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While growth slows down statewide, smalltown populations on the Front Range in Colorado boom.

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A proposed housing project could more than double the population of Calhan, a town of just 760 on the Eastern Plains outside Colorado Springs. For some small towns on the Front Range, it's a familiar situation.



Note

Colorado's overall population growth was just 0.4% last year. At a time when net migration has stagnated statewide, several small towns have seen percentage increases in the double digits in the past five years.

Chris Lowe, interim town manager for Elizabeth, said that people were attracted to the idea of rural, small-town living within commuting distance of larger population centers.

"They still want the ability to have that community feel," he said.

The town, located on the Colorado 86 corridor east of Castle Rock, has doubled its population from 2018 to 2024, the latest year recorded by the Colorado State Demography Office.

Once a town with a population hovering around 1,300, Elizabeth has ballooned to about 3,000, according to U.S. Census population estimates.

Major housing developments have driven recent growth in other small towns up and down the state's highway corridors. From 2018 to 2024, Berthoud, between Denver and Fort Collins, saw its population spike from 8,000 to 13,000 in state population records. In Bennett, a small town east of Denver Interna-

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tional Airport on Interstate 70, the population went from under 3,000 in 2020 to nearly 4,000 in the most recent estimate.

One of the housing developments driving growth in Bennett is Bennett Ranch, where just one short row of

houses now sits amid a maze of neighborhood roads and driveways ready to serve new homes as they are built. The imposing white Bennett grain elevator, which is the nucleus of the old town center, rises over the disturbed earth and construction stakes.

Bennett Ranch is an LGI Homes project. Based in Texas, LGI is one of the largest homebuilders in the U.S. The company is diversified across urban and rural Colorado, with several active projects in other small or mid-sized Front Range towns like Severance, Fort Lupton, Berthoud and Johnstown.

Calhan could be joining the list as the smallest and arguably most rural addition. About an hour away from downtown Colorado Springs, the major road through town is the two-lane U.S. 24, which slows to 35 mph at the city limits. The population hasn't changed much in decades, and the town's culture is mainly geared toward ranching.

The project proposed for Calhan is currently referred to as the North Tree annexation, and the owner of the land is Smith Land Development and Co. According to a title commitment submitted to the El Paso County planning office, LGI Homes is listed as a buyer as of August of last year.

LGI Homes did not respond to a request for comment on the project. William Vandergriff, the senior manager for Smith Land Development, declined comment.

In its most recent iteration, the North Tree annexation would bring about 475 new single-family homes to Calhan. The lot sizes in the community would be less than 8,000 square feet. There would be two neighborhood parks.

Last week, the town Board of Trustees held a workshop with an unusually full crowd for discussions about whether to allow ATVs on the roads and how often semitrailers speed through town late at night. Much of the standing-room crowd had at least heard about North Tree, and many were there hoping for updates.

"We're small-town individuals, so we don't know what to expect or what to do," said resident Kristin Roskos.

Roskos has been getting the word out about North Tree recently on social media, hoping for higher attendance at town meetings. She said she was cautiously receptive to new growth in the town, but the scale of North Tree and its lack of commercial development gave her pause.

"There is a need for housing," she said.

According to the 2025 Colorado Springs and El Paso County Regional Housing Needs Assessment, unincorporated El Paso County has a demand shortfall of 7,585 housing units, of which about 6,000 should be homes to buy. At the same time, the population of Calhan has declined slightly between the latest two censuses.

Along with population, sales tax revenue has also been declining precipitously in Calhan — a 20% decline from 2022 to 2024, according to the housing assessment.

Some residents who came to the meeting chimed in with skepticism about how Calhan's sporadic services could support so many new people and how fast business would catch up. The local Loaf ' N Jug

ran out of gas that day, one resident said. Another pointed out that Woolsey's Food Center, the only grocery store in town, was not the most fast-paced establishment.

Jamie Johnson said she never expected something like North Tree in Calhan, even as the east side of Colorado Springs encroaches.

"I never thought it would come out this far," she said.

Calhan's Board of Trustees has spent the past few months negotiating the creation of an annexation impact report, which will help town leaders understand how the housing project would affect existing infrastructure like roads and the water system.

Most recently, the board discussed its methodology for water, with several trustees hoping the town can adopt a 300-year rule before considering North Tree.

A 300-year rule refers to the theoretical life span of the underground aquifers that supply well water to the town. Under the standard, which is also applied in El Paso County, new building projects need to prove 300 years of water sufficiency. Before a developer came knocking, town code only required an unspecified "adequate" water supply.

"Which is so wrong," said Town Clerk Cindy Tompkins at the workshop.

Growth has been a divisive issue in other small Colorado towns. Not all of Elizabeth's rapid expansion has gone uncontested: Town voters soundly rejected a plan to add over 600 residential units on 425 acres in 2023 by overturning the town board's approval.

Lowe, the interim town manager, said the developer was still going ahead with modified plans by pulling the land out of the town's limits.

"Just because you don't like the development doesn't mean it's going to go away," he said.

Sometimes, small-town growing pains can be more indefinite. Berthoud Mayor William Karspeck said the town has struggled with its identity during a rapid period of growth starting about 10 years ago, going so far as to hire a consulting firm last year to workshop its image.

Since the town's tagline is "the garden spot," new residents are always hoping their backyard views of farmland will last, he said.

"They instantly get frustrated when they see another development come in," said Karspeck.

Roskos said she was worried that North Tree may not be designed to allow the kind of lifestyle that people in Calhan expect.

"You're going to want chickens," she said.

