

January 27th, 2025

Chaffee County Common Ground Citizen Advisory Committee Meeting

Location: 104 Crestone Ave, Salida, CO 81201

Attendance:

Committee: Ben Lenth, Dani Cook, Paule Muelle, Sydney Schnurr, Joe Stone, Jim LaRue (Virtual)

Chaffee County Staff: Gina Lucrezi, Miles Cottom, Gabe Hobson

CCCCF: Betsy Dittenber, Anna Hendricks

Public: Russ Schnurr, Jessica Downing, Michael Earle, Linda Simpson, Molly Chilson, Sue Greiner (virtual), Kathy Horlein (Virtual), TR Evans (virtual), Joe Greiner (virtual), Sig Jaastad (virtual), Ashley Cogan.

Media: Guinevere Stropes of the Mountain Mail (virtual). Jan Wandra of the Ark Valley Voice (virtual).

13:00 – Meeting Commences.

13:01 – CAC Approves Consent Agenda.

13:02 – Guests introductions.

13:06 – Miles C updates the CAC on the Working Lands Initiative. The contract has been awarded to the Upper Arkansas Conservation District, but the contract is still being finalized. Reporting schedules and other requirements are still being worked through. The scope of work in the contract comes directly from the original RFQ.

13:08 – Gabe H gives updates on County Resource Councils. Meetings are continuing as normal. Additional coordination meetings are scheduled to plan trainings and coordinate accessibility assessments.

13:10 – Ben L gives a presentation on an alternative budget the CAC composed in response to County Staff's budget proposal presented at the December CAC meeting. The presentation put an emphasis on the high demand for grants through the competitive grant cycle and large impacts the grants have made. Ben L notes that the competitive grants are an effective way to make the Common Ground fund accessible through a bottom-up direction. He acknowledges that there needs to be adjustments to ensure better long term financial success of the program. He also points out that there will be no 2026 competitive grant cycle and that a reserve fund is being established. He argues that, because of the Working Lands Initiative, there will be increased demand for grant funding from agricultural producers.

The CAC feels that not enough funding will be available for competitive grant cycles in upcoming years. They also want to see more in-depth explanations for why the reserve fund goals are so ambitious and what types of large projects it could be used for. The CAC proposes an alternative plan that increases the minimum funding available for grant cycles to \$1 million per year starting in 2027. This alternative would reduce the annual contributions to the reserve policy, reaching \$5.9 million by 2035 instead of the \$6 million by 2030 proposed by County Staff.

13:22 – The CAC and County Staff discuss the CAC’s alternative proposal. Miles C states that he will bring the proposal to the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) to see if they are receptive to it. He also notes that the funding for Rec Rangers and Rec Adopters was approved to come through a lodging tax re-allocation rather than Common Ground funding. He also reminds the group that the contract of the for the Chaffee County Community Foundations’ (CCCCF) administration of the grant program still needs to be finalized.

13:25 – Dani C asks who developed the proposal presented by County Staff at the December meeting. Miles C explains it was developed by the staff and the finance department and given direction from the BOCC to move forward with the proposal. He states that the proposal was largely shaped by the priorities of the BOCC. Responding to Dani C’s request for more details, Miles C notes the origin of the budget comes from the desire to support larger projects while not overspending the fund. He argues that the strategy of funding larger projects helps meeting the goals of leveraging funding through partners. \$6 million was identified because it allows for the opportunity to invest in large projects while still providing funding for a grant cycle.

He notes that actual tax revenue and actual expenditures of the reserve fund may alter the original proposal in the future. He also notes that any expenditure of the reserve fund will be subject to the CAC’s recommendation.

13:34 – Sydney S asks for examples from the past of the types of projects the reserve fund might have been used for had it been available. Miles C points out the Snowmass Falls Ranch acquisition by Pitkin County that leveraged a similar fund with GOCO funds to purchase and preserve the ranch. He also points to Larimer County’s plan that prioritizes areas of interest based on resource value. Dani C expressed the desire for better communicate to the community how the reserve fund will be used. Miles C notes that the reserve fund can be used for the competitive grant cycle in times of greater need and that, no matter how it is spent, it will be subject to the restriction of the resolution approved by voters in 2018.

13:41 – Paul M shares that he is concerned that the aggressive timetable for saving for the reserve fund limits the amount of money available for the grant cycle that has been highly sought after by the community to fund important projects.

13:43 – Ben L questions if the models referenced are the right models for Chaffee County since they come from larger counties including counties on the Front Range. He asks how land acquisitions would align with the goals of the program. The CAC discusses the possibility of surveying the county to find out how they wish for the funds to be spent. The original ballot determined how the funds must be spent and it would require another ballot measure to change it. Dani C asks if the reserve fund could be used for a larger project proposed by a grant applicant. Miles C states that it just must be used in accordance with the ballot language. He notes the important of transparency and accountability when spending Common Ground funding.

13:53 – Paul M asks for clarification on what policies will govern the program since the CAC developed draft policies and some of the policies County Staff have presented overlap or conflict with the CAC's proposed policies. Miles C explains that there is ongoing review to ensure consistency across count boards and committees and the difference between the policies which the County applies to the boards and the boards authority to govern itself. He expects that those policy topics will be resolved in the next several months and the reserve policy to go to the BOCC for consideration in the coming weeks.

13:58 – Ben L requests a work session with the BOCC and CAC.

13:59 – Betsy D gives an update on multi-year grant reports. She notes that CCCF is working to make reporting deadlines more consistent. She asks if there are any grant recipients that the committee would want to have present to the group. The CAC decides to ask all multi-year grant applicants to give presentations.

14:05 – Betsy D discusses the need to make grant process adjustments in the coming couple of months to ensure that they are complete in time for the 2027 grant application period in late 2026.

14:07 – Miles C reminds the CAC that grant applicants should communicate directly with CCCF or County Staff, not members of the CAC who vote to recommend grant awards.

14:09 – Ben L reminds the group that, through email, officers were re-elected to their current roles: Ben Lenth as Committee Chairman, Sydney Schnurr as Vice-Chair, and Paul Muelle as Secretary.

14:10 – Public comments begin.

Michael Earle, 9514 Highway 291, Salida – Expresses support for a survey of the county.

Molly Chilson 7705 Meadow Lark Rd, Buena Vista – Expresses concern about a possible bait and switch with the working lands coordinator because she is worried that after hiring someone to help the ag community there will not be enough resources for them to access. She expresses appreciation of the grassroots work that the CAC does and the scale of the work. She is concerned about the example of purchasing of a ranch since conservation easements of 7,000 acres may make the County the largest land holder of ag land in county. Ben L clarifies that easements do protect the land but do not give ownership to anyone other than the landowner. Molly C replies that it affects the value of the land.

Russ Schnurr, 18205 Alta Vista Dr, Buena Vista – He states that the close vote on the Common Ground ballot initiative is important to him. He believes that it passed because of the requirement to have a CAC. He notes that the lodging tax was not established by a countywide vote. He believes that society is tired of executive power and that the BOCC needs to listen to the CAC. It's important that the little guys continue to get funding from Common Ground.

Sue Greiner, 702 Yale Avenue, Buena Vista – Sue congratulates the CAC on the good work. She emphasizes the importance of the voters passing the ballot initiative tied to the three areas of concern of rec, ag, and forest health. She points out that the program has been successful at quickly putting tax dollars back on the ground. She worries that moving \$6 million from the grant cycle will hurt meeting the goals of the program. She reminds the BOCC and County Staff was intended to be citizen driven.

Joe Greiner, 702 Yale Avenue, Buena Vista – Joe worked inventorying campsites and removing unnecessary campfire rings in Chaffee County. He also helped removed large amounts of ash and trash from public lands. He states that defunding Envision has lessened the effectiveness of campsite cleanup efforts. He is concerned that County Staff and the BOCC are taking too much control of Common Ground. He doesn't believe these concerns are being addressed. He thinks that the reserve fund proposal is too large and will hurt smaller projects. He believes the program does not align with the goals of the program. He is concerned that not enough money is going toward forest health projects. He wants more money for grants.

14:24 – Meeting adjourns.