



Parks and Trails are Highly Valued

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City Manager

Spring Canyon Community Park is officially open, and what an incredible place it is! If you haven't yet been there, go check it out. With a sleeping giant and equipment accessible to people of all abilities, Inspiration Playground is a real gem. People and dogs alike are playing at Fort Collins' largest dog park and the only off-leash area with a lake. You can also enjoy mountain biking, the city's largest multi-purpose open turf area, ball fields, trails, and many other traditional park amenities. It truly is a world-class park.

Parks like Spring Canyon don't happen by accident. In Fort Collins, we have a tradition of high quality, well-maintained parks and trails. When we receive national recognition, such as the Money Magazine "best place to live" designation, the city's wonderful park and trail systems are often listed as a factor.

The city has been strategic about how we develop and maintain parks. The current Parks and Recreation Policy Plan, adopted in 1997, called for one neighborhood park every square mile, and a new community park every four square miles. Funding to construct the parks comes from impact fees collected on new development and maintenance is funded primarily with sales tax dollars. The system worked well for many years when sales tax revenues were increasing at a solid pace. However, that's no longer the case. As with other city services, such as transportation and public safety, revenues to maintain the nearly 800 acres of city parkland are not keeping pace with growing demands.

Our Parks Department has made many changes to be more cost effective. For example, raw water is used to irrigate 80% of parks, drought tolerant grass is planted in lower use areas, and a new system of applying fertilizer has reduced labor costs. However, budget cuts in recent years have still affected parks maintenance. Fewer flowers are planted in the parks, trash is picked up less frequently along the trails, maintenance of athletic fields has been reduced, and community park restrooms are closed in the winter.

Trails have also been impacted. The city receives funding from the state lottery each year that can be used for a limited number of things. Primarily, the city used that money to construct trails. As funding for parks maintenance has declined, a portion of those dollars have been reallocated to parks maintenance, thereby slowing down the timeline for new trail construction.

So what's in store for the future of our parks system? City council and staff are updating the Parks and Recreation Policy Plan, and when complete, it will address that very question. The Plan update began this spring with a public process. The process included focus groups, a statistically valid survey and input from city advisory boards and commissions. The message is clear – residents highly value our parks and trails and like the high level of maintenance.

But high quality, well-maintained parks come with a price tag. Under the existing financial realities, the current system is not sustainable. Over the next few months, we will look at a variety of options to further reduce future operation and maintenance costs in a way that is responsible and that fits with community values and desires. This will likely include reducing the number of parks, delaying construction, and designing parks to require less maintenance. These will be significant choices for our community.

The Parks and Recreation Policy Plan update will set the direction for our parks and trail system for the next decade. Parks and trails are an integral part of our way of life in Fort Collins. Ultimately, it's up to you to shape the future of the parks system.