

## Interview Transcription

Interviewee: Skyler Rorabaugh, Executive Director, Estes Valley Recreation and Parks District

Interviewer: Mitchell Schaefer

Location: Estes Valley Recreation and Park District, Estes Park, Colorado

Date: July 29, 2014

Transcribed by: Zach Lewis

Abstract: As Executive Director of the Estes Valley Recreation and Parks District, Skyler Rorabaugh witnessed and responded to the area's 2013 floods. During the flood, Rorabaugh warned people away from dangerous public lands and campsites, and then he joined Parks and Rec employees in restoring vital infrastructure and services such as water, sewer, and electricity. Partnering with agencies such as the Town of Estes Park, FEMA, and church volunteer groups, the local community came together to recover from the disaster. According to Rorabaugh, the restoration and repair of public and semi-public recreational facilities was important for both economic and psychological reasons; local agencies needed the income for recovery, and locals "needed to relieve their stress, needed to get back to a sense of normalcy." Rorabaugh's agency helped by locating recovery funds, assisting in community communications and organization during and after the event, and taking advantage of networking opportunities to save time and resources. Rorabaugh stressed the importance of establishing multiple means of backup communications and the greater Estes Park community's willingness to band together to pool resources after the flood.

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MS: I am Mitchell Schaefer, a graduate student and researcher with the Public Lands History Center at Colorado State University, working on the 2013 Colorado Flood Oral History Project. Today, on July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014, at 10:00 a.m., I am at Estes Valley Recreation and Park District, in Estes Park, Colorado, interviewing Skyler Rorabaugh, who works as the Executive Director of the Estes Valley Recreation and Park District. In September 2013, Mr. Rorabaugh worked in that capacity during the flooding that affected several counties in Colorado. Today's interview will focus on his role in responding to that crisis. Could you just give us a brief background as to where you came from and how you ended up in this position?

SR: Yup. I started my career in Western Kansas. I was born and raised in Western Kansas and spent about seven years working for the Ellis Recreation Commission, ah, complete my graduate work there, as well at Fort Hays State University, and undergraduate work. And then I was, prior to moving to Estes Park, I spent six years in the Kansas City area working for the City of Bonner Springs and the Turner Recreation Commission in Kansas City, Kansas. And I've been at Estes Park since April first of 2012.

MS: What brought you to Estes Park?

SR: Just my love for the mountains and love for Colorado.

MS: Okay.

SR: You know, I've vacationed out all around in Colorado growing up as a kid, so, I always wanted to

move out here.

MS: Did you serve in the military at all?

SR: Never have.

MS: Okay. Um, what other employment opportunities have you had prior to coming here?

SR: I've mainly spent the majority of my professional career, work career, in parks and recreation, whether it is as an umpire or scorekeeper when I was really young. So I, you know, kind of fell in love with this job and this career at an early age. You know, there's been some other odd jobs through college. I had a paper route when I was really young, like, fifth or sixth grade. But for the most part, parks and rec's kind of been where I've been at.

MS: Okay. How did you get started within your position here?

SR: Um, you know, just through a variety of experiences that I've had along the way. I did work for the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks for three years, um, three different summers as a seasonal worker and junior ranger, so I've felt that I learned a little bit on the parks side and the wildlife side of things, um, so I took those experiences and tried to apply those into every day, you know, such as when we're building trails, or when we're managing water, or managing land. Um, moving into Colorado, you get a much better experience of what that exactly is because it's everywhere.

MS: Mm-hmm.

SR: And there's a lot of federal partners up here, so it's definitely different from working in Kansas, for instance, for us, so— And I think as far as how I got out here is, you know, I just started looking for a variety of different jobs out here after visiting with my wife, and we have two young kids, and my wife said, “Well, you know, if we're going to do it, we should do it now. We should make that move now.” So, she gave me the green light, and so I started looking.

MS: Awesome. So what is the purpose of the Estes Valley Recreation and Parks District, and what are some of its responsibilities?

SR: Our main responsibility is to manage, well we manage about 640 acres of land and about 250 acres of water, so we manage a lot of property, and we don't own a lot of property. We manage it on behalf of the Bureau of Reclamation, which is the Department of Interior, and, um, the Town of Estes Park. We manage some properties for them, as well as the Estes Park School District. We manage an indoor aquatic center for them. So we're managers of many, owners of few, as far as property. But just a variety of park and recreation services. We manage campgrounds in this area, two different campgrounds, an indoor and an outdoor shooting range. Um, we manage two different golf courses, an indoor aquatic center, Lake Estes, the marina that's located there, a lot of day-use areas, some park spaces, so really a pretty wide variety of experiences. About ten miles of trails. Um so, our main goal is to serve our community first, and then serve the many visitors that we have in Estes Park as well. With it being a destination in Colorado, you have to try to figure out what that happy medium is, you know, when you're trying to support your tax base that's supporting you, and at the same time support the

folks that are coming into town, you know, that are supporting our sales tax, so. We only get funded through property tax. We don't get funded through any sales tax, and it's a small portion, so we run our campground operations, our marina operations, and our golf course operations as enterprise funds. So they help generate revenue for some of our programs and some of our offerings that don't make any money.

MS: Okay. Can you describe, like, a typical day here in your work?

SR: A typical day is usually reviewing a lot of different contracts, a lot of different paperwork. My typical day has changed dramatically since the flood has hit. A lot of it is just meetings; it's going from one meeting to another. I had a staff member tell me the other day, she was like, "We don't even see you anymore." So it's, it's definitely a struggle where, you know, in the business of parks and recreation the motto is kinda "do more with less," and that's been going on for the last ten years, so everybody has a full schedule the way it is. And then you put a devastating event like this on top of it and all the different federal regulations that you have to abide by, the different agencies that you have to meet with, the different studies you have to perform. There's just a— I mean, we're learning as we go too, as we get deeper and deeper into these projects. And at the same time trying to convey that information to the community and making sure you're a good communicator; it was a big challenge for us. So, my typical day is not typical to what it used to be, but it's probably about sixty, seventy percent flood recovery and then thirty percent the rest of my job. So it's really been our managers around me stepping up, you know, making sure that they're doing their job taking care of things on the ground, and then I'm trying to, with a few other staff members, trying to take care of the flood picture for us.

MS: What was the— Can you mention any projects prior to the flood that you guys were focused on?

SR: Yep, we were focused on a regional trails plan for the Estes Valley. We invited in seven other partners for that project, which is huge for us and huge for the Valley. We have a lot of trail maintenance organizations, or managers, such as the National Park Service with Rocky Mountain National Park, the U.S. Forest Service with Roosevelt and Arapahoe National Forests. We also have Lake County.

MS: [Sneezes].

SR: Bless you. Lake County Parks and Open Space. We invited them to the table. The Town of Estes Park, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the Estes Valley Land Trust, and the YMCA of the Rockies is the other partner. Um, so we feel that we have all the major players on board for that, and then we were working towards getting the ancillary trail user groups involved. We have a cycling coalition, a running group, an equestrian group. We have a lot of small groups, and some are large groups, that have a big involvement with our trail system here. But we don't have great connectivity throughout the Estes Valley, but we have great opportunity to connect to the national forests, and to connect to Rocky Mountain National Park. So we really want to work hard on trying to get that established and get everybody at the same table, planning together, talking the same language, which is huge, for us to do all the work effectively, you know, get some major trails put into place, and to take advantage of some great recreation opportunities. That was one very large project that we had on the fore front, and at the

same time, we invited six, or excuse me, five other partners to the table for a community center project, so what we formulated there is about a \$25 million project, with partners being the medical district here locally, the Estes Park Medical Center, the Estes Valley Public Library District, the Estes Park School District, and the Town of Estes Park. Since then, since we started this back in June of 2013, we've also had a private partner come on with CrossFit of Estes Park and the Larimer County Boys and Girls Club, which is a nonprofit, as well as Valley Renaissance which is another non-profit organization. So we've had a lot of excitement behind this project. At the same time, when a lot of people are going through a very stressful time with flood recovery.

So those were, I would say, our two main projects. At the same time it's, you know, our organization's in the stage of succession planning for some of our positions, so that's a big change in a small organization where we only have about fourteen full-time staff,...

MS: Okay.

SR: ...so we have to try to do the best that we can, and if somebody leaves that's been here for twenty or thirty years, that's a lot of information to retain, and you don't want to drop the ball too much. So those were probably our big-picture things, and just developing a strategic plan was definitely on the horizon for us to put together kind of our goals for the next five to ten, and our immediate goals as well. We haven't really had an opportunity since I've been here to sit down as a staff between the fires in 2012 and now the flood in 2013. It's just— We've kind of been scrambling through and, you know, making due with what time we have together, so it's been a challenge.

MS: What are some of the rewarding aspects of this work?

SR: I think the rewarding aspects is that a lot of partnerships that form through just the devastation that has occurred. People have been drawn close together, whether they wanted to be or not, where they are kind of forced to work together, so that's good. So a lot of silos that have been there for a long time have been broken down. I think at the same time, we're definitely looking at it maybe a little bit differently than some other organizations, where we're looking at it as an opportunity to make things better than what they were before. There are certain regulations through the federal emergency management authority with FEMA on what you can and cannot do, but we are looking at kind of added-value grants to really support all these projects. And we've been very successful; I believe we've garnered about \$1 million thus far in outside grant sources beyond FEMA. So we were excited about that opportunity to make a trail experience better, to provide better ADA access, to provide just better public access to our outdoor gun range that had nearly a million dollars' worth of damage, to really integrate our trail with the creek, along Fish Creek Trail. And that was, that project had probably a million point one, point two, 1.2 million worth of damage. So really we're looking at opportunities, you know, interpretive signage. One thing we have done with a couple of our trails is we've taken, we had before pictures of the flood, and we took after pictures, and so we're kind of showing that and telling the story about the flood as well. So that, you know, kind of capturing that, these moments of disaster, but at the same time telling the story so people can appreciate that at a later date, I think is a huge advantage. And at the same time, the damage that we've had at our golf courses, we're taking a look at, you know, maybe, now that this is damaged we can take a look at reorganizing or re-aligning our

fairway to make it work better with, you know, the green or the tee box or whatever the case is. Coming in and building up stream habitat or repairing a habitat maybe in a different way than it used to be, or really trying to bring that back. Because it all ties into the destination experience and also the livability experience here, the quality of life in Estes Park. Those are things that people come here for, you know, to see the elk here, to go fishing, and you know, to catch a rainbow trout or a brown trout. So we understand the importance of that, and, you know, in our everyday livelihood as well as the destination part of it too, so. We look at it as an opportunity, more or less. At the same time it's a struggle, but...

MS: Yeah.

SR: ...those are kind of the good things that we've seen come out of it. And at the same time a lot of attention on Estes Park in general. I think we were, you know, kind of cut off from the world there for a couple days. So a lot of people, where we were on I think every national T.V. program there was for a while there. So it definitely brought some political attention up this way as well as just everyday attention, so it's exciting to kind of tell our story, you know, and show what we've done.

MS: Mm-hmm. Speaking about the flood, how did you become aware of the severity and magnitude of the flood?

SR: [Laughs quietly]. I think for me, just living through it. Just first-hand experience of, you know, our family, where we live at, we were on the last extension that got hooked up from the temporary sewer line that was put into place, so we were using a port-a-potty in September, October, November. It started getting pretty cold there, in November. [Both laugh.] So we had first-hand experience of what that was like, and then just trying to get down to the valley, um you know, the Denver/Boulder area, we had to re-route sometimes an hour, hour and a half out of the way of what our normal path would be to get down there, so it definitely felt like you were on an island for a while,...

MS: Um-hmm.

SR: ...and that really put things into perspective of, you know, what we need to do better as far as from an emergency preparedness standpoint, and then what we can do better from a reaction standpoint as well. So I think just looking at resiliency of not only people but infrastructure as well.

MS: Okay. Could you walk us through kind of those days of the flood and kind of what you remember of the events happening and how you saw the flood occurring? And then kind of describe also how the areas in Estes Park and the surrounding areas were all affected by it?

SR: Mm-hmm. Um, I think for me it was, we live about four houses up from Fish Creek, which was probably the hardest-hit area in Estes Park, and I can remember Thursday when I woke up, and I drove to work on Thursday night, drove Fish Creek Road, and I looked at our trail, and I thought, "You know, we're going to have some claims for insurance for sure." And didn't really think much more about it, it's like, man, we're getting a whole lot of rain, you know, and Fish Creek is up out of its banks, and that doesn't take much, because Fish Creek isn't much, it's a creek, it's not much of a watershed. But it turned into a great watershed. And as I came back, you know, I came into work, worked most of the

day on Thursday, did a bunch of cancellations, things like that, and you know, talked to our management team. Worked a full day, and then went back home Thursday night, and then I could just kind of, I could kind of see, and you know, as we're hearing different things before all communications went down, you know that rain's going to continue to come. So then we kind of went into emergency mode, as in, "Okay, who's going to be our point person for this communicating out to the public? Who's going to be our point person to make sure we stabilize our facilities and that we provide public safety, we keep people out of these areas?" So we started going out as quick as we could and just basically putting fences up, putting signage up, just keeping people out of areas that they shouldn't be in. The advantage that we had, I would say, was the timing of the flood in September. Our season starts to slow down in September, our tourist season, in September/October, so a lot of people, um, were kind of prepared to leave town, and a lot of our weekenders weren't coming in right then, so I think we hit it about just right. And we had that opportunity to kind of evacuate all of our campers out of our campgrounds. You know, we pretty much told everybody, "Let's get you out." All of our other facilities, we were able to communicate with people right then and there kind of what our conditions were so that we wouldn't put them at risk of coming up here or trying to stay here too long. So we really were just trying to push people out, or push people away from coming.

And then as I drove back home, I couldn't drive Fish Creek Road back home, so I had to find my way through. Friday morning, I mean, you could just, you could hear the water from the house, from my, from inside the house. It was just coming down like crazy. And there wasn't a road there anymore where I drove to work Thursday morning. So then it really just kind of set in like, "Man, this is a huge event." And as I went to every one of our facilities Friday morning just to, or the facilities I could get to, just seeing the amount of water and destruction that had already occurred, and knowing that as soon as that water subsides there's going to be even more underneath that. That, I think, was probably the hardest thing, because first of all you're kind of in shock, emergency mode, you know, do what you can. And you can't really do anything. I mean you can do some things, but I mean in the magnitude of things it's very minimal of what you can do. It's not like you're going to stop that water or anything. So really it's protecting yourself. It's protecting your family; you know, and it's protecting other people's safety, so that was kind of our goal was just public safety as number one. And what we did with our resources after we kind of figured that we had everything closed off and safe for the public here, we took all of our resources and helped like the Town of Estes Park, and we helped the Sanitation Districts here locally, because that was more, you know, people needed electricity, and people wanted sewer systems, so we kind of put ourself on the back burner and moved all of our efforts into that area.

MS: Okay. [Clears throat]. How was the local economy affected by the flood?

SR: Pretty dramatically, to be quite honest. We've made some business interruption claims with our insurance company, but it's— between the fires in 2012 where we lost probably three weeks of our busiest part of the season because of all the smoke and just bad press, whether Estes Park was affected or not, it made everybody, outside of Estes Park, it appeared as though we were. So it's kind of two years in a row where we have this, and you know, it was, you know, "Estes Park is flooded; Estes Park is closed down," and honestly we recovered pretty quickly, you know. Our crews between all of our local governments were on the clock, it just seemed like twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week,

cleaning stuff up, debris removal like crazy. But it was, it definitely hit us hard. We've— I think we completed about forty percent of our capital improvement plan in 2012 and maybe fifteen to twenty percent in 2013. So we just had to delay all these projects, you know, and when you delay projects, that asphalt's getting older; that building's getting older; that equipment's getting older; it's not in any better condition. So you're going to end up paying more in the long run. So that really has probably impacted us the most, and at the same time a lot of our managers that we work with—our team here that we work with, whether it's managers or part-time people—they take a lot of pride in our facilities, and what they do, and so they want to reinvest money back into it and they want to create a good experience. And not being able to do that for two years in a row, is, is hard for a lot of people to take, and at the same time it's, you know, we may not be able to give you a raise. We may not be able to do this, that, or the other, and since the economy has went down, that's been a challenge for a lot of public agencies just to simply give a salary increase. So going through two years of that plus putting devastation after the disasters on top of that, I know it's been a struggle for, you know, some of our staff, definitely to work through and navigate through that.

MS: Um, within your office and within the community as a whole, how are those effects still being felt by the residents and the businesses?

SR: I think it depends on who you talk to. Some folks definitely were not, um, didn't feel the effects and the damages, you know, and the repercussions as much as others. Honestly, you could have drove into Estes Park probably four months after the flood and not even known that we were hit by a flood, if you don't look at the roadsides that you're driving up.

MS: [Laughs].

SR: But if you stay away from the water sheds, the waterways in Estes Park, you know, we look pretty decent. For the most part we recovered pretty well and pretty quickly. But we have long-term projects, long-term recovery ahead of us, and where some people think, “Well, it's over,” for me, you know, it's really not. It's just now starting for a lot of this with some of these bigger projects, you know, the multi-million dollar projects that we need to recover for, and just rebuilding watersheds and making us more resilient and hopefully sustainable over time, if and when another one of these disasters occur, because we know it's not going to be the end of natural disasters. So it's been a challenge, and I think the other opportunity that I did leave out from your earlier question is the community center project that we've been working on. We now see that we truly can use a, ah, kind of a “full-service” evacuation/emergency response center in this community. That's something that we don't have. Since the fires and the flood, we've changed that location from a church, to a school district, to a conference center. Um, it's been moved around a lot; there's not really one location that can serve everybody well that wouldn't impact their bottom line somehow. You can't use the school district when school's in session; I mean it's almost impossible. You can't really use the YMCA of the Rockies when they're in the busiest part of their season. You know, they need to make their money, and they have a service they need to deliver at the same time. But when they're in that evacuation area of the fire, there's thousands and thousands of people up there, and where are you going to put all those people? They're not going to fit in a church. And at the same time, the conference center is the same way, they have bookings, um,

and they have different events that they're going to be hosting, so what our community is really kind of getting behind is this idea of utilizing the community center as an evacuation center, so we're really trying to push that hard with the State Office of Emergency Management.

MS: Which stage is that project in?

SR: We just wrapped up our feasibility study this month, so we're, we put in a notice of intent through the Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery Fund to assist in funding this project. And our community passed a sales tax in April, April 1 of this year, 2014, um, to provide about \$5 million worth of funding over a ten year period to help build the senior service's adult, active adults division of the community center. So it's a \$25 million project, and we're about \$7 million of the way there, so we still have some additional fund we need to raise before we get into construction.

MS: How long do you think, um, construction would take to build it?

SR: It's probably going to take a little over two years, depending on our construction season up here. It is sometimes very questionable because of the weather, so I'd say no more than three years, but probably two to three years. It's an 85,000 square foot facility, so it's a pretty large facility, so it'll take some time to build.

MS: Okay, other than what you already discussed, were you directly involved in any flood management, recovery, or relief to any extent?

SR: We partnered with a whole lot of agencies, mainly with the town. We assisted with whatever we could, whether it was storage of equipment, whether it was bring our resources over, I was involved with speaking at town hall meetings almost every day, multiple times a day. We tried to help as much as we could with the recreation to be quite honest. We still had people contacting us saying, "Hey, when's the golf course going to open? Hey, can I go on the trail? Can I go to the aquatic center?" People needed to relieve their stress, needed to get back to a sense of normalcy, and so we were able to really kind of step in, which is part of our role in this community is kind of bridge that gap. But we helped with whether it was sandbags, whether it was debris removal, you know, it just wasn't based on our facilities and what we needed, but it was really based on the greater good of the community. So if the town asked us to step in for a certain role with the sanitation district, putting up fences, whatever the case may be, you know, that's exactly what we did. We tried our best to get things open. The dog park, I mean, it was amazing at how many people just were requesting that specifically. You know, and then it was kind of putting things on hold and even helping our neighbors at the same time, you know, pull stuff out of their basements or get water out, bail it out, pump it out, whatever the case is. So really just kind of was wherever we could help, that's what we did, we just stepped in, did what we could.

MS: Within your jurisdiction of all the parks and rec in the area, how much of just your oversight was affected by the flood? Was the golf course affected?

SR: We had about \$4 million total of damage throughout our district, which is a lot for our district. We have a \$3 million annual budget, so that can kind of put it in perspective. And the way the FEMA programs are set up—the Federal Emergency Management Authority—you kind of, basically you

spend down your cash reserves and then you make sure that you get all your documentation in place, and then you have the opportunity of getting reimbursed. So it takes some time, and it takes a lot of good planning to get that done. So when I say that work's just starting for us, our two biggest projects, where we had \$1.2, \$1.3 million worth of damage for Fish Creek Trail, we're just getting into that, more on the design stage of things, and the outdoor gun range where we had just under \$900,000 worth of damage, you know, we're just getting into stages like that. But it's really trying to plan, you know, what stage can I complete now with the cash reserves that I have on hand? Or what other outside source of money can I bring in to help me assist so that I can get these things repaired? So that's a challenge and at the same time we're trying to figure out, you know, where can we take advantage of opportunities like the blasting operation on Highway 36; we brought a lot of that rock up. We've used that in a lot of our projects. Just donated resources from our other government agencies has been huge. We had to close down both of our campgrounds, both of our golf— We had to close down everything. I mean everything was damaged to be quite honest, that we manage. Everything was under water, either that or it was contaminated with sewage, such as, like Stanley Park is our destination park. The dog park was under layers of sewage and just debris; it was absolutely disgusting to be quite honest. The golf courses, we had part of our hole six washed away, hole five at the nine-hole golf course. We had up to sixteen inches of silt that was deposited throughout an entire fairway. Just a whole lot of work, and we're still not recovered at the nine-hole golf course. We need to come up with a long-term sustainable plan, because all that sand and sediment that washed down—36,000 cubic yards of sand and sediment washed down into Lake Estes—so that instantly the water table's just going up. So we had standing water on our nine-hole golf course until June of this year.

MS: Wow.

SR: So just unplayable areas that once again affects our revenues that are coming in; it affects our play. That word gets out and it spreads like wildfire, and then people aren't going to come up here and play the course, so it's definitely kind of a trickle-down effect for us. Our eighteen-hole golf course we were able to get our seventeen hole repaired, we lost about probably an eighth of our fairway, um, in that area, and so we just kind of made a decision that we'll make the fairway a little bit more narrow. But at the same time we were able to bring in some more sustainable construction, and really we were able to kind of just re-design that hole, in the green area as well as the approach. And we've gotten a lot of good compliments at that; we were featured in Divot Magazine with the repairs that we made, so that was great, great press for us. But for the most part, you know, we had to close down our campgrounds, our water system got destroyed at one of our campgrounds. You know, a lot of camp sites, store buildings got flooded. I'm just trying to think of everything. Our marina, there was so much sand and sediment and material that washed in we had to dredge everything out of that area, it actually busted the concrete on our boat ramp, just a variety of different things. Our trails just were just annihilated. Out of our ten miles, we lost probably five and a half miles of ten miles total, just completely. So just a whole lot of work there, too.

MS: How well-prepared do you think your office wa-or-ah, was for the challenges of this flood?

SR: I would say we came together very well. We met, you know, at the beginning of the day, at the end

of the day, and everybody brought to the table everything that they could, whether it was, you know, our part-time people that usually wouldn't stay on and work beyond October, they ston— stayed on the entire year with us. And that's another thing that I don't think a lot of people understand maybe, is just how impacted your budget gets through this process because you're payroll is not going to go down any more. It actually, it went up for us tremendously. And at the same time, we're not bringing any money in that we usually count on. Um, and we offered a lot of events, whether it was for the adults, you know, we did the Mountain Strong thing, for the adult gathering, and we did a, we partnered with some other agencies, the YMCA and the library to do a Mountain Strong Kids event. Um, and then we did like a flood disaster camp for kids, where we basically just watched kids all day, while parents could work in their homes and get things, you know, halfway to a manageable level for 'em. But as far as preparedness, I know we could have been better prepared, but I don't know how. I think you can have the best preparation plan for any natural disaster, but everyone is unique. And I think at the end of the day it's how well you can rally around each other and you know how you can provide safe facilities, and at the same time minimize damage and have great communication out. And I think we did a pretty good job of communicating out to folks, whether it was knocking on doors to make sure people were okay, you know, or if it was just having the town hall meetings, you know, multiple times a day just to keep people informed and let people know that, hey, Safeway's going to drive a truck over the top of Trail Ridge to bring in milk and eggs and bread, because we were, Safeway was sold out. You couldn't buy gasoline in town; we were out of gasoline. It was kind of bare bones there for a while and kind of scary for a lot of people because it was like, "Are we going to have gas? Are we going to have bread, milk, cheese, eggs?" Chlorine was another big thing, because we didn't have sewer. So people were coming in buying chlorine as quick as possible, you know, and setting up their own toilet systems at their house, so it was an interesting time, those two or three days immediately after the flood.

MS: Yeah. That's, um, kind of my next question, is for a few days, Estes Park was almost completely cut-off, or was it completely cut-off, or...?

SR: It was. I think we had some ham radios that were able to connect out, and we did have a small pocket I think of internet service that was still working.

MS: Okay, but there was no way to get in and out of the valley?

SR: No, there wasn't.

MS: All the roads were cut off?

SR: Yeah, it was helicopter only.

MS: How did the residents here, we kind of talked about this, how did the residents manage themselves during that time and what was the supply of resources, how was that a concern? I haven't, what other issues did you, did this town, confront?

SR: Um, I think a lot of it was just word of mouth, you know, what do you have and what don't you have, and everybody just kind of brought that together, whether it was, you know, like Crossroads Ministry in town, or if it was, you know, a variety of the churches really banded together, like the

public government agencies, private businesses. Our private contractors brought all their equipment out and were helping wherever they could as well. It wasn't like anybody was billing anybody at the end of the day for anything; it was just, you know, we all pitched in and did what we could. And it got to the point, we, we really could have used an evacuation center at that time to bring everybody in, because *that* moved I think two or three different times just in a short period, and then people didn't want to leave their homes, so they much rather would have had an evacuation center close, like folks in Pinewood Springs or Drake or Glen Haven or Big Elk Meadows, Allenspark, Meeker Park area, you know, we could have been that source for them, rather than them potentially having to leave and go to Loveland/Fort Collins/Greeley area to be evacuated, and then knowing that it's a four to five hour trip to get back to my house, if I can even get back to my house, because you don't have a vehicle, you don't have a means of transportation getting back, so a lot of people were very reluctant to leave. A lot of people hiked into Estes Park from those outer areas, and then the motels opened up rooms for those people to stay, you know, the people that ended up being trapped here, for the employees. Because that was the other thing: so many people commute to work here, whether it's at the medical center, at Harmony Foundation, the YMCA, some of our employees, the town's employees, I think eighty percent of the police force commutes here, so just even having police. It was a strange feeling; and I guess kind of a strange time. But at the same time people tried to rally together and helped out wherever they could.

MS: Where were most of those people commuting from?

SR: Loveland, you know, Boulder-Longmont area, Fort Collins.

MS: Okay.

SR: But it got to the point, you know, there were so many Chinooks flying in and flying people out that, [Lawnmower outside window], I know when I was a kid growing up, and even today as an adult, whenever I hear a helicopter above I always look up, just naturally. But it became so normal to hear helicopters flying over all day long...

MS: Really?

SR: ...that you just didn't even look up any more after a while.

MS: Was that the National Guard primarily flying those in, or who was that?

SR: I think a variety of agencies, mostly the National Guard, mostly the federal government, was flying a lot of those in. You know, T.V. stations were flying in; there was also a variety of other emergency-type helicopters that were scanning all the damage in the area as well, so it was interesting.

MS: Um, to what extent did your office find itself involved in unprecedented interaction with other agencies that were also involved with flood management?

SR: Well for me, that's going to be kind of a difficult question to answer just because I have, I had only been at Estes Park for a short amount of time, so where it may have been unprecedented for some of our other staff that had been for a longer time, to me it was probably more normal, or hey, it's just

asking our neighboring agency or the federal government to come in and help out. It wasn't a huge deal, but definitely communication with the State of Colorado, our federal agencies. But we manage a variety of federal land, so we have kind of regular interactions, at least, or communications with those groups. So it wasn't as unprecedented, um, from my view point, but I think for some of our other staff it may have been. So I don't know if I can really give you a great answer on that one.

MS: What kind of, um, agencies—what agencies did you get involved with?

SR: We got involved a lot with the National Parks Service at that time; um, they really had the only road going out, that they were able to open up with Trail Ridge. Um, we talked a lot with the State Office of Emergency Management, which is not a regular, or even yearly event that, so that would be unprecedented for us. You know, Governor Hickenlooper was up here quite a few times in the immediate— Larimer County was very involved, well, I'd say Larimer County was involved, um, for sure, but you know, they had a lot of other issues concerning themselves with the Loveland/Fort Collins area as well. And as far as federal agencies, just coming on site, whether it was FEMA was the main one that came in right away. And so that's, I should, yeah, that's unprecedented for us. You don't ever want to see FEMA; you know, usually when they show up it's not a good thing.

MS: What were the most important lessons that you learned from the 2013 flood with regard to either preparation, planning, management, or recovery from water disasters?

SR: I think just having a strong communication line is, I think, A, number 1, the most important, not only within your organization, but how you communicate out to other organizations. And then when communication lines fail, then what is your recourse at that point? What's your Plan B? What's your Plan C? What's your Plan D? Because we take a lot of that for granted, because we have so many ways of communicating with one another in this day of age, with technology, that we all, I think we all take it for granted, I'm sure. But then when we're faced with that, it's kind of like, okay, well what do you do now? And it honestly ended up being word-of-mouth, and the best way we could get information out at a local level was knocking on people's doors, you know, something you'd have done probably seventy years ago, maybe. So that was probably the biggest lesson that I took away from it is just communication, and then just public safety, for our public but, not only our public but for our team, as a team district here, is how can we take care of each other, because you don't want to lose employees, you want to make sure that employees are comfortable when they're here, knowing that their family's in a secure place and safe place as well. So I think those are most important, as well as inventory. What do you have in this time of disaster at our restaurant? At our marina? You know, as far as perishable items, extra water on hand. We didn't know what our water situation was even, we didn't know if it was safe to drink, safe to shower, whatever the case is. So there were just a whole lot of question marks for everybody, so it's kind of like, well, what do we have that we can help not only ourselves but the community with? So those would probably be the three biggest takeaways for me.

MS: You briefly mentioned, ah, communications a couple of times. Could you describe a little bit more, like, what was the communication concerns of television, internet, phones, radio, how were those working, not working, during and immediately after the flood?

SR: I don't think television was working at all. Um, we had pockets of internet that was working, and we tried to relay, relay that information out to the greater community, saying, "You can go here to get internet, to let your family know, whether it's on Facebook or via email, or Twitter, whatever the case is, to get your information out." But we didn't have any phone lines; we, no, I take that back. We did have, no we didn't have any phone lines for a while, but then we had local landlines. We couldn't dial out, but we could dial locally. We had no cell phone coverage. They flew, one of their helicopters flew in cell phone towers and did a bunch of repairs, and then I think they came back up on Sunday, and they were down Friday or Thursday night to Sunday, I think, is what it was. Um, but definitely your relied-upon means of communication were not there.

MS: Was satellite television working at all? Or was that completely down too?

SR: No, it was completely down, too. Yeah, so it was old-fashioned, let's put some puzzles together and let's play some cards. [Both laugh]. Yeah. Not a whole lot of us were doing that, though. We weren't, as a staff, unfortunately, but—

MS: You mentioned that some homes near where you live were affected. Was your home directly affected by the flood?

SR: You know, we were very blessed and not be affected. We had some groundwater come in through our—in our garage, but our house is built on the side of a rock, and so there's an actual, there was a drainage system installed at that time, because during spring runoff, water always comes up, but then it comes down that drain. So all the water that we did get, in from underneath the home, went right out that drain, so gravity just took it out, but it did set in on our third garage. And we had, you know, maybe, I don't know, five or six hundred dollars' worth of damage. I mean, in the grand scheme of things, nothing. But plenty of neighbors around me, we helped tear carpet out of, and, you know, four homes down from us they lost a vehicle. They lost part of their home, their deck. They lived right on Fish Creek, so it was really rough to see, you know, because there's such a magnitude of who is impacted and who isn't, and two homes down, you may not have had a thing happen to you, but if you're right in that watershed, then you most likely lost something for sure.

MS: How does the flood of 2013 compare to any other natural disaster event that you have experienced within your own lifetime?

SR: It's by far the most devastating from a financial standpoint for sure. And I think even an emotional, it was the worst I've ever had. And I've went through probably five different tornadoes, um, one kind of major tornado growing up in Kansas, you know. And the fires in 2012, which were right in our back door, with the Woodland Heights Fire and the Fern Lake Fire. But definitely not near as all—I mean, it was so widespread the flood was; it was just, it was amazing. Just to know that everything is shut off from you: you're here in Estes Park, and that's where you're going to stay pretty much, for a while.

MS: Um, the people around you, who did they turn to for help?

SR: Um, you know, the churches served I think a great role in all this, and one of the churches still is the lead agency for flood recovery and organizing all the volunteer groups, all the supplies, everything

like that.

MS: Which church was that?

SR: Rocky Church.

MS: Okay.

SR: They're doing a fantastic job, you know. They partnered with the town and basically said, you know, "We feel that this is our role." So they've taken it over. The town has kind of handed that off to them, and they'll be doing that for quite a few more years yet to come I'm sure.

MS: So what have they been doing in that role, exactly?

SR: We have just an enormous amount of volunteer groups that have been coming into town, you know, hundreds of people, in groups, whether they're teenagers, you know, youth, or organized adult groups that, I didn't realize there was this many volunteer groups around that responded to natural disasters like this. So that has been a great opportunity to meet people, grow your network, and really just, you know, appreciate them. They host an appreciation breakfast I think, every Thursday morning, for all the volunteers that show up. All the donated supplies, whether it be from a federal agency or local people, they divvy those out to different people. If it's a water tank for somebody that doesn't have water anymore in the Big Elk Meadows area or Glen Haven. If it's shovels; if it's diapers, I mean, anything that your family needs, you know, shampoo, food, they're giving all that out to people that need it. You know, and you fill out a form, you do a little bit of work, but I don't think they're really turning people away. They are trying to, at the same time definitely, where the demonstrated need is, that's where they're trying to put their resources. But that's really kind of what their role has been in flood recovery, and I think a lot of people reached out to, you know, private contractors and Estes government agencies, just saying, you know, "What can you do to help me, or how can you help me?"

MS: Okay. Are there any topics that we've covered that you'd like to return to for clarification?

SR: I think I'm pretty comfortable with what you've asked so far.

MS: Okay, are there any other topics that you'd like to address that we haven't discussed?

SR: Not that I can think of. I can't think of anything, so.

MS: And finally, is there anybody else who you think we need to be talking to within this project?

SR: I think it'd be good to reach out to Rocky Church. I mean, I think they could give you a good idea of all the different groups that have come in and how they've served the community. Obviously the town would be a great one to visit with. And the Fire District. I haven't mentioned the Fire District much but those folks were so overwhelmed, I could only imagine. And that's mainly a volunteer-based organization; I mean they were just rescue after rescue.\* I think I heard from their chief that they rescued the same person three times, the same family. So just instances like that, where people don't

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\*See 2013 Colorado Flood Oral History Project, Interview with Jason Gdovicak, Glen Haven Volunteer Fire Chief.

want to leave their home or their belongings or, you know, kind of their livelihood, where they keep returning, keep returning, but, just situations like that, it just, it amazes me where I think we played a very, I think we played an important role, but a very small role in the grand scheme of things, compared to what the town was doing, what Larimer County Sheriff was doing, what the Fire District was doing, you know, our ambulance, medical services, you know, those folks definitely were tasked with an unbelievable event, you know, that I think all of us had some preparation for but, like I said, you can't prepare for how everything unfolded and what unfolded. But I think we responded pretty well.

You know the other thing that I will add is I think it was very devastating to our economy from the sense not only that we received poor press, that, you know, Estes Park is closed because of the flood, and that we had fires and flood in consecutive years, but we lost I think around, maybe you could talk to the school district about this. You know, our kids couldn't go to school for a while because they didn't have sewer, so I think emotionally a lot of people are definitely still, I think, trying to recover, still recovering, but we lost I believe sixty kids in our school district, which is huge for our school district when we only have about a thousand total students.

MS: They went to other school districts?

SR: They did. They moved out, and a lot of those families that moved out are a part of our work force, you know, our blue-collar workers that are, you know, working the housekeeping jobs, working on our golf courses, you know, working for the town, maybe one of the town departments, or— So when you lose sixty kids and you lose parents beyond that, then, you know, our population dropped at the same time as homes got destroyed, and that's just taxing agencies when you rely on property tax, sales tax, to help fund what you're doing, and that's gonna to go down at the same time. It's just a combination of all these things that really put things into perspective for you: how, how can you become more of a resilient community and more of a sustainable community? And I think that opened a lot of people's eyes, and I hope that they keep their eyes open into the future. I hope that it just doesn't, kind of like, “Okay, you know, we've made it this far so now we don't have to worry, and we'll just get things back to normal.” But I think there's definitely some big-picture things that we need to address for this community, because we're primarily a retirement community up here, but yet we rely on, you know, a lot of people that are working eight to twelve dollar-an-hour jobs, you know, to make this destination work up here. And some teachers that we lost, some great teachers, because they don't want to make the drive up from Boulder anymore, because it definitely put things into perspective for a lot of people: doctors, you know, that we had to get flown up here, they commute. So it's an interesting time for us, but at the same time, I think, a lot of us, I don't think, I know a lot of us are working through these and we're coming up with plans collectively, all these government agencies, on how we can address this and make it a better community.

MS: Hmm. Well, it's been wonderful talking to you, so thank you for so much for your time.

SR: Yeah, I appreciate it.