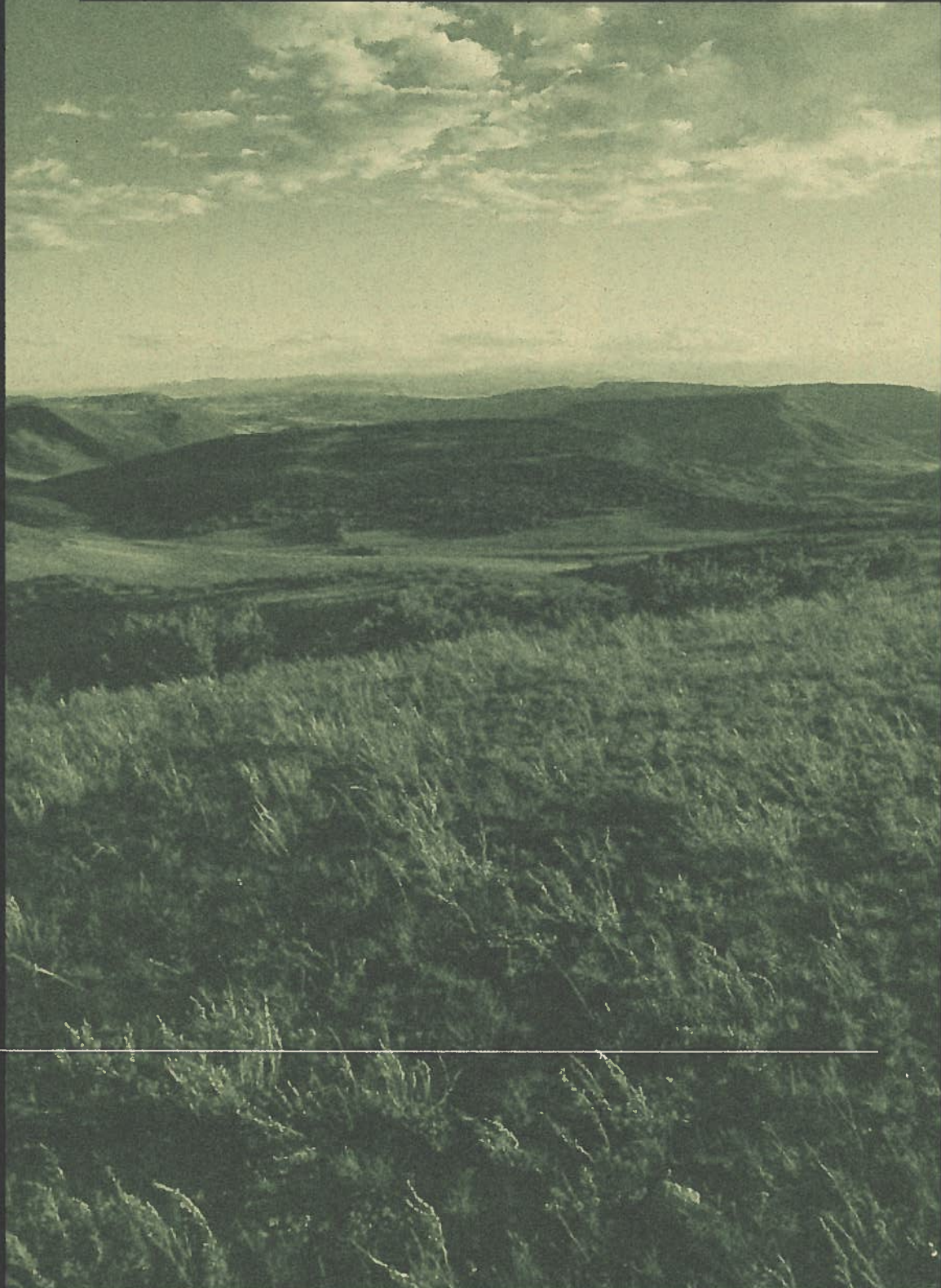


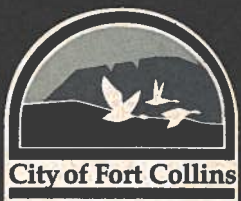
CITY OF FORT COLLINS, COLORADO

NATURAL AREAS

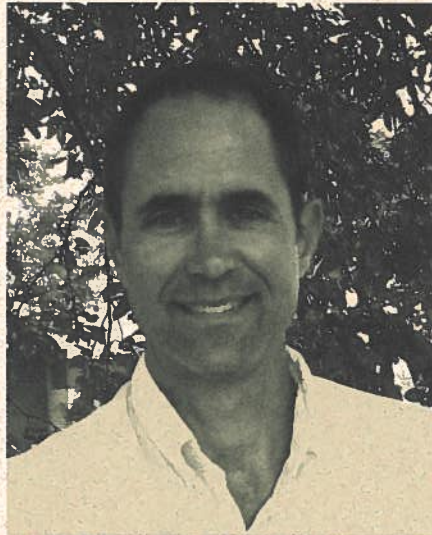
ANNUAL REPORT



2004



Message from the Director



John Stokes
Natural Resources Director

I always feel energized and renewed by the spring. The longer daylight hours trigger my yearning to wander...

The Poudre River is rising, the first migrating birds are working their way north, the crocus are blooming, my honey bees are flying purposefully on warm days, the maples have bloomed, our chickens are starting to lay more eggs, and the foxes are up to their springtime shenanigans on the back forty. All of these signals remind me, as if I needed any reminding, that the spring cycle of life is, once again, bursting forth with its usual passion.

I always feel energized and renewed by the spring. The longer daylight hours trigger my yearning to wander, to tend my bees, and to observe nature as it wakes from its winter somnolence. E.O. Wilson – the Harvard biologist, entomologist and Pulitzer Prize winning author, coined the word “biophilia,” described as the intense bond between humans and the rest of nature, a bond that is essentially hardwired by generations of co-evolution. My own perception of this bond is especially intense during the spring.

At this point, if you’ve made it this far, you may be thinking to yourself that these springtime ruminations are all very nice, but what do they have to do with the Natural Areas Program?

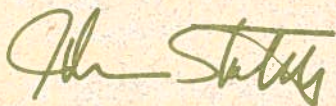
The fundamental answer is that our City-owned natural areas are rich environments where the opportunities to observe nature are abundant. Since its inception in 1992, the Natural Areas Program has built a successful track record of both conserving land and providing access to the public.

2004 Annual Report

In terms of land conservation, last year saw the total number of conserved acres vault from 11,000 to approximately 33,500 (including 5,800 acres of leased land). Land was conserved in community separators, locally, and most spectacularly in the region. Highlights include the acquisition of a 151-acre tract on Overland Trail that harbors a wetland and preserves a great view corridor to the foothills; the acquisition of the program's first ever conservation easement in the Timnath community separator; and in the most notable project of the year, the acquisition of the 12,500-acre Soapstone Prairie Natural Area for \$7.3 million (see more on this acquisition in the Regional Conservation section).

As a staff privileged to help conserve land and manage it for its recreation, biologic, and scenic values, we know that we have a challenge ahead of us in terms of balancing the recreational use of these properties with our concomitant responsibility to steward their natural resource values as well as to manage them in a fiscally prudent manner. Importantly, we fully recognize that we have a responsibility to open these properties to the public as soon as possible so that we can all enjoy the harbingers of spring. Thus, we are working very hard to develop management plans and improvements in a timely fashion. Moreover, we are doing a thorough job so that when you arrive at a site you are safe, well oriented, and challenged by interesting wildlife observation, education, and recreation opportunities.

In 2004, we held three public open houses and sponsored 17 popular field trips to Bobcat Ridge Natural Area to hold a dialogue with the public about how best to manage this special property near Masonville which is scheduled to open in 2006. As we move forward with additional management plans and public improvements, I hope that you will continue to share your perspectives with us, and I also hope that you will spend time on our natural areas tapping into nature's contagious springtime energy.



John Stokes

Director of the Natural Resources Department

221-6600



*Soapstone Prairie Natural Area
(photo by Charlie Johnson)*

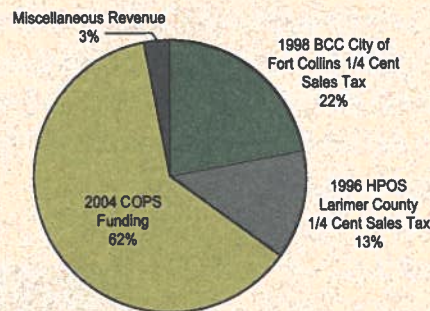
2004 Revenues and Expenditures

A unique element of the Natural Areas Program's financial transactions in 2004 was the use of Certificates of Participation (COPS) to off-set the immediate budgetary impacts of Soapstone Prairie and other regional acquisitions. COPS are long-term financing instruments issued by the Fort Collins Capital Leasing Corporation, a nonprofit corporation, for sale in the public bond markets. Through the use of COPS, the Natural Areas Program is paying off Soapstone Prairie and several other acquisitions over 15 years, thereby keeping funds available in the Natural Areas Program budget for other natural area acquisition opportunities that become available. As the financial graphs indicate, COPS represent a significant part of the program's 2004 financial activities.

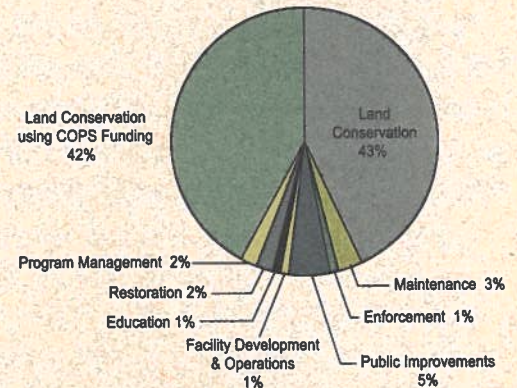
The miscellaneous portion of the revenue graph includes an \$11,400 grant from Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) to help fund the reroute and restoration of a severely eroded section of the Foothills Trail.

Not reflected in the budget graphs is the efficiency afforded the program by the donation of almost 4,000 hours of service by volunteers and the 2,837 hours of other un-paid service provided by court-ordered community service persons.

Natural Areas 2004 Revenue
\$24,767,526



Natural Areas 2004 Expenditures
\$22,366,056



2004 Acquisitions

- Soapstone Prairie (12,500 acres)**
- Soapstone (Roman Property / 1,960 acres)**
- Bobcat Ridge (an additional 640 acres in 2004)**
- Andrijeski property (153 acres)**
- Timnath Community Separator Conservation Easement (80 acres)**
- Two Wellington Community Separator Conservation Easements (105 acres)**
- Roberts Ranch Conservation Easement (2,734 acres)**
- Devils Backbone (500 acres)**

Ecological Restoration

Re-establishing and maintaining native plant and wildlife species is an important goal of the Natural Areas Program. Efforts in 2004 included a combination of intensive weed treatments, transitional cover crop plantings, native grass seedings, and engaging some native wildlife in the control of non-native trees!

Various Approaches

It was a banner year in 2004 for combating non-native plants. Staff controlled 15 invasive plant species on 37 out of 40 natural areas. The integrated weed management approach employed by the Natural Areas Program utilizes a variety of methods to produce maximum results. Seasonal staff cut, pulled, sprayed, and farmed nearly 4,000 acres in the effort to promote healthy native grasslands. At the Resource Recovery Farm, Nix Natural Area, Kingfisher Point, and Pelican Marsh, transitional cover crops (wheat and oats) were used to out-compete weed infestations and prepare the soil for native grass seedings in 2005. Finally, more than 80 acres of non-native Russian olive trees were removed at Riverbend Ponds and Kingfisher Point natural areas to promote the healthy growth of native cottonwood trees.

Wildlife Helpers

The aid of the native beaver population (volunteers only, of course) was enlisted in the fight against non-native trees. Natural Areas Program staff treated the base of native cottonwood trees along the Poudre River sites with a non-toxic sand, color-matched paint mixture to deter beaver activity on cottonwoods and encourage the beaver to select non-native crack willows (untreated) as a food source. This "directed diet" enables the beaver to co-exist with the native vegetation while contributing to the Natural Areas Program's non-native control efforts.

A Continuing Approach

In 2005, the Natural Areas Program will plant approximately 1,000 acres of native grassland on nine natural areas. Each site will require constant monitoring to ensure the establishment of native grasses. Look for the red seeding tractor at a natural area near you!

The dream of healthy, restored prairie and foothills ecosystems inched a bit closer to reality in 2004. The Natural Areas Program's restoration efforts will kick into high gear once again in 2005!



Beavers were encouraged to help control non-native trees



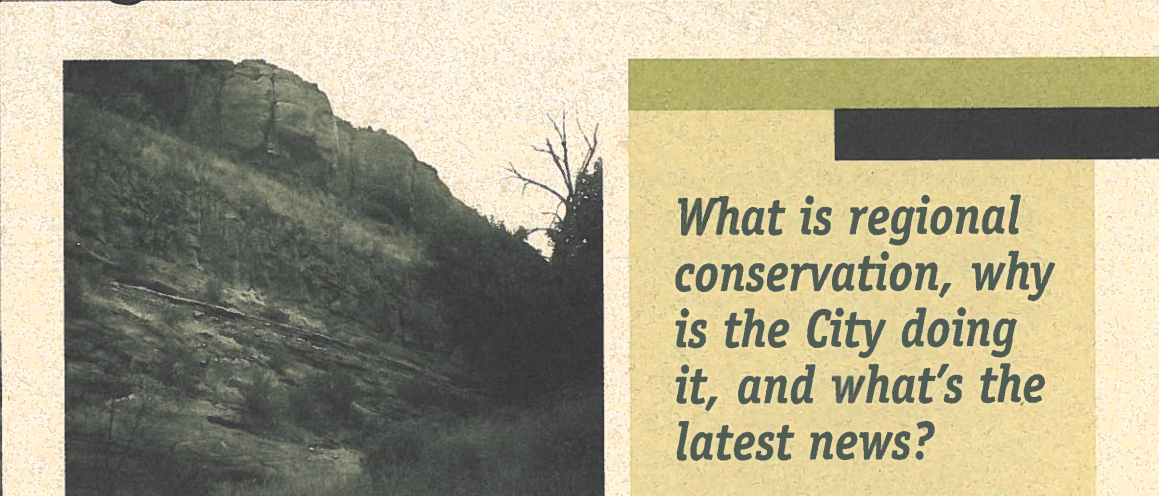
Evening-star

2004

Regional Conservation



photo by Charlie Johnson



Bobcat Ridge Natural Area

What is regional conservation, why is the City doing it, and what's the latest news?

Background

In 1996, voters passed Building Community Choices. This sales tax legislation included a 1/4 cent portion for natural areas conservation. It also included language authorizing the City to engage in regional conservation. In 2003, voters passed the "Open Space, Yes!" 1/4 cent sales tax that again called for land conservation in local areas, community separators, and regional areas.

Acquisitions

In 2003 and 2004, several large regional properties were conserved, including Indian Creek Ranch – a joint acquisition by Larimer County and Fort Collins; Bobcat Ridge; and the Soapstone Prairie. The Indian Creek property comprises a large portion of a hogback between Fort Collins and Loveland. This 1,500-acre property will be managed by Larimer County as an addition to Devils Backbone and will provide phenomenal trail connections enabling a 16-mile corridor from the Devils Backbone near Loveland all the way to Lory State Park. Bobcat Ridge is a gorgeous 2,600-acre property near Masonville about 20 minutes from the southwestern corner of Fort Collins. The City plans to have an initial trail system open to the public by May of 2006.

Of the three properties, Soapstone Prairie clearly is the most ambitious effort. At \$7.3 million, Soapstone Prairie is the most expensive natural area purchase ever. Nevertheless, the purchase price represents a small portion of the total revenues to the program from inception to date, and an even smaller portion from today through the scheduled expiration of "Open Space, Yes!" in 2030.

Soapstone Prairie Natural Area

Many have questioned why the City would purchase a property that is 25 miles from town and that will take four to five hours to visit. In the end, the long-term conservation and recreation opportunities were so phenomenal that the City moved ahead with the purchase. Some of the factors involved in the decision included the once-in-a-lifetime nature of the opportunity to conserve the property, the fact that no other entity appeared able or willing at the time to conserve the property, the sheer beauty and incredible natural values of the property; and the hope that the City's investment in Soapstone Prairie would be leveraged several times over with other partners, including Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), Larimer County, and The Nature Conservancy (TNC).

Laramie Foothills: Mountains to Plains Project

In late 2004, the City's hopes were realized when GOCO announced that it would invest \$11.6 million in the Laramie Foothills Mountains to Plains Project, a joint effort by the City, the County, and TNC. Including donations by the County, TNC, and private landowners, what the City helped initiate with its \$7.3 million purchase of Soapstone Prairie has turned into a \$25 million conservation project that will help conserve private and public lands amounting to over 55,000 acres in northern Larimer County.

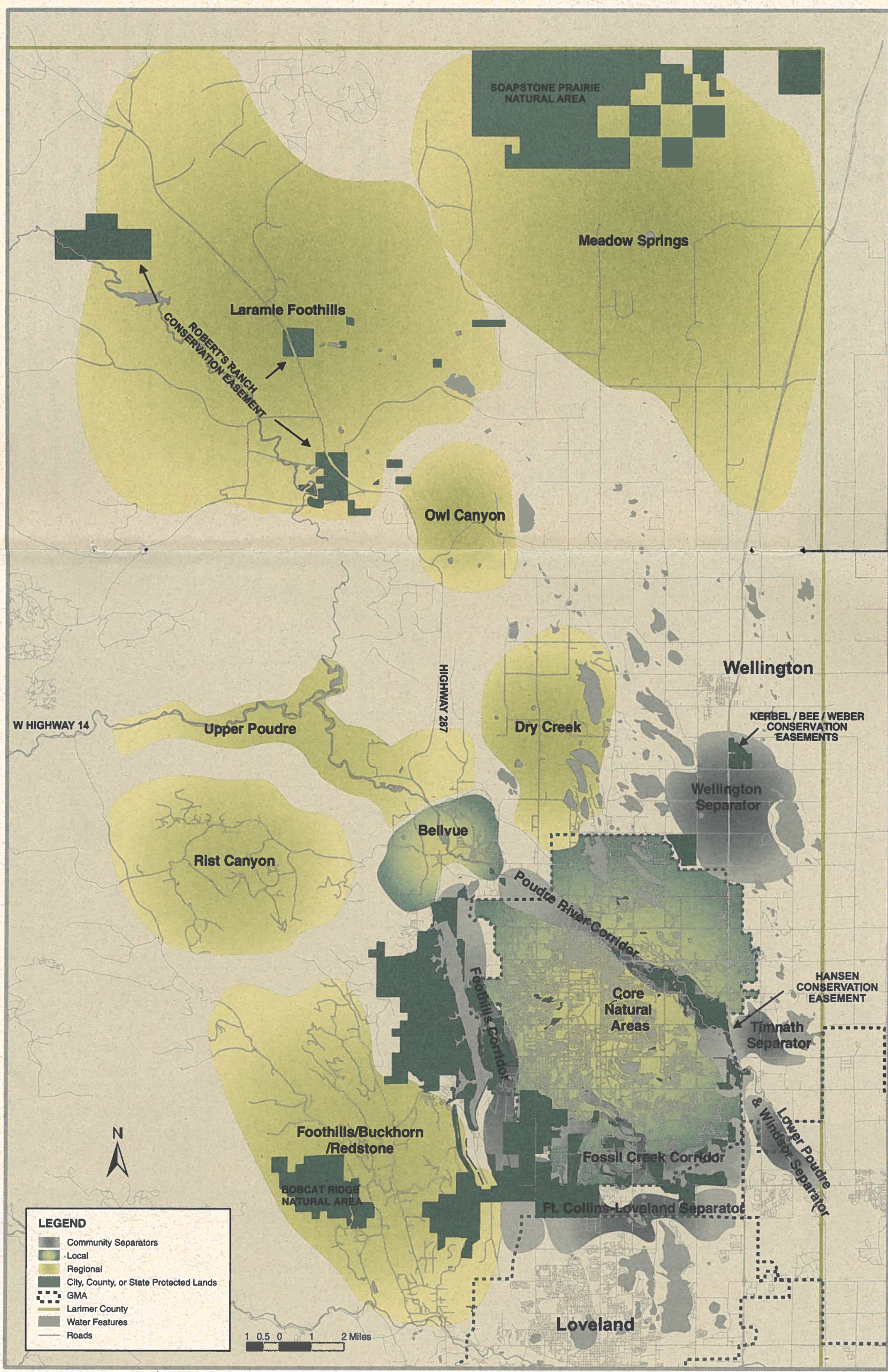
As part of the Laramie Foothills project, the County plans to own and manage approximately 6,000 acres of the Red Mountain Ranch known as the "Big Hole" immediately west of Soapstone Prairie. Together, the City and County properties will make one of the most spectacular and interesting natural areas open to the public in Northern Colorado. Both properties are planned to be open in 2009. In the meantime, the City will be providing guided tours to the public on a regular basis.

Community Separators

Community separators are defined areas that lie between Fort Collins and surrounding communities and that are relatively free of development. The objective of the City's land conservation program is to acquire development rights in these areas to help maintain a rural landscape as well as separation between Fort Collins and surrounding communities. Development rights are typically acquired in the form of a conservation easement, a legally binding document that restricts development rights in perpetuity. There are four community separators including Loveland, Wellington, Timnath, and Windsor. The Loveland separator essentially is completed, while the other three separators are still in progress.

In 2004, three important community separator conservation easements were acquired. Two are in the Wellington community separator and were acquired in partnership with Larimer County. The underlying ownership of the land was acquired by Colorado State University's Agricultural Research, Development, and Education Center (ARDEC). Totalling 209 acres, the easements were acquired on active farmland, and the land will continue to be farmed as part of ARDEC. In addition to the Wellington conservation easements, an 80-acre conservation easement was acquired in the Timnath community separator.

Regional Natural Areas



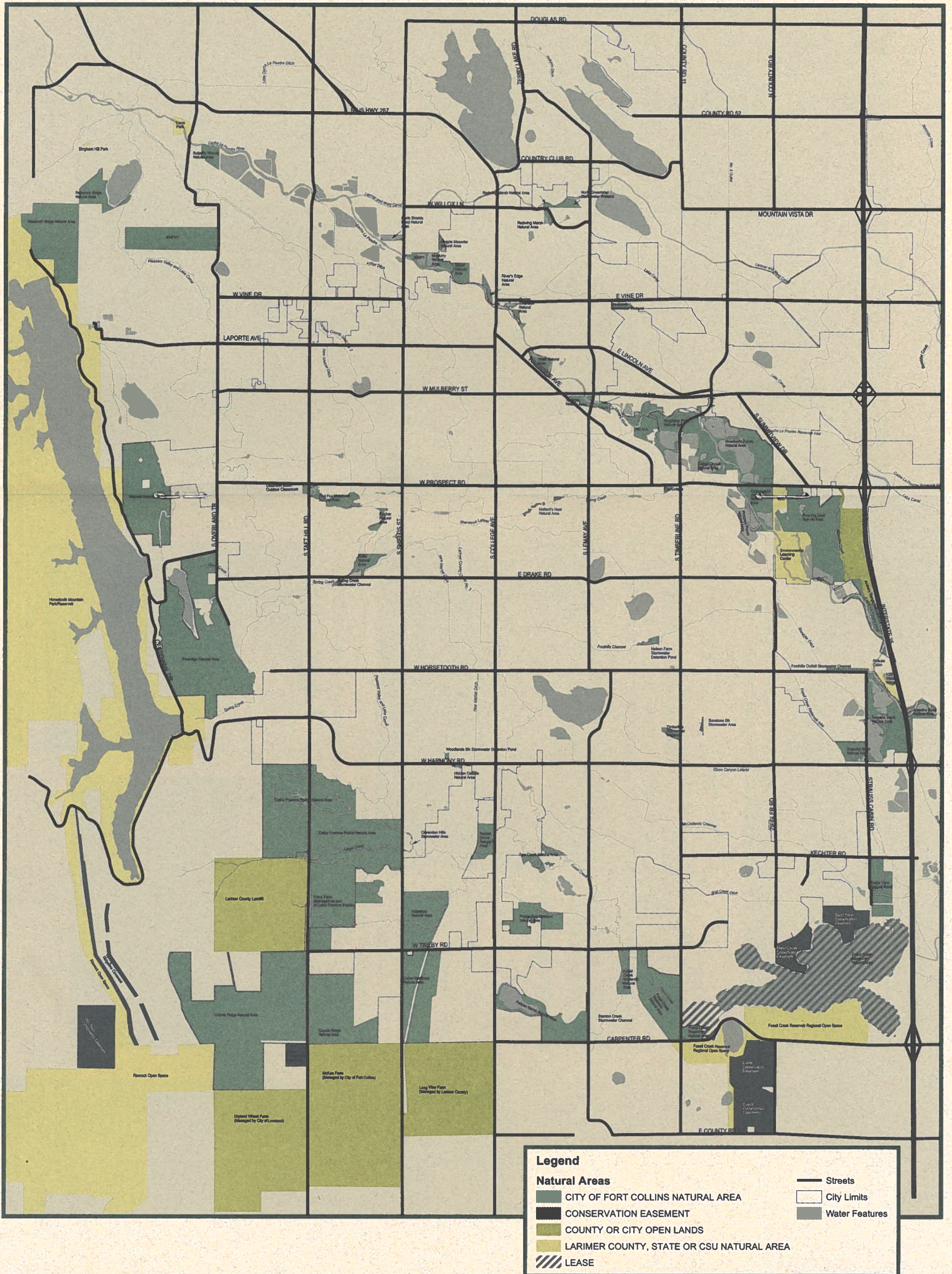
LEGEND

- Community Separators
- Local
- Regional
- City, County, or State Protected Lands
- GMA
- Larimer County
- Water Features
- Roads



Local Natural Areas

The Natural Areas Map shows existing local natural areas close to home.



2004 Local Natural Areas

While the primary focus of the City's Natural Areas Program in 2004 was on regional natural areas, acquisition and management of local natural areas continued.

Acquisition

A 153-acre site (temporarily known as the Andrijeski purchase) was acquired in northwest Fort Collins. This site, currently leased out for grazing, is on Overland Trail south of Michaud Lane. The site's natural values include a wet meadow that contains the Ute ladies'-tresses orchid, a plant classified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a threatened species because of its rarity. A 5-acre portion of the site containing a house and farm buildings will be sold.

Foothills Trail Improvements

Due to erosion and new federal security regulations, several improvements were made to the popular Foothills Trail.

- A quarter-mile segment at the northern end was rerouted to mitigate erosion; restoration of the old trail portion was begun. A local youth corps assisted with this project.
- Rerouting was started on a half-mile trail segment along the base of Soldier Canyon Dam to meet new Bureau of Reclamation security regulations requiring trails to be kept at least 100 feet from the dam.
- A new bridge was installed where the trail crosses an irrigation ditch at the southern edge of Soldier Canyon Dam.



Reservoir Ridge Natural Area



A portion of the Foothills Trail was rerouted

Fossil Creek

Fossil Creek Natural Areas Management Plan

In late 2004, approximately 80 people attended public open houses and provided comments on the draft Fossil Creek Natural Areas Management Plan. This document will direct management of the 11 Fort Collins local natural areas, totaling 2,105 acres, in the Fossil Creek drainage: Cathy Fromme Prairie, Hazaleus, Colina Mariposa, Hidden Cattails, Redtail Grove, Two Creeks, Prairie Dog Meadow, Pelican Marsh, Fossil Creek Wetlands, Fossil Creek Reservoir Natural Area, and Eagle View.



Redtail Grove Natural Area

These natural areas provide an abundance of habitat for wildlife:

- Eagles and great horned owls roost in the trees at Cathy Fromme Prairie and Eagle View;
- Pelicans, coyotes, and foxes enjoy Pelican Marsh;
- Raptors hunt for prairie dogs at Prairie Dog Meadow;
- Tiger salamanders inhabit Two Creeks;
- Peregrine falcons have found valuable habitat at Fossil Creek Reservoir

Fossil Creek Reservoir Regional Open Space

In October, Larimer County opened the 470-acre Fossil Creek Reservoir Regional Open Space along Carpenter Road near I-25. The City of Fort Collins and Larimer County are joint owners (50-50) of the site, with Larimer County managing the site. Fossil Creek Reservoir and the adjacent lands provide one of the region's key wildlife habitats, a complex of open waters, wetlands, riparian areas, and grasslands that attract large numbers of waterfowl and shorebirds as well as wintering bald eagles. The site provides 2.2 miles of hiking trails, with some areas closed seasonally to protect sensitive wildlife.

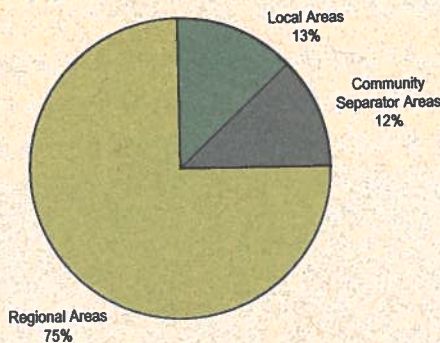
2004

Land Conservation Distribution

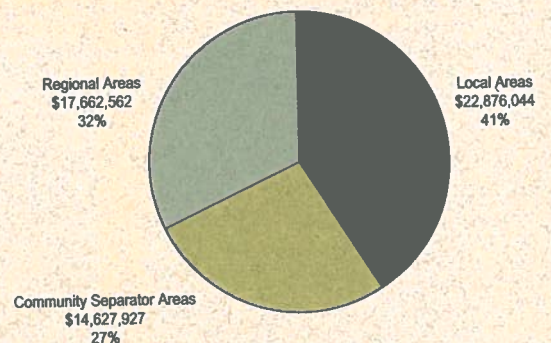
In 2003 and 2004, Natural Areas Program staff went through an extensive process with the public to identify those areas that qualified as local and regional, as well as community separators. A planning team of citizens and staff layered natural resource values, scenic view sheds, recreation opportunities, and other values to determine areas of conservation interest. These areas were reviewed in various forums culminating in a large open house at the Lincoln Center. Ultimately the conservation areas were included in the City's "Land Conservation and Stewardship Master Plan" which was adopted by City Council in spring of 2004. This plan outlines how the City will spend its land conservation funding over the next ten years in approximately even amounts on regional, local, and community separators. During the planning process, citizens urged staff to maintain a flexible spending approach in order to be able to respond to emerging opportunities.

Major regional land conservation opportunities occurred in 2004. While by far the greatest amount of land conservation funds spent in 2004 were in the regional conservation area, funds spent on land conservation purchases to date are relatively evenly divided among the three conservation areas. Acres of land conserved in each of the three areas to date are not evenly divided and will never be evenly divided. In contrast to local and community separator areas, parcels of land in regional areas are larger and the costs per acre lower. Thus, the City will always have the ability to conserve larger parcels in the regional areas.

Land Conservation Areas
33,476 acres



Land Conservation Purchases
\$55,166,533



The Visitor Experience

Making it Happen

A lot of work goes into providing a safe, enjoyable visitor experience in natural areas. Natural Areas Program staff build and maintain trails, parking lots, fences, and other site features and provide other services as necessary to maintain the City's natural areas. Highlights of 2004 include the following:

- Improved 7.5 miles of natural surface trails
- Constructed ½ mile of new natural surface trail
- Improved and maintained ½ mile of crusher fine trail
- Maintained 4 vault toilets and 4 port-a-lets
- Installed new brochure holders
- Constructed and installed benches
- Repaired fishing piers
- Provided weekly trash collection
- Kept pet pick-up bag holders filled
- Provided ranger patrol at all natural areas open to the public
- Installed 70 mini kiosks (with regulatory and site directional information) at entrances to natural areas that are open to the public (many sites have multiple entrances).



Mini kiosks have been installed at natural area entrances

On-line Community Natural Areas Journal

In 2004, the City inaugurated the on-line Community Natural Areas Journal. Located at <http://fcgov.com/naturalareas/na-stories.php> this is an on-line opportunity for the public to share natural area experiences. While visiting City of Fort Collins natural areas, people see and hear a variety of wildlife, witness stunning sunsets, are awed by prairie wildflowers in the springtime, and so much more. On the Journal, citizens can read about others' experiences in Fort Collins natural areas and share their own.

Stories currently on the journal tell about seeing a bald eagle at Arapaho Bend Natural Area, listening to frogs at Butterfly Woods Natural Area, hiking with a friend at Coyote Ridge Natural Area, seeing deer at Kingfisher Point Natural Area, and more.



Trail improvements help to create an enjoyable visitor experience

2004

Wildlife Happenings

Wildlife are primary residents of, and visitors to, the habitat in natural areas. Their presence provides exciting viewing opportunities and creates challenging co-existence situations in our urban environment.

Burrowing Owls Move into Local Natural Areas

A pleasant surprise occurred in the spring, when burrowing owls were discovered at Cathy Fromme Prairie Natural Area and adjacent to Pelican Marsh Natural Area. These pigeon-sized, short-tailed, long-legged owls like to nest in abandoned prairie dog burrows. Because their habitat had been disturbed by human activity, it had been several years since burrowing owls had been seen on these sites, so it was particularly rewarding to see them returning. It is hoped they will continue nesting on these and other local natural areas.



Burrowing owl (photo by Wild Critter Photography)

Mountain Lions Spend the Summer

While it isn't unusual to occasionally see mountain lions in and around Fort Collins, in 2004, lions stayed longer than usual in Cathy Fromme Prairie and Pineridge natural areas. The Colorado Division of Wildlife, which has jurisdiction over these large mammals, strongly advised that the animals be allowed to leave the area on their own, rather than through human intervention. Advisory signs were posted to facilitate visitor safety. Visitors were advised that, if they saw a lion, they should

- Stop, avoid running, stay calm, and talk loudly and firmly to the lion in a low voice
- Face the lion (but avoid direct eye contact) and back away
- Make themselves look large (raise arms or hold a jacket above their heads)
- Pick up small children
- If the lion is aggressive, throw stones, branches, or anything handy at the lion

Lion sightings ended late in the summer, and advisory signs were removed. No human injuries were reported.

Abundance of Life

Prairie Dog Research Continues

The Natural Areas Program staff continued its multi-year prairie dog research project. Comparisons between 2003 and 2004 were as follows:

- Number of acres within Fort Collins' natural areas occupied by black-tailed prairie dogs (spread among 10 sites): 2003 - 614; 2004 - 505.
- Density estimate of prairie dogs on the 10 sites: 2003 - 8,400; 2004 - 6,160.

Future research will help to monitor, and possibly identify reasons for, the changing numbers.

Visitors Advised of Tularemia at Riverbend Ponds Natural Area

In October, a dead beaver was found in Riverbend Ponds Natural Area. Following protocol, the Larimer County Department of Health and Environment was contacted to have the animal tested for disease. The beaver tested positive for tularemia, a zoonotic disease that can be transmitted from animals to humans and can also be fatal to cats and dogs. Notices were posted in the natural area advising that tularemia had been found on the site and that visitors should stay on trails, avoid contact with the water, and avoid approaching or handling living or dead animals.

By the end of the year, there no longer appeared to be any threat of disease, and advisory postings were removed. No incidents of illness in humans or pets were reported.



Black-tailed prairie dog



Pronghorn



Mountain lion

2004

Volunteer Highlights



Master Naturalists lead exciting, informative field trips

In 2004, a total of 3,995 volunteer hours were donated

As always, the number of hours donated to the Natural Areas Program by volunteers in the community was impressive. In 2004, a total of 3,995 volunteer hours were donated:

- Master Naturalists - 1,438 hours
- Adopt-a-Natural Area - 478 hours
- Building Bat & Flicker Houses - 66 hours
- Beaver Tree Project - 160 hours
- Bird Surveys - 418 hours
- Maintenance Projects - 136 hours
- Restoration and Weed Control Projects – 882 hours
- Various Wildlife Related Projects – 48 hours
- Wildflower Seed Packaging - 59 hours
- Trash Can Art – 310 hours

Local Master Naturalist Program Recognized as National Leader

Master Naturalists are volunteers, trained in local ecology and as educators, who plan and lead field trips and give classroom presentations. With a growing interest in such programs across the country, a workshop was held in West Virginia in 2004 with representatives from 17 states discussing the formation of a national program. Several agencies have established such programs, but the City of Fort Collins' Master Naturalist Program, begun in 1994, was the first in the nation. In recognition of that fact, and in light of the program's accomplishments, Fort Collins Natural Areas Program education personnel were guest speakers at the national workshop.

Master Naturalist

Since the inception of the local Master Naturalist Program, volunteers have donated nearly 10,000 hours and given almost 1,000 programs to more than 35,000 people.

In anticipating a nation-wide program, agencies around the country envision different types of programs, but all have a common goal: to promote awareness and citizen stewardship of natural resources through science-based education and community service.

Master Naturalist Wins Volunteer Award

In October, Marge Dugan, who has volunteered as a Master Naturalist with the City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Program since 2003, was a winner of The Coloradoan's Making a Difference Day Award. In 2004, Marge taught kindergartners about the importance of plants, assisted 7th graders in creating art on trash cans for natural areas parking lots, staffed a booth at the opening of the City's Gardens on Spring Creek, helped 5th and 6th graders learn how wildlife and plants adapt to live on shortgrass prairies, investigated ant behaviors with 2nd graders, and helped 3rd graders explore wetlands at the Children's Water Festival. Marge touched the lives of more than 500 residents and donated more than 100 hours of her time in 2004.

Volunteers Presented Popular and Innovative Programs

Master Naturalists presented over 130 exciting programs in 2004. Many were popular on-going programs about prairie dogs, birds, and wildflowers. An exciting new program in 2004 was, The Trail Savvy Dog, a hands-on field program during which Master Naturalists Stephanie Fedewa and Jamie Surface helped participants learn basic trail etiquette for dogs including training tools for loose-leash walking and tips to prevent on-leash aggression. The program was extremely popular and is being offered again in 2005.

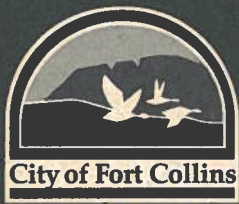


Students have fun with trash can art projects

Thank You
Volunteers



Volunteers help with the beaver tree project



**Community Planning and Environmental Services
Natural Resources Department**

Natural Areas Program
P.O. Box 580
Fort Collins, CO 80522

Contact us:

Natural Areas Program (970) 416-2815

To schedule a Master Naturalist presentation (970) 416-2480

To become a Master Naturalist (970) 224-6118

Natural Areas and Trails Rangers (970) 416-2147

Adopt-a-Natural Area (970) 416-2480

Certified Natural Areas (970) 221-6310

Web site: www.fcgov.com/naturalareas



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