Appendix (under separate cover) contains a variety of background data and analyses which were used in the formulation of the plan and/or its interpretation. This material is informative but not regulatory.