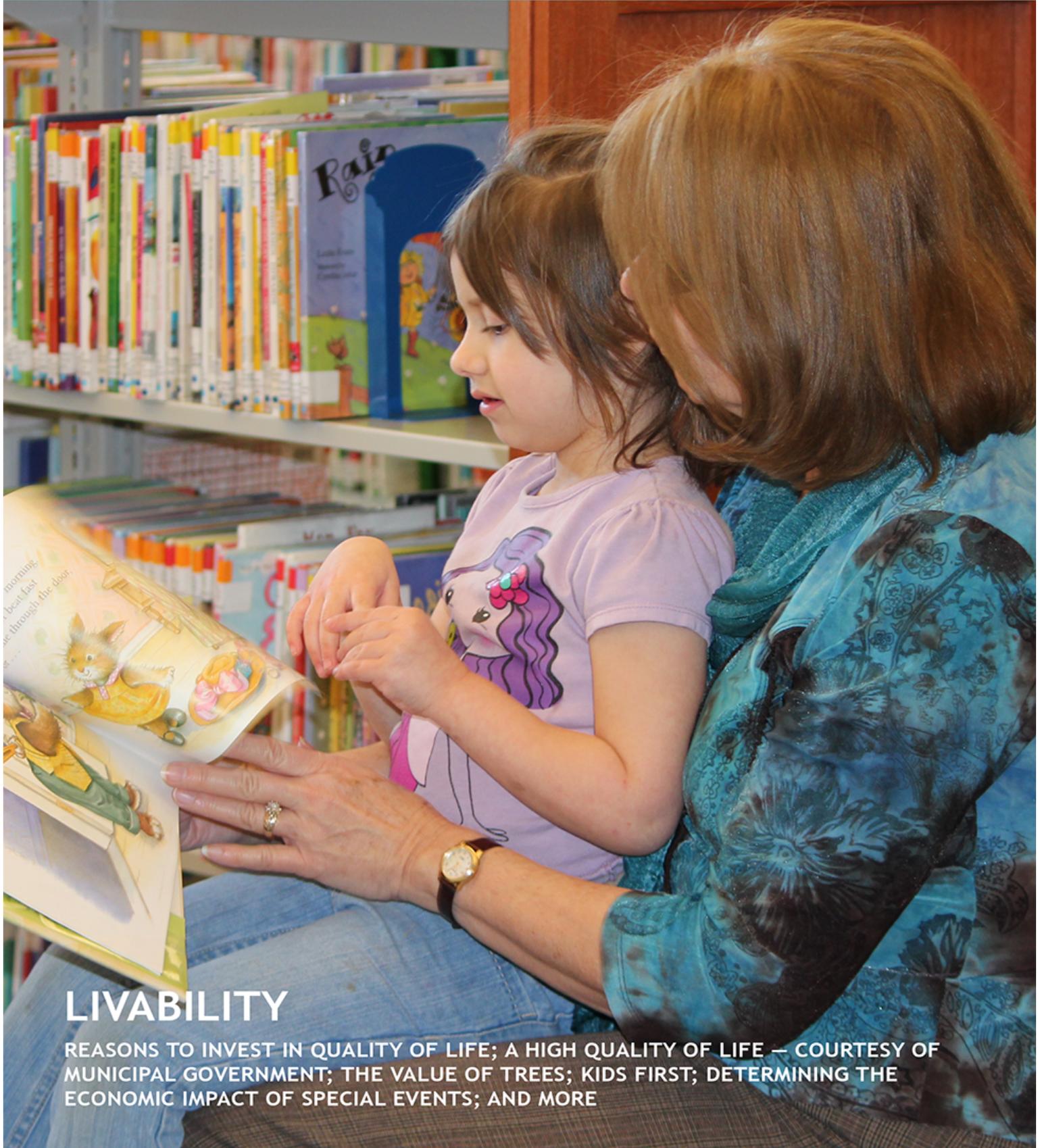


# COLORADO MUNICIPALITIES



## LIVABILITY

REASONS TO INVEST IN QUALITY OF LIFE; A HIGH QUALITY OF LIFE — COURTESY OF MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT; THE VALUE OF TREES; KIDS FIRST; DETERMINING THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF SPECIAL EVENTS; AND MORE

# HEARING FROM ALL RESIDENTS LEADS TO BETTER TOWNS FOR ALL

WHEN HIGHWAY 491 IN CORTEZ was slated for repaving by the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), municipal officials saw an opportunity to turn an eyesore entryway into a welcoming gateway.

The project happened to come up at the same time the City was busy engaging residents in Cortez Heart & Soul, which was the name Cortez chose for its Community Heart & Soul® project. Developed by the Orton Family Foundation, the method brings a broad range of residents together to determine what they most value about where they live. Cortez's story and the stories included here from other towns illustrate the power of resident-driven plans and action that is rooted in what matters most to them — in other words residents' "heart and soul."

In Cortez, improving the appearance of downtown was one of those priorities. The Colorado Department of Transportation's plans for South Broadway, as Highway 491 is called within municipal limits, did not align with what residents envisioned.

"The design was completely counter to what the Heart & Soul Team had



been hearing from residents. I called it doubling down on ugly. We had this really ugly entrance. CDOT's initial plan was to patch these old medians, and make them look like a calico cat that they would not touch again for another 40 years," Cortez City Manager Shane Hale said.

The city council responded by allocating \$650,000 to begin making changes downtown, no small amount for a municipality of 8,600 residents.

Working with a design team of landscape architects and civil and traffic engineers, the City held several design charrettes with the community. Additionally, the Cortez City Council broadened the initial design to include several streets in the downtown core, ensuring that Cortez had a cohesive plan moving forward. Knowing support existed among residents made the city council and the planning department case even stronger. Cortez approached the state with designs by the community and pushed for what they wanted.

In the end, tired and broken concrete was replaced with drought-tolerant plants, trees, and shrubs. Unsafe streetlights were updated through a partnership between the City and

Empire Electric Association. Following the project, two new businesses were built on vacant lots, welcome additions that countered the tide of development that had previously occurred only on the east side of town near Walmart. Getting CDOT to allow Cortez to codesign the highway was groundbreaking.

There was another groundbreaking aspect of the project — the role that the Ute Mountain Ute tribe played. Key tenets of Community Heart & Soul are to involve everyone and reach people whose voices had been missing. The City saw one element of the project as a chance to involve the tribe, including a missing voice and bridging a historical divide.

Design of the welcome sign was given over to the tribe, as this is its entryway to Cortez. All of the design work was conducted on tribal lands, with very little input from city leadership, which was intentional. The significance of this went beyond the signage. Having communication with the tribe allowed the town to be aware of and honor the local culture and traditions. One tribal member said that because of Heart & Soul, the tribe and city met in a way that had not happened before, providing the opportunity to talk about



historical traumas and marking the start of a change in the relationship between the two.

What happened in Cortez illustrates how community engagement lifts up a community. Engaging residents helped the City establish priorities and push for change. The result was a gateway that attracted visitors and businesses and began a better relationship with neighbors.

Involving a broad representation of residents and identifying what they love about where they live helps communities chart a course that leads to a better quality of life for everyone. Cortez is a good example of that.

Here are other examples of Colorado towns that strengthened their communities in different ways through Community Heart & Soul.

### The Golden Rule

Golden's Community Heart & Soul project helped shape a vision plan for the community of about 19,000 based on what mattered most to residents. The Heart & Soul Team, made up of residents, municipal staff, business owners, faith-based leaders, and others, engaged people throughout Golden with a series of events including block parties, interviews, and murals. About 12 percent of the population participated, a milestone for Golden. Two guiding principles emerged: responsive government, and controlled and directed change, along with Heart & Soul statements that reflected what mattered most to residents.

The City went to work embedding these statements, their "heart and soul," into its planning process and in how it did business in general. Here are a few examples:

- Development review checklists incorporated the City of Golden's values.
- Neighborhood plans were updated and included resident input.
- Department budgets and requests are required to align with the City's values.
- The city clerk uses new and different outreach tools to advertise meetings and reach more residents.
- Projects such as helping with neighborhood cleanups and cookouts now partner with faith-based groups.

"It has really given staff, planning commission, and city council a lot more confidence that they understand the desires and interests of the community, which is a helpful compass during the decision-making process," said Rick Muriby, Golden planning manager. "In my own observations, these decision makers

have been able to refer to the Golden values during particularly difficult or divisive land use hearings, sometimes compelling the applicant to do more to meet these goals in order to gain approval and sometimes to stand up to strong opposition from neighboring residents or owners."

### Rebuilding Relationships, One Recording at a Time

In the North Fork Valley, three towns participated in a shared Heart & Soul project: Crawford (population 400), Hotchkiss (population 900), and Paonia (population 1,400). Despite its small-town feel, affiliations with local industries sharply divided social life. Coal miners and "hippies," as the locals say, which includes environmentalists, artists, and newcomers, sometimes disagreed when it came to local mines.

Artists were seldom recognized as contributors to the local economy.

To build community across these divides and engage hard-to-reach people, the Heart & Soul Team recruited 14 reporters, ages 10 to 12. They were trained in how to interview people and create stories for local radio station KVNF in a program called Pass the Mic, and they did some tough reporting. For example, children of coal miners interviewed environmentalists and vice versa. The same was done across other industry sector divides. This intentionally helped to get adults to move outside their comfort zones and share their stories in a way that was approachable for youth to capture.

Pass the Mic culminated with a community event where people from across divides came together under one roof to watch the work of their children and to watch friends and neighbors who were interviewed. More than 150 people packed the theater in what was a historic moment for the community.

Seeing the valley through the eyes of youth helped the whole community

## REALIZING THE RESULTS OF POSITIVE DISRUPTION

REACHING OUT TO AND LISTENING TO A WIDER SPECTRUM OF RESIDENTS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO DO NOT typically participate in local decision making, can be challenging. But the rewards and results are tangible. A study of nine Community Heart & Soul® projects, including Cortez, Golden, and the North Fork Valley, identified the strengths of resident-driven community development.

The report by researcher and analyst Doug Easterling, a professor of social sciences and health policy at Wake Forest School of Medicine, observed that Community Heart & Soul was a “disruptive” force that pulled up issues that needed to be named and worked through in order to have a stronger foundation from which to start. For this to happen, however, a community must first discover what they love about where they live so they can start from a positive place instead of from dissent. The report concluded that Community Heart & Soul creates a critical mass of positivity.

Here are additional findings the report cited about the impact of Community Heart & Soul:

- Elected officials, municipal staff, and community leaders are guided by the values, priorities, plans, and designs that emerge from Community Heart & Soul.
- Enhanced public trust in municipal government was fostered.
- New forms of community engagement and decision-making were adopted.
- New leaders emerged.
- New and stronger relationships developed among residents.
- Civic engagement was boosted.

“There is a lot about Community Heart & Soul that’s unique,” Easterling concluded. “Most of these community planning initiatives focus on visioning, strategizing, and creating action steps. These come out of a planning process with a facilitated group of people around a table. It is very formal and structured. It is contained. Heart & Soul comes up with a vision by looking at the past and what is worth preserving and looking forward. Information is gathered in such a decentralized way through gathering stories and then analyzing them to make Heart & Soul statements. That level of engagement I have never really seen before.”

start new conversations about important issues.

### Planning with Heart and Soul

One of the reasons Community Heart & Soul works is because the impetus for change comes from within the communities, the residents themselves. In each of these projects — Cortez, Golden, and the North Fork Valley — change was directed by residents and represented what they valued and cared about, whether an improved downtown, thoughtful growth, or bridging divides. Each community has received awards for its Community Heart & Soul projects. Golden received awards from International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) and Denver Regional Council of Governments for community outreach and public

education. Cortez was recognized for community engagement by the Colorado chapter of the American Planning Association. North Fork Valley won a Colorado Creative Industries designation.

Communities that make decisions based on what they truly care about are able to make significant positive change. That is something Orton Family Foundation staff members have seen happen in towns that have undertaken Community Heart & Soul, and they are not alone in their observations.

A study by the Knight Foundation (Soul of the Community, [www.knightfoundation.org/sotc](http://www.knightfoundation.org/sotc)) found a correlation between residents who value their communities and economic prosperity. The foundation examined whether emotional attachment to

place is a factor in a successful local economy. The study looked at 10 factors in 26 towns that drove community attachment in some way, including basic services, local economy, safety, leadership and elected officials, aesthetics, education systems, social offerings, openness, civic involvement, and social capital.

The data showed a significant correlation between community attachment and economic growth.

The Knight report reinforces the value of discovering and building from a foundation of what people love about their town and what matters most to them. As Community Heart & Soul towns in Colorado and across the country have shown, a town that makes decisions and plans from its “heart and soul” is a stronger town.