

Elbert County Roads: Part 1 of 3

Current Fiscal Realities, Conditions & Capabilities

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This is the first of three monthly pieces discussing our county roads. This month, we focus on the notable contrast in condition and funding of our roadways and those in our neighboring county to the west. Next month we will describe the ongoing and planned engineering assessments of our subdivision and connector roads. And in the final month, we will outline the plan for funding and conducting improvements.

It's obvious that there is a difference when you cross the Elbert/Douglas county line - whether the road are gravel or paved, the change is generally obvious, especially after a period of rain or snow. But, "Why?" you might ask. The answer isn't that our Road & Bridge Department doesn't care; it isn't all about training, or techniques, or soil or traffic differences. We do have extremely caring, professional, and well-led employees in our Road & Bridge Department. The clear difference simply is money. And, it's not how it's used, where it's prioritized, or if it's well spent - it is simply ... that ... we ... have ... less.

Let's take a look at the numbers:

Geography: At 1,851 square miles, Elbert County is more than twice as large as Douglas County's 843.

Roads Miles: We have about one-quarter the miles of county maintained pavement but, more than three times the miles of gravel road. In all, our Road & Bridge Department maintains 1360 miles of road to their 1172- or about 16% more road miles than our more prosperous neighbors.

Population Served: Douglas County is obviously more populous. In 2015, their population of over 322,000 was more than thirteen times Elbert County's nearly 25,000. This large difference greatly magnifies the differences in taxes collected.

Population Distribution: A far greater percentage of Douglas County than Elbert County is served by state and federal highways. In Douglas County- Parker, Castle Rock, Highlands Ranch, their three major population centers (64% of their total population), are served by SR 83, I-25, and C470. Here in Elbert County- the towns of Elizabeth, Kiowa, Simla, and Agate are all on state and federal highways (SR 86, SR 24, and I-70) but, these four towns account for only 12% of our total population. This places a greater percentage of wear and tear on county maintained roadways.

Revenues and Expenditures: A review of the two counties' budgets shows stark differences. Where revenues collected for Road & Bridge in Douglas County for 2017 is projected to be \$49.4 million, we will collect approximately \$6.9 million. Of this, Douglas

County will spend approximately \$32.6 million and we will spend nearly the full \$6.9 million that we will collect.

Priorities and Spending per Person: Elbert County's budget clearly indicates that roads are a top priority. The year, Douglas County will spend around 11% (approximately the state average) of their budget on roads. Elbert County will spend well over 24% (one of the highest allocations in the state) this year. As far as 'per person' spending- we spend nearly almost 3 times the amount that our neighbors to the west do. We will spend nearly \$280 per person versus their \$98 this year.

Outcomes and Spending per Mile: There is no doubt that Douglas County, even if they spend a much lower percentage of their budget, have roads in better condition because their spending per mile far exceeds what we can ever hope to. Even at our much high budget percentage allocation, we spend around \$5,000 per mile where Douglas County's spending is nearly \$28,000. Were we to spend this much per mile, our roads would certainly be in better condition; however it would require nearly \$38 million annually to do so - and this is nearly \$10 million more than our total yearly budget.

While we will continue to make every effort to improve our roads, it is clear that at our current levels of revenue, we will never match what our neighbor to the west can do. This doesn't mean we should lower our expectations but, we must be realistic.

How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.

Over the past few years we have completed some large paving projects: Kiowa-Bennett Road, CR 29 and CR9/15, this year we have budgeted to rebuild approximately 20 miles of the gravel roads in the highest need (based on both condition and traffic counts). The priority of our current maintenance effort throughout the county is placed on ensuring the ability of our fire and law enforcement to respond to emergencies, the general safety of the travelling public, and finally on executing repairs that safeguard against rapid deterioration and more expensive future repairs.

The use of Douglas County as a comparison in no way indicates that the roads in the eastern part of our county are viewed as less important. It simply helps to illustrate our truths using a clear contrast. When leaving Elbert County into eastern Arapahoe and El Paso Counties or traveling into the western end of Lincoln County, the change is not as stark. We will work toward road improvements throughout Elbert County.

We are conducting a full pavement condition analysis with a priority on our sub-divisions to help prioritize future maintenance spending, and are working toward an update and extension of the 2008 Western Elbert County Transportation Plan. The update of this plan will take into account current and projected growth and encompass the transportation needs of the entire county. These efforts will be the subject of the next two parts of this series.

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