

# Custer County



## 2017 CEDS

Prepared by Southern Colorado Economic Development District  
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**CUSTER COUNTY MAP**  
**COLORADO, USA**



Fremont



**LEGEND**

Major City/Town	Railroad	Highway Class	River/Stream
County Seat	Airport Type	State	River/Lake/Reservoir
Golf Course	Small	Other	County Subdivision
Mountain Peak/Hill			County Boundary

Huerfano



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## SUMMARY BACKGROUND

Custer County is located in south central Colorado on the east side of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The county is 789 square miles with a population density of 5.5 per square mile. The average elevation is 7,888 feet.

The county was established in 1877. In the early 1800's Custer County was an important mining community during the mining boom. The Wet Mountain Valley provided gold, silver and copper and the railroad provided the needed transportation to haul ore to the smelter. Although mining is no longer a mainstay of the community, its history is evident. The Sangre de Cristo Mountains provides ten of the State's "Fourteeners"; a main attraction for visitors to the community. Custer County's economy consists of mainly tourism and agriculture.

### County Commissioners:

Lynn Attebery  
Kit Shy  
Dr. Bob Kattnig

### Legislative Districts:

Congressional District: 3  
Senate District: 2  
House District 60

**County Seat:** Westcliffe

### Population

The population of Custer County for 2015 was 4,445.

### Population by Age

Under 5 years of age	131	5 to 9 years	203	10 to 14 years	163
15 to 19 years	226	20 to 24 years	132	25 to 34 years	240
35 to 44 years	269	45 to 54 years	579	55 to 59 years	485
60 to 64 years	641	65 to 74 years	749	75 to 84 years	378
85 years and older	78				

### Population by Community

Silver Cliff	596
Westcliffe	577
Unincorporated	3,291

Data retrieved from State Demography Office – DOLA

[www.dola.state.co.us](http://www.dola.state.co.us)

## **Poverty**

In 2014, Kids Count reported 41.1% of school age children qualified for free/reduced lunch and 30.6% of children under 18 years of age were living in poverty compared to 14.9% in the State.

[www.kidscount.org](http://www.kidscount.org)

## **Housing**

The average household size for Custer County is 2 compared to an average family size for the state of 2.64. The homeownership vacancy rate is 11.5% and the rental vacancy rate is 16.1%

According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, affordable rent represents the generally accepted standard of not spending more than 30% of gross income on gross housing costs. The fair market rent in 2015 for Custer County is \$659 for a two bedroom home. In order to afford rent at this amount, a household in Custer County must earn \$26,360 annually. At the minimum wage of \$8.31 hour, one minimum wage earner would have to work 61 hours per week.

[www.nlihc.org](http://www.nlihc.org)

## **Education**

Custer County provides K-12 education through one school district, with a four day week. Higher education is available in Pueblo and Fremont Counties.

The 2014 Census American Community Survey estimates that 22.6% of the total population 25 years of age and older has attained a high school diploma or higher; 21.2% have attained a Bachelor's Degree or higher.

[www.factfinder.census.gov](http://www.factfinder.census.gov)

## **Agriculture**

In 2012, Custer County had 188,748 acres of agricultural land. There are 198 farms, with an average of 953 acres. The market value of products sold was \$8,193,000 of which \$2,229,000 (27%) were crop sales and \$5,965,000 (73%) were livestock sales. The average per farm was \$41,381. Government payments in 2012 were \$301,000 with an average per farm of \$41,381.

[www.agcensus.usda.gov](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov)

## **Travel Impact**

Dean Runyon and Associates report that \$10.7 million was spent by visitors to Custer County in 2015. Not only does travel affect the revenues to a community, but jobs must be created to



maintain services to visitors. Approximately 135 full and part time jobs were attributed to travel and tourism in Custer County in 2015 with \$1.8 million in earnings, \$275,200 in local tax revenue and \$267,900 in state tax revenue.

[www.deanrunyon.com](http://www.deanrunyon.com)

### **Local Economy**

The current unemployment rate for Custer County is 3.1% in October 2016 which is the same as the state. The average earnings for Custer County is \$32,261.

[www.factfinder.com](http://www.factfinder.com)

## **STRATEGIC PLANNING**

### **SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) Analysis**

The starting point for a credible economic development strategic plan is a SWOT analysis. By working with Custer County stakeholders the following was identified:

#### **Strengths**

- Beauty of Valley
- Quality of life – Amenities (Social)
- Events
- Volunteer efforts
- Quality of residents
- Medical Clinic
- Tourism
- Water
- Government land for recreation
- Growing desire for change
- Retirement assets
- Access to front range
- USPS/UPS/FedEx
- Silver West Airport
- Start up broadband
- Dark Sky certification
- Clinic
- Economic Development/Chamber of Commerce
- Library
- Reasonably priced land

## **Strengths Continued**

- Gym with swimming pool
- Education system
- Low property taxes

## **Weaknesses**

- Lack of jobs
- Lack of countywide broadband
- Limited shopping
- Limited medical
- Lack of affordable housing
- Lack of water augmentation plan
- Lack of railroads, water ways, interstate highway
- Tendency to accept the status quo
- Low pay scale
- County assets run down
- Phone/cell phone coverage
- Post secondary training
- Limited water
- Lack of restaurants
- Lack of unified vision
- Lack of year round economy
- Teacher turnover
- Road system in disrepair
- High poverty level
- Difficult for businesses to succeed through the winter
- No transportation
- Not enough lodging
- Lack of primary employers
- Lack of retail stores
- No licensed day care facility
- Lack of elderly and veterans services
- Recycling/renewable energy

## **Opportunities**

- Room for growth

- Educated population
- Volunteer availability
- Community College
- Logging on government land
- Recreation/outdoor activities
- Small business in rural area
- Recruit new employers
- Countywide building code
- Incubator
- Have a county based strategic plan
- Capital to help with infrastructure
- Matching funds
- Focus on non-agriculture opportunities
- Land Trust willing to maintain beauty of area
- Market area to entire state
- Build/develop Custer County brand
- Economic master plan
- Develop affordable housing
- Transportation – trolley – excursions to surrounding towns
- Winter activities
- Consistent hours for retail businesses
- Senior services
- Community Center

### **Threats**

- Lack of Capital
- Loss of water rights/drought
- Limited tax/income base
- Losing water to large front range cities
- Marijuana growing
- School system population continues to shrink
- Failing to move towards a living wage for local workers
- Fire disaster
- Landfill issues
- Public safety issues – cell tower and no internet
- No clinic
- Lack of infrastructure improvements



### **Threats continued**

- Clinic closing
- Uncontrolled growth
- Aging population
- Infrastructure breakdown
- Natural disasters
- Lack of broadband expansion
- Lack of dollars to implement projects
- Utility bills keep getting higher
- Drugs and alcohol
- Over population
- Loss of grocery store
- National economic downturn
- Lack of redundant communication
- Single parents lack educational opportunities
- Diminishing families with young children
- Young people leaving the valley
- Loss of 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment rights

### **Custer County has identified a number of strategic priorities. These include:**

- Develop housing
- Childcare
- Improve telecommunications
- Diversification of local economy
- Workforce

#### **Goal: Develop Housing**

The lack of housing stymies economic growth and diversity when businesses can't recruit employees because there is no place for them and their families to live. Rising rents, a lack of housing stock has been identified as factors contributing to a housing crisis.

#### **Goal: Childcare**

Custer County currently does not have a licensed child care facility. The lack of childcare has been identified as a strategic priority to focus resources.

**Goal: Improve telecommunications**

Areas without adequate telecommunications such as broadband, cell service, reverse 911, etc., have fewer opportunities for businesses to start, grow and succeed, and are less desirable places to live for employees and families.

**Goal: Diversification of local economy**

Diverse economies are sustainable economies. With a diverse economy as one industry declines it does not negatively affect the entire economy. By diversifying the economy, Custer County is less susceptible to fluctuations and economic cycles.

**Goal: Workforce**

Providing a well-trained, skilled workforce is vital to the economy. Recruitment of skilled workers as well as education and training programs will enable a diverse workforce for businesses to draw from. Skilled workers also command higher wages.

**Resiliency**

In the event of a disaster, the Southern Colorado Economic Development District (SCEDD) plays a support role to other partners in planning and recovery efforts following a disaster.

**Custer County Emergency Contact Information:**

**Custer County Office of Emergency Management  
P.O. Box 1351  
Westcliffe, Colorado 81252**

**Cindy Howard, Director  
719-783-2410  
[ccoem@custercountygov.com](mailto:ccoem@custercountygov.com)**

