

waterwise

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*The Voice of the
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In this issue...

PAGE 6

Shifts in Water Use
During a Pandemic

PAGE 8

High Resolution AMI
Engaging Customers

PAGE 10

Greywater Pilot
in Stapleton

PAGE 12

Sterling Ranch

PAGE 15

WaterSMART Grants

PAGE 17

Imagine a Day
without Water 2020

colorado
waterwise 

FALL 2020

AT STERLING RANCH, THE FUTURE IS NOW

by Don Ireland, contributing writer

You don't need a crystal ball for keen insight on water planning for future neighborhoods. There's a simpler way: take a drive to northwestern Douglas County. There, you can discover where the fusion of visionary planning, cutting-edge technology and a love for Colorado's beauty have given birth to a place named Sterling Ranch. A place where the importance of water is a cornerstone throughout the development.

Make no mistake, at Sterling Ranch, the future is now. Harold and Diane Smethills, whose dream of a better future began more than 15 years ago, conceived the master-planned community that will encompass 3,400 acres. Many of the first 794 lots are already sold and sales are booming. Future phases of the estimated \$4.3 billion development will include patio homes, duplexes and condos.

Harold Smethills, a Colorado native, stepped into the national spotlight a few years ago for taking an idea and transforming it into what could be the blueprint for future development in the Centennial State. The Smethills wanted a place to show their love for Colorado, nature and the outdoors.

"My wife, my team and I traveled all over the country looking at sustainability and water management," according to Smethills. Their personal goals, along

with the knowledge they acquired in their travels, makes Sterling Ranch different for many reasons:

- A fiber-optic underground cable network delivers 1 gig of bandwidth. "Better speeds than what you can find in many offices," Smethills said, noting the result was developed through a partnership with Siemens USA. "You can download the largest movie in 3 to 4 seconds."
- The same technology enables residents to monitor use of electric, gas and water service. Lumiere, Sterling Ranch's on-site technology partner, operates and optimizes the smart home and smart technology features. It helps with the community infrastructure, too. "If there is a leak in the main lines, we can detect it," Smethills said.
- Each home has a Siemens-powered, dual-water meter system, which differentiates between outdoor and indoor consumption. Indoor use is priced lower for than outdoor use.
- Each home includes Rachio smart irrigation controllers which prevent irrigation from running in the rain and can be controlled through mobile apps.

Smethills said he is proud that the development has eight award-winning builders creating homes. When a prospective buyer discusses the home they want to build, Sterling Ranch has a landscape architect to





STERLING RANCH, CONT.

work with them to design their yard. Denver Botanic Gardens assisted with the creation of a pallet of more than 150 plants. Water-thirsty Kentucky Blue Grass isn't an option – a topic that garnered attention for the development in the 2009 Wall Street Journal story, "In Arid West, Thirsty Lawns get Cut from Plans." Instead, residents can choose from designs that include alternative turf grasses and water-wise plants. The result? "It looks like Colorado and won't die in a drought," Smethills said.

It is the beauty of Colorado and residents' desire to embrace a sustainability lifestyle – coupled with the available information technology – that enable the development to boast that its water demand management goals are yielding lower, better-than-expected results. "People have taken to sustainability and have embraced it," said Smethills, "People will make the right choices if you give them the right information and don't penalize them. Residents know outdoor water is expensive. They don't have to buy water they don't need or want."

One concern for Smethills is the need to remind families to test and replace their toilet flappers every few years, to assure they're not losing water. "Your flappers are your worst enemies," he said.

The green space-rich design of the neighborhood may motivate owners to reduce the size of their yards. Pocket parks, play areas and open spaces are a short stroll or bike ride away for children and families. The community even offers home designs that enables several family generations to have their own separate personal spaces within sections of the same home.

Sterling Ranch has a prairie management plan for its open spaces and works to attract birds in collaboration with the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies. The Maintenance team doesn't use chemical fertilizers. Classes on plant care are offered by the Community

Authority Board. Under future consideration is the development of community gardens where residents can grow their own produce.

In 2009, Sterling Ranch was unanimously approved to have the state's first rainwater harvesting pilot site project. The Colorado Water Conservation Board regularly reviews data from the community's on-site weather monitoring station on site to ensure continued, long-term success.

Smethills credits the Douglas County Board of County Commissions with the foresight to approve his plans at a time when opponents had concerns for water availability and other issues. "Douglas County let us incorporate water sustainability into our land plan," he said. Sterling Ranch is supplied by the Dominion Water & Sanitation District, which manages rainwater harvesting and is a member of the Water, Infrastructure and Supply Infrastructure Partnership, a regional supply project.

Several things have made a huge difference, according to Smethills. "We changed the conversation from water conservation to demand management. Demand management means figuring out how much you need. Educating residents shows them the best things they can do, in terms of sustainability."

Smethills' philosophy is, "In the old days there was a saying around Colorado, 'whiskey is for drinking and water is for fighting.' Rather than adopt that mentality, we found that if we worked together...we could bring complete water systems that could be shared at a fraction of the cost of any one of us doing it by ourselves. Sharing infrastructure reduces costs to everyone, including our residents. Water sustainability is in everyone's best interest."

For additional information, visit [Sterling Ranch](#).