

AURORA, COLORADO

ICMA's Community Sustainability Award in the greater-than-50,000 population category goes to the city of Aurora, Colorado, and City Manager Ronald S. Miller for the Nature as Your Neighbor program.



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Like many Colorado municipalities, Aurora must strike a balance between accommodating new development and protecting existing natural

open space areas. Many homes border city greenways, parks, golf courses, and trails. But while homeowners may understand the benefits of living next to natural lands, they don't always understand the responsibilities associated with living so close to nature.

"Nature as Your Neighbor: The Joys and Responsibilities of Living Next to Nature" was created in 2005 to educate residents about the benefits and responsibilities of living next to natural areas. Beyond providing tips and contact information, it gives them the tools they need to safely and effectively handle interactions with their wildlife neighbors. In short, the program helps residents understand and respond to growth issues in their communities and teaches them to better respect and protect the environment.

Designed as a flexible, interactive program, "Nature as Your Neighbor" includes a 45-minute class that begins with a "call to order" of the local wild Habitat Owners Association, in which participants read meeting announcements in the voice of the "coyote" or "dung beetle." In this way this program provides humor, assures the audience that they will not be lectured, and enables residents to see human behaviors through animal eyes. Guided conversations

then allow participants to share their definitions of natural areas and understand the impacts that people and nature have on each other. The program includes the following:

- Misconception cards, from which participants read such fallacies as "I help foxes by feeding them."
- Surprise cards, which teach appropriate responses when surprise situations arise—something that people can always expect when living next to nature.
- A discussion of property lines, what they mean and to whom, and how animal roles change when residents move into their "territory."
- A lab area with pelts, skulls, antlers, recorded animal sounds and bird calls, and other interpretive resources to provide hands-on learning before or after the program.

By the end of the presentation, participants are able to identify three benefits and three responsibilities of—as well as five common misconceptions about—living next to a natural area, and can list at least two ways in which they can help conserve and protect their local natural areas from damage and degradation. They also have access to proactive information on conflict prevention and to contact information for two local land management agencies.

Staff from Aurora's parks and open space department regularly teach the course to neighborhood associations, community groups, realtors, and schools. They also have been asked to train resource



Accommodating new development, while respecting nature

professionals for open space managers in Colorado's north region, including Larimer County and the city of Fort Collins. And the course is offered whenever issues arise. For example, when coyote sightings increased throughout Aurora's open space areas, city staff distributed the program's brochure and set up meetings with neighborhood groups so that residents could learn more about what they should—and shouldn't—do if they see a coyote.

Because giving the presentations falls within the staff's normal job duties, it does not require supplemental funding. Moreover, the cost for materials needed to implement the program—note cards for the misconceptions/surprises, visual aides, rope and cards for the property line activity, lab practical items, and the brochure—is nominal.

It's easy to assume that Coloradans understand wildlife and know how to coexist near natural areas, but that is not the case. Many residents think that it is acceptable to feed wildlife, that coyotes will not venture into their backyards, and that animals will adjust to them, instead of the other way around. However, once they receive the useful tips and information, residents are quite open to changing their behaviors. More

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importantly, once a few residents are armed with critical information, they tend to share that wisdom with their neighbors.

Aurora's "Nature as Your Neighbor," the only program of its kind in Colorado, has received both statewide and national recognition. It was presented at the Colorado Open Space Alliance Conference in 2005 and at the National Association for Interpretation conference in 2006. It is a program that communities across the country could easily adapt wherever people must learn to coexist with the natural world.