

Just a handful follow short-term rental rules in Jefferson County; officials aim to pull hundreds more into compliance

There are less than 20 registered properties in unincorporated part of the county

By **JOHN AGUILAR** | jaguilar@denverpost.com | The Denver Post
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KITTREDGE — Laura Hayes picked up a binder at least 2 inches thick — all of it documentation needed to rent out her house to strangers — and laid it on her kitchen table.

“It’s endless, endless red tape,” she said, as permit applications and room-by-room photos of her property spilled out of the folder. “The amount of paperwork to remain compliant is non-stop and exhausting.”

The worst thing about it, Hayes said, is that she is one of only 17 property owners registered with Jefferson County to legally offer short-term rentals in the unincorporated parts of the county — the vacation listings that most commonly appear on websites like Airbnb and Vrbo.

Yet, the county believes that at least 500 property owners rent houses or rooms across unincorporated Jeffco on a short-term basis — only they do it under the radar. No fees, no inspections, no permits.

Hayes suspects the number of non-compliant landlords in the county may be much higher.

“I think everyone should have to play the game,” said Hayes, who relies on her rental property near Kittredge, dubbed Creek Stone Cottage, for more than half of her annual income.

Twelve miles to the south, William Judy also plays it straight, having paid for and renewed his short-term rental permit with the county for the past three years. He rents a home he owns just east of Aspen Park for \$350 and up a night.

“I feel like the county should be holding these other people accountable,” Judy said. “And if everyone was playing by the rules, they could reduce the fees.”

The first-year cost to offer a short-term rental property in unincorporated Jefferson County is nearly \$3,000, which includes a \$750 permit fee, an \$800 application fee, a \$200 hearing fee and a \$200 review fee. The charge drops to \$1,150 a year in subsequent years, a county spokeswoman told The Denver Post.

That is substantially higher than what some cities inside Jefferson County, which run their own short-term rental programs, charge their residents. In Wheat Ridge, the fee for a permit is \$200 a year. That same \$200 will get you a two-year short-term rental license in Golden.

In Arvada, the cost is \$110 for an annual permit.

Chris O’Keefe, planning director for Jefferson County, knows the county’s short-term rental rules aren’t perfect.

“We want to find that balance where the fee is not discouraging people from applying,” he said. “Our goal is to have regulations that everyone will come into compliance with.”

22 complaints so far in 2022

To that end, Jefferson County held an online public meeting last week as part of an effort to revamp its short-term rentals regulations, which have been in place for a decade. A draft of new rules is expected to be released this autumn.

Requirements today include a one-acre minimum for the property being rented, adequate parking at the site, defensible space around the house to protect against wildfire, and up-to-date water and sanitation — as most mountain properties are not on municipal water and sewer.

During the meeting, county planning and zoning officials got an earful about high fees, the one-acre minimum, absentee landlords — and party houses. One man told participants in the meeting that he never rents out his property for one night only.

“That means parties, parties, parties and problems, problems, problems,” he said.

Cities and counties in Colorado have long grappled with the impact of short-term rentals, especially after the rise of popular vacation home listing services on the internet.

Five years ago, Denver licensing officials [issued more than 1,000 violation notices](#) to landlords who broke the city’s new short-term rental rules. Several were criminally charged with felonies for falsifying documents related to their rental properties. That led hundreds of Denver property owners to [surrender their licenses, and dozens more to withdraw their applications](#), in subsequent years.

Compliance with Denver’s rules, however, [has soared since City Council decided at the beginning of last year](#) to fine booking providers like Airbnb and Vrbo up to \$1,000 a day for allowing customers to book an unlicensed rental. The compliance rate across all short-term rental companies in Denver is now estimated at around 90%. And last year, Airbnb [blocked or redirected potentially risky reservation attempts](#) from more than 2,600 people in Denver who the company suspected of wanting to use a property as party central.

The issue has been [no less fraught in vacation-heavy resort communities](#) in Colorado’s high country, with local governments trying to find a way to let property owners make money renting while trying to preserve the quality of life for those living there.

Jefferson County, like most other local governments, operates on a complaint-based system to sniff out violators. It typically receives a couple of dozen complaints a year from residents, ranging from a five-year high of 36 in 2019 to a low of 24 last year.

This year — with 22 so far — is on track to be a busier year for complaints.

Darlene Kell, 76, is one of those who has contacted county officials about scofflaw properties. A resident of Sphinx Park, near Pine, Kell has seen neighboring homes rented out to vacationers where parking spaces and access to land not belonging to the property owner were promised in the listing.

“Trespassing is a big issue for us,” Kell said.

She and a neighbor have spent months monitoring who might be renting out properties illegally in their neighborhood. Because of the fire danger in the foothills, Kell said she gets worried when guests use fire pits at the properties — whether they are aware of or simply ignoring any fire restrictions.

“Guests had built a roaring bonfire with six to seven-foot flames (last fall),” she said. “We were tinder-dry then and Jeffco initiated Stage 1 fire restrictions approximately two weeks after this incident. The guests are often city dwellers who have no idea of the danger of having an outdoor fire. They think it is just a fun ‘mountain’ activity.”

Kell said she'd like to see the county's one-acre minimum for short-term rentals stay in place "because it serves as a buffer." At the last week's meeting, several speakers said it was the one-acre rule that is likely keeping hundreds of property owners from registering with the county.

"Get on with our lives"

O'Keefe, the Jefferson County planner, said it's likely the county will amend some of its regulations, recognizing that not doing so will only result in more people operating in the shadows.

"We do think the structure of the regulations is keeping people from applying for a permit," he said.

Judy, with the property near Aspen Park, said he runs a "tight ship" with his short-term rental, which is next door to his permanent home. His property is not "4/20 friendly," requires a minimum three-night stay and allows no more than six people at a time.

On a note he leaves inside the property is a warning to quell any guest tendencies to act foolishly or unlawfully.

"The good news is the owner lives next door," the note states. "The bad news is the owner lives next door."

Hayes, in Kittredge, just wants certainty from the county's regulations. She does all the cleaning and maintenance at her 1925-era property on Highway 74, which is tastefully decorated with old steamer trunks filled with books while boasting a modern kitchen with stainless steel appliances.

The three-bedroom property, which fronts Bear Creek for 500 feet, can command as much as \$550 a night during the high season. Hayes says she is largely booked through early September.

"I want them to get on the rules, figure it out and publish them so we can get on with our lives," she said.