




GROWTH

A tale of two Colorado counties: One the fastest growing, one the fastest shrinking

Broomfield and Kit Carson represent Colorado's urban-rural divide. One is trying to pack in new residents in a thoughtful way, while the other is hoping no one else moves out.

Jennifer Brown and **Margaret Fleming** 3:59 AM MDT on Jun 12, 2022



Credibility:  Original Reporting  On the Ground  Sources Cited





Vona, about 140 acres in area, has a population of about a hundred people. (Jeremy Sparig, Special to The Colorado Sun)





Broomfield, about 34 square miles in area, has a population of 74,000. (Olivia Sun, The Colorado Sun via Report for America)

Story first appeared in:



The Daily Sun-Up

: A closer look at Colorado's fastest and sl
00:00 / 16:22



On the Eastern Plains, Colorado's fastest-shrinking county is hanging hopes on a truck stop and two new hotels to help prevent it from becoming an expanse of farmland dotted with ghost towns.

And meanwhile, in the state's fastest-growing county, government leaders are trying to hit the brakes on what's been a rush of commercial and residential development — before there is no room left for the kind of thoughtful projects that make it a nice place to live.

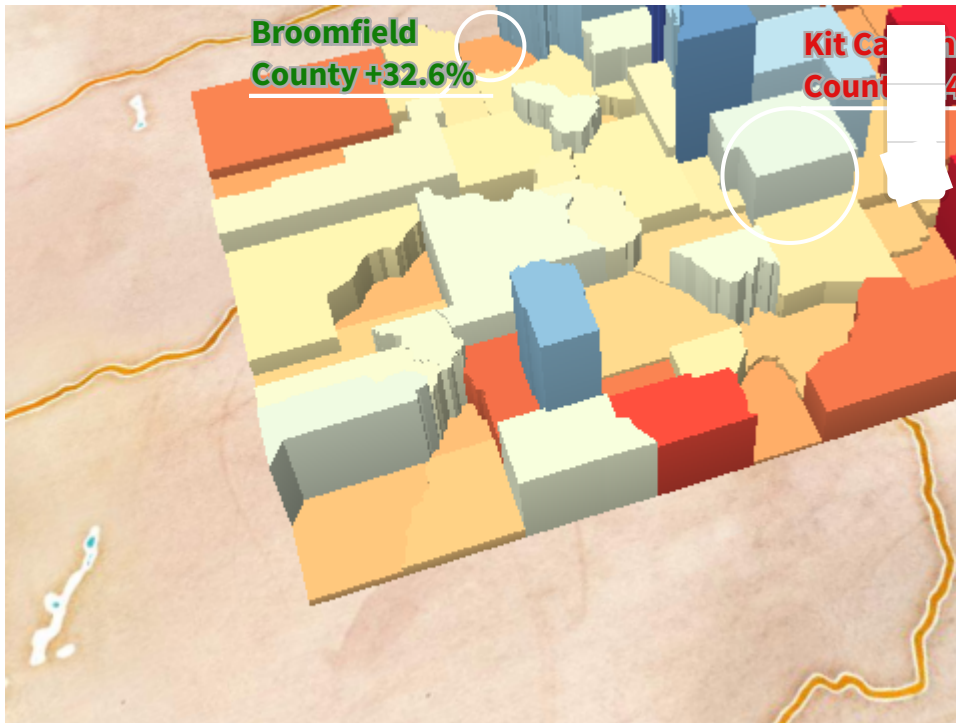
Kit Carson and Broomfield counties are a tale of opposites, representing the extremes of Colorado's country-city divide. As the state's population shifts from rural to urban, Coloradans' priorities on matters that affect their way of life have grown so far apart it can seem there are two Colorados.

Kit Carson, a 2,162-square-mile county on the eastern flatland bordering Kansas, and Broomfield, a tiny but bustling county in the heart of the Denver metroplex, don't have much in common. In the plains county, locals are cheering on businesses that sprouted in the shadow of a prison closure. And in Broomfield, as thousands more people have poured in, officials are getting picky about what new development they will allow, even during a housing crisis.



Colorado population change, 2010-2020

Hover over each county to see its percentage population change 2010-2020.
= Decrease = Increase



Source [U.S. Census Bureau](#)

 The Colorado Sun

 A Flourish chart

A review of census data shows that Broomfield’s population grew by almost 33% in the decade from 2010 to 2020 while Kit Carson County’s dropped by 14%. The two were at the opposite ends of a statewide pattern — cities are growing more crowded while farm country is losing residents. “Areas that most would consider very urban are growing, and areas that are very rural are shrinking,” said Elizabeth Garner, Colorado’s state demographer.

Population along Colorado’s Front Range, including Denver, Colorado Springs and Fort Collins, grew by about 17% in the last decade. The number of residents on the Eastern Plains, meanwhile, remained basically unchanged. In many plains counties, the population dropped. Elbert County, the westernmost of the plains counties that includes the town of Elizabeth and borders the south Denver suburbs, was the outlier with a 13% increase in residents.



But the population in towns farther from office jobs and shopping malls declined. The plains counties of Kit Carson, Cheyenne, Baca, Bent, Prowers, Otero, Yuma and Logan lost people from 2010 to 2020. The story was the same in south-central Colorado's San Luis Valley, with population drops in Conejos, Costilla and Rio Grande counties.



Broomfield seeks “cadence” as it nears capacity

When the percentages are crunched, Broomfield is the fastest-growing in part because it’s so small. The whole county is 34 square miles, an oddly shaped sliver of the greater Denver metropolis that, up until 2000, wasn’t even its own county.

Before 2000, Broomfield was a city that lived in four counties: Boulder, Weld, Adams and Jefferson. Residents used to have to drive to one of those counties to get a driver’s license or sign up for social services. It still doesn’t have its own school district, so kids in the county go to one of four districts that stretch into Broomfield’s borders.

Population in the county climbed almost 33% in the decade between the 2010 census and the 2020 census, rising to about 74,000 people. And while census data regarding age isn’t finalized, the state demographer’s office



says Broomfield County has the fastest growing under-18 population of all counties in the metro area.



City Manager Jennifer Hoffman and Jeff Romine, director of economic vitality and development, recently spread out a colorful map in shades of green, brown and gray across a conference room table, then pointed to what's left of the county that hasn't been developed. It's a few blank squares on the map's grid, representing empty fields along the east side of Interstate 25, the most northeastern section of the county.



Jennifer Hoffman, Broomfield's city and county manager (Photos by Olivia Sun, The Colorado Sun via Report for America)



Broomfield's population increased almost 33% from 2010 to 2020. Broomfield became an official county in 2000.





Jeff Romine, Broomfield's director of economic vitality and development

And unlike in the past, they're not in a rush to see lines of streets and homes plotted on their map. From here on, Broomfield is taking it more slowly, aiming to make sure any new subdivisions are not just good enough to satisfy the current housing crunch, but will help the former bedroom community move toward the future.

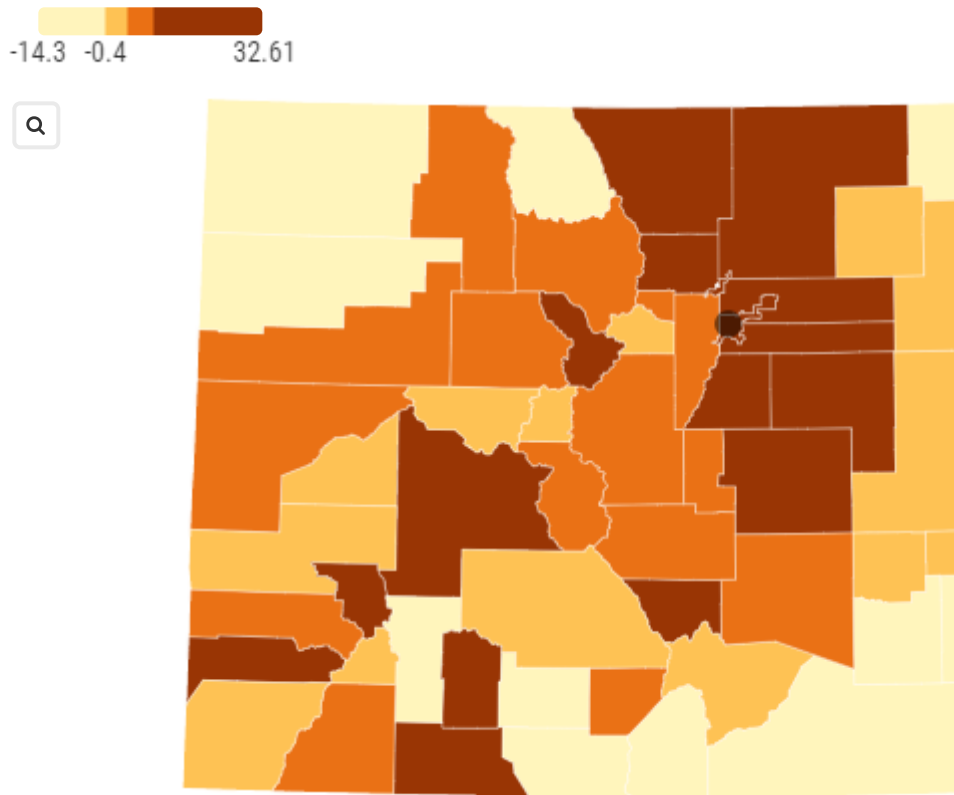
Hoffman and Romine, who took on their roles as head city-county planners in 2019, want subdivisions with hookups for electric vehicles, neighborhoods built around a public transportation plan, perhaps for carpooling vans or buses, and with an abundance of green space. The goal for the county is 40% green space, and the current share is 33%.



Population change per census data

Where are people moving? Where are they leaving?

In the last ten years, counties like Weld and Broomfield are becoming home for upwards of 30% more people. Meanwhile, Kit Carson and Bent counties are seeing the largest exoduses.



Source: [U.S. Census Bureau's cartographic boundary shapefiles, 2018 edition](#)

 The Colorado Sun

Besides, those fields along the interstate have no infrastructure — no sewer, no power — and creating it would cost millions of dollars.

Hoffman is leading the city council through eight months of “focus sessions” on commercial and residential development.

It's all happened so fast, and it's time for the county to make sure all future development choices are “deliberate,” the city manager said. Instead of accepting pitches from developers, Broomfield wants to sketch its own plan and then let developers decide whether they can build what Broomfield has pitched.





Gardens at the Brunner Farmhouse on June 3 in Broomfield (Photos by Olivia Sun, The Colorado Sun via Report for America)

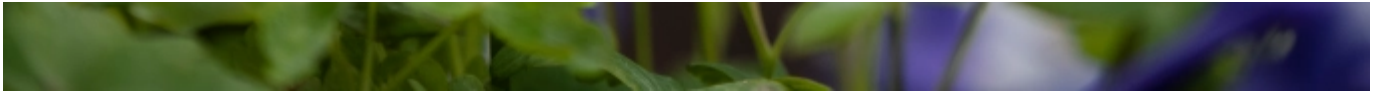




Broomfield’s city planning will prioritize more subdivisions with electric vehicle hookups, public transit, and an abundance of green space.







The Brunner Farmhouse is surrounded by open green space, of which Broomfield aims to have 40% in coming years.



A red-winged blackbird near Brunner Reservoir on June 3 in west Broomfield





Broomfield, about 34 square miles in area, has a population of 74,000.

Even as the housing crunch persists, Broomfield wants to control the “cadence” of future development, choosing where developments go and



when they come, Hoffman said. They want the right ratio of commercial and residential real estate, and the right infrastructure, including water pipes and electrical lines, to support the city.

And they have to figure it out now, before it's too late, before all the space is gone.

“Now that we are so close to buildout, we can't be thinking about new, new, new all the time,” Hoffman said. “It's very hard now because the reins have been, ‘Yeah, let's go!’ Jeff and I and our finance team have the unenviable position to be able to say, ‘OK, now we're going to rein that in.’ That's oftentimes not very popular.”



Kit Carson County shrunk when prison closed

When the private prison shut down in Burlington, the town at the heart of Kit Carson County worried what it would become. The fears were warranted — 142 jobs were lost from a facility that helped boost school funding.

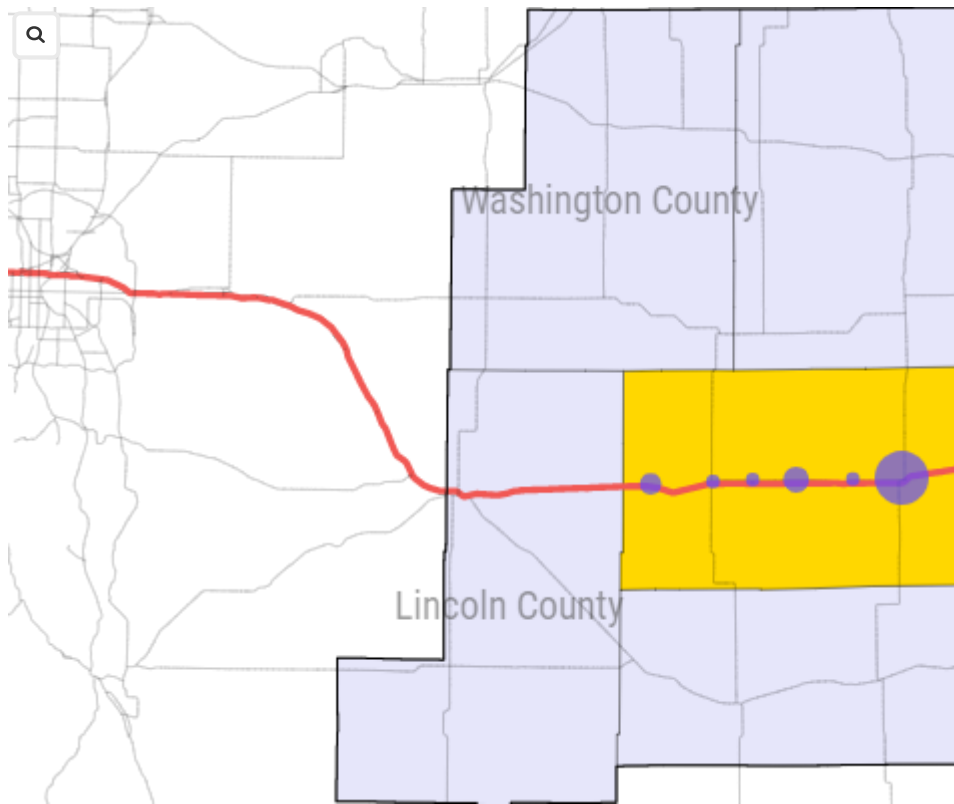
The population of Kit Carson County in eastern Colorado dropped from 8,270 in the 2010 census to 7,087 in the 2020 census. That's a 14.3% drop, the biggest in the state.



The tiny towns of Kit Carson county

The population breakdown of Colorado's fastest shrinking county

The county's six towns lie along I-70 on the way to Kansas. The county lost more than 14% of its population when the prison in Burlington closed in 2016.



Source: [U.S. Census Bureau's cartographic boundary shapefiles, 2018 edition](#)

 The Colorado Sun

“It’s not really noticeable because there’s really nothing out here,” resident Diana Gallardo said.

The main reason for the decline? Kit Carson Correctional Center closed in 2016 and prisoners are included in census counts.

The number of prisoners across the nation went down over the last decade due to criminal justice reform. In Colorado, prison populations dropped to 19,466 in 2020 from 22,980 in 2010. Eight prisons housing Colorado offenders have closed since 2009, resulting in a reduction of 4,394 beds.





Love's Travel Stop at 582 S Lincoln St. in Burlington on May 28 (Photos by Jeremy Sparig, Special to The Colorado Sun)





The Kit Carson Correctional Center in Burlington was a privately owned medium-security prison for men operated by CoreCivic from 1988 until its closure in 2016.





The Fairfield Inn & Suites by Marriott at 526 S Lincoln St. in Burlington on May 28

The prison population declined because of the state legislature's changes to mandatory sentencing laws, according to Rod Hudler, who directs economic development for Burlington, the county's most populated municipality. Hudler also said the private company that ran the prison, CoreCivic, had several nearby facilities with dwindling populations.

Many former prison workers lived in Kansas, but most who lived in Kit Carson County ended up staying. Several of the former employees found work in the Burlington school district.

"One of their head cooks actually became one of my head cooks at the elementary," said Tom Satterly, who recently retired as superintendent.





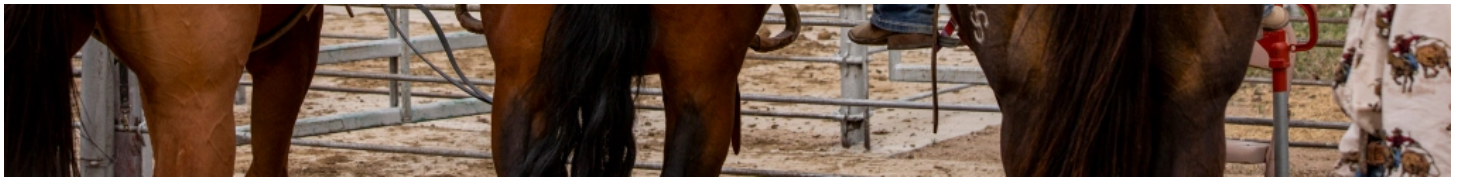
A boy competes at the Kit Carson 60th Annual Little Britches Rodeo.





A boy competes at the Kit Carson 60th Annual Little Britches Rodeo. (Photos by Jeremy Sparig, Special to The Colorado Sun)





The rodeo was held at the Kit Carson County Fairgrounds in Burlington on May 28, 2022.



Kit Carson 60th Annual Little Britches Rodeo.





A boy interacts with his horse.





Friends chat during the rodeo.

School enrollment in the Burlington district slightly improved after the prison closure. The number of funded students jumped to a five-year high in 2020. Numbers fell during the pandemic, but the district is finishing the school year with 13 more students than it did in 2020.

Community members worried about losing funding after the prisoners moved. But several new businesses have opened in the community, including a Love's truck stop, Fairfield Inn & Suites and Econo Lodge that lure travelers coming across I-70 through nearby Kansas. As the county's population went down, its assessment value actually went up.

"It's been a real shot in the arm," said Mark Hillman, the former state Senate majority leader and treasurer from Burlington. "Both from a tax perspective and from a school perspective, I think [the new businesses] took up a whole lot of the slack that would have been created by the loss of the prison."



In Broomfield, many new residents are kids

Kathryn Liguori, her husband and two kids are among the 18,000 or so people added to Broomfield since the last census. They came from Los Angeles in 2019 for her husband's job at a satellite company in Berthoud, and the self-described "purple couple" — she's a Democrat and he's not — were drawn to Broomfield's "down-to-earth" mix of politics, somewhere both geographically and ideologically between liberal Boulder County and red Weld County.



They also loved the parks, the elementary school within walking distance, the neighborhood pool down the block and the community amenities, including a water park and recreation center that cost them \$33 per month per person. There was nothing comparable in L.A., said Liguori, a former teacher who is now a remote instructional coach for a school district in California.

And although Broomfield is less ethnically diverse than she would like, Liguori enjoys the economic diversity — her kids won't grow up the wealthiest or the poorest of their friends — as well as the age diversity. On her street on the west side of town, there are senior citizens and teenagers to babysit, along with other young families. “In L.A where we lived, everyone was our age with two little kids,” she said. “I was over that.”

With the move, they went from a cramped townhouse to a four-bedroom home that's about 20 years old. They miss the beach, but now they can more easily go hiking, climbing and skiing, Liguori said. “Hopefully nothing takes us away for the next 15 years.”

TODAY'S UNDERWRITER

Young families are gravitating toward Broomfield's more-affordable (compared to other parts of the region) homes so they can have more bedrooms, its choice of school districts and its green parks and trails — the county boasts that it has more miles of walking paths than it does paved roads.

The population boom in the county also comes from new apartment complexes near the high-paying jobs of Interlocken, more spacious and grown-up apartments for the engineers, scientists and programmers compared to the tiny suites in the music-blasting, party blocks of Denver's



Lower Downtown. The business park sits beside U.S. 36, the diagonal cut-through from Denver to Boulder.



In coming years, Broomfield's city planning will prioritize more subdivisions with electric vehicle hookups, public transit, and an abundance of green space. (Photos by Olivia Sun, The Colorado Sun via Report for America)





Aloft Hotel in Broomfield is among new developments of apartment housing. (Olivia Sun, The Colorado Sun via Report for America)





A lot, pictured June 3, in south Broomfield is among new developments of apartment housing.

Farther south along the turnpike, in an area called Arista, two apartment buildings are under construction and a third is on the way.

A batch of new multifamily housing is evidence of the county's push in the last couple of years to invest in affordable housing. The city council put up \$1 million to establish an affordable housing fund and, in 2020, passed an "inclusionary" housing ordinance, which requires that developers make 20% of new apartments affordable housing or pay a fee.

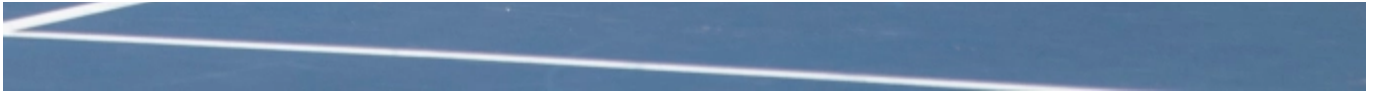
One of the buildings along U.S. 36, by developer Arista, is 100% affordable housing. And in the northeast, an area called Palisades Park and Baseline is booming, including Lennar at Palisade Park, where 28 out of 280 units are for sale on an income-based rate.

The Baseline area, along Colorado 7, also has a 1,100-acre development that, when finished, will include 8,400 housing units, plus restaurants, retail and office space. The design is European-style, with single-family homes, row homes and apartments in a concentrated space rather than spread out on large lots. About 1,000 of them are tagged as affordable housing, either for sale or for rent.

And in the southern part of the county, bordering Westminster, are the original neighborhoods, patio homes built in the 1960s. They started with young parents who then turned empty nesters who then, in recent years, sold to young families. The number of people per house rose in the last decade because of that shift.









Members of an adult tennis class on June 3, 2022, play at the Broomfield Swim and Tennis Club. (Photos by Olivia Sun, The Colorado Sun via Report for America)





Sally Miller has witnessed the turnover from her home of 51 years.

When Miller moved to Broomfield five decades ago, she could see cows grazing from her window beside the water tower. There were no stoplights. No chain stores, though Broomfield — named for the broomcorn that swayed in the fields and was actually made into brooms — had a hardware store and a bowling alley. When she moved to the town of about 7,000 people from Ohio, Miller and her husband were the interlopers, out-of-staters who came for good jobs at Western Electric.

“The old-timers didn’t like these new high-falutin young people coming into Broomfield because we built bigger houses and spent more money than the older residents did,” the 82-year-old said, with a laugh. They spent about \$30,000 on their custom-built house, and she got to pick out floral patterns for their scalloped ceilings. Now the home she’s lived in for 51 years is appraised at \$605,000, Miller said.

“McDonald’s came and we thought we had arrived,” she said. “I think Target was next.”

The days of the close-knit community where she always knew someone at the grocery store are long past, but that doesn’t mean Miller doesn’t love Broomfield. “I’m very proud of Broomfield,” she said. “That’s why I stayed.”

TODAY’S UNDERWRITER



Miller's first husband, who died a few decades ago, ended up running for city council because the couple was annoyed by plans for a new apartment building right next to their house, land that they were told would become a golf course, she said. Once elected, he pushed the city to commit to more open space, and succeeded in paring back the apartment building and forcing developers to contribute to city improvements.

Miller and her second husband, Merle, have stayed put as the southeast Broomfield neighborhood aged, then turned over to young families. They're some of the oldest residents, she said, but she'd rather live there, where she can chat with the triplets next door who are going into sixth grade and watch kids riding their bikes in the cul-de-sac, than a retirement village.

"I'm just thrilled," she said. "I like to hear them playing games in the streets and talking."



“Why would you want to go live in the concrete jungle?”

Even though the main drop came from the prison, and school numbers have remained steady or increased, there’s a different feel for some members in Kit Carson County in the last few years.

The county feels pretty sleepy to 14-year-old Marcus Lyngstad, who moved there four years ago.

“It was not exactly lively when I first moved here, but it’s certainly become more and more like a ghost town,” Lyngstad said.



Development hasn't quite reached Lyngstad's hundred-person town of Vona. He said the gas station shut down and all that remains are a post office and a firehouse.

"It's starting to get worn down and slowly started to get tired," Lyngstad said. "We're trying to get some businesses in here, but not much is going on."



Marcus Lyngstad, resident of Vona, stands for a portrait after speaking with the Colorado Sun on Saturday, May 28.
(Photos by Jeremy Sparig, Special to The Colorado Sun)





Vona along Highway 24.





An abandoned gas station in Vona.



An abandoned gas station in Vona.

New pipelines, wind farms and construction all helped raise the total taxable assessed property in a county that's mostly agricultural, according to Abbey Mullis, the county assessor. Plus, CoreCivic still pays taxes on the prison facility, even though it's empty.

Most new development in the county has occurred around Burlington, but Mullis has seen residential and commercial expansion all over the county.



“Last several years we’ve seen sales just going nuts from the west end of the county to the east end,” Mullis said.

Mullis said agricultural costs have gone up in the last decade for irrigated land because of water and chemical expenses.

“I think the ag land values hold pretty steady, now the market value, that’s a whole different animal,” Mullis said. “The whole idea is to keep taxes on ag land affordable so it doesn’t hurt the farmers so much that it drives them out of business.”

Agricultural struggles don’t end with costs and taxes, the drought or wheat-eating insect infestation. Resident Jim Wohlenhaus said it’s hard to get young people to take over the farms instead of going to college or moving to a bigger city.



“The kids are not staying and the older generation that owns the farms and ranches are getting too old to run them,” Wohlenhaus said.

Hudler said Burlington’s strong internet service is attracting remote workers and young families looking for a smaller community, while older folks come for safety and less traffic.

Gallardo said she likes that her town of Stratton is like a family community, but there were times where she felt she had to tone down her heritage. She said she was one of only two Mexican-Americans in her cl



and other students would tell them to change from speaking in Spanish to English.

“There’s not really many Mexican families or African Americans,” Gallardo said. “I think that diversity would be better for the community.”

What’s happening in Kit Carson County is a story spread across the plains. Bent County also had a prison closure in the last decade that led to the state’s second-largest downward percentage change. Its numbers dipped 13% from 6,499 people in 2010 to 5,650 in 2020.

“The city of Las Animas’ population decline is emblematic of Colorado’s rural trends with shrinking numbers in the Eastern Plains counties and movements of people into metro areas with more concentrated densities, specifically along the I-25 corridor,” Amanda Leck, the county’s economic development director, said in an email.



An abandoned building in Seibert, Colorado, along Highway 24. Saturday May 28, 2022. (Jeremy Sparig, Special to The Colorado Sun)



Gary Short, resident of Seibert, Colorado. Saturday, May 28, 2022. (Jeremy Sparig, Special to The Colorado Sun).

Fort Lyon Correctional Facility closed in 2012, resulting in the loss of hundreds of jobs and stunting multigenerational growth in the community, Leck said.

Other factors that have affected census numbers include a lack of internet availability, an aging population, hesitancy to adopt recreational marijuana ordinances, and pandemic-related underreporting and the release of nonviolent offenders, Leck said.

Seibert resident Gary Short is happy with Kit Carson County's ghost town feel.



“Less people’s OK with me,” Short said.

Short’s grandmother lived in the county until she was 110 years old. She was a journalist with eight kids and never learned how to drive a car.

“We don’t have any crime, I’m parked in the wrong direction on the street,” Short said. “Why would you want to go live in the concrete jungle?”

Photojournalist Jeremy Sparig contributed to this story.



Flagler, Colorado. Saturday, May 28, 2022 (Jeremy Sparig, Special to The Colorado Sun)



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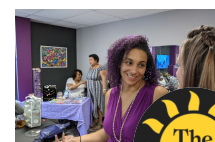
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HEALTH

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major gaps remain.

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