The background of the slide is a light blue gradient. At the top and bottom, there are horizontal bands of darker blue watercolor paint. The edges of these bands are irregular and torn, resembling the edges of a piece of paper. The text is centered in the middle of the slide.

# Natural Areas Annual Engagement Cycle Feedback

## Executive Summary

The City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department (“Natural Areas”) provides frequent and varied opportunities for residents to provide feedback on natural areas and their management. One of those opportunities is an annual online feedback form. For 2022, the Natural Areas Department sought input on the Poudre River Zone natural areas, the Mountains to Plains Zone Plan Update, and Kestrel Fields Natural Area trail alignment.

More than 300 people provided responses to the online feedback form. This resulted in more than 500 comments on the Poudre River Zone, Mountains to Plains Zone (MTP), and Kestrel Fields Natural Area. This report reviews the responses gathered from the online feedback form, with a special focus on the open-ended questions.

A demographic analysis found that respondents were generally older, wealthier, and more highly educated than the general population. Just under 20% of responses came from people making less than \$50,000 annually, and nearly 90% of respondents who shared their education level had at least a Bachelor’s degree. Respondents were also less diverse than the general population of Fort Collins. Of the respondents who provided information on their race, 93% were white and 95% were non-Hispanic/Latinx. Just over 10% of respondents were under 30. The majority (~53%) were over 50.

Responses to open-ended questions were uploaded into the coding program Dedoose, and analyzed for key themes<sup>1</sup>. Responses demonstrated a high level of care and appreciation for natural areas and the opportunities they provide for all community members to relax, recreate, and interact with nature. As one respondent shared,

*We are incredibly lucky to have such a valuable community resource at our fingertips. So many Fort Collins residents benefit from these natural areas. It's one of the best features of living in this beautiful city.*

Across all three feedback areas, two key themes emerged—**Balancing conservation and recreation** and **Creating a safe and welcoming environment for all user types**.

*Balancing conservation and recreation.* Respondents understood that community natural areas are an important site for both conservation and recreation, and expressed a spectrum of views towards how best to balance these two goals. Some expressed strong opinions that conservation should always be central and recreation always secondary. Others expressed a strong desire for natural areas to better accommodate recreational uses like mountain biking, water access, and dog walking. Emphasizing the shared love of these spaces, and the opportunities for natural areas to exist for both ecological and recreational benefit will be important as Natural Areas seeks to achieve both of these important goals.

*Creating a safe and welcoming environment for all user types.* Respondents highlighted that natural areas are important public assets, but responses suggested some tensions among

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<sup>1</sup> More information about the analysis is available as an appendix to this report.

different “user types,” including pet owners and non-pet owners, housed community members and people experiencing homelessness, and even bikers and non-bikers. This was particularly prevalent in the Poudre River Zone data, and somewhat prevalent in the MTP data. Community members are continuing to grapple with the ways that their use patterns overlap with and differ from others in the community. Some have a tendency to “blame” others for poor behavior, and requested additional patrols or management of natural areas, particularly in the Poudre River Zone. It will be important to create a sense of community and shared ownership rather than a sense of suspicion and competition among users, particularly as the community grows.

Additionally, some recognize that natural areas need increased or improved infrastructure to meet the needs of a diverse community. This included things like better maintaining parking lots, providing additional access for community members with disabilities, and providing better access and connectivity between neighborhoods and natural areas. More specific feedback from different user types—including folks with disabilities and community members of color—may help guide targeted infrastructure improvements.

The following sections dive into the three specific feedback areas for a more in-depth conversation about these themes and others in the data.

## Poudre River Zone Feedback

The Poudre River is widely understood to be an iconic feature of Fort Collins, offering the community an incredible array of recreational opportunities and ecological benefits. The Poudre River Zone contains 22 natural areas adjacent to the Poudre River from [Gateway Natural Area](#), located seven miles up in the Poudre Canyon, through Fort Collins to [Arapaho Bend Natural Area](#) where the river flows under Interstate 25. Many Poudre River Zone natural areas are located within minutes of downtown Fort Collins. Altogether, these natural areas contain 40 miles of paved and soft surface trails managed by the City of Fort Collins Natural Areas and Parks departments.

The Poudre River Zone management plan is in the early stages of being updated. As part of that update, the online feedback form was used to gather information on what people currently value about the area, the conservation of the area, and safety. More than 300 people provided responses to the online feedback form. This resulted in 120 comments about the conservation of the Poudre River, 111 open comments, and 62 comments about safety.

When asked what they appreciate about natural areas along the Poudre River, the most common responses were that they exist and will not be developed (73%) and that the current system of trails makes it easy to travel through the natural areas (72%). The beauty of the natural areas was mentioned by about two-thirds of respondents, and slightly less (64%) mentioned that they appreciate the opportunity to view wildlife. Just under 60% of respondents said that they enjoyed or appreciated the current way that natural areas along the Poudre River were maintained/preserved.

Approximately 200 people provided responses about how they could feel more safe in the Poudre River Zone Natural Areas. Among those who responded, the most common suggestions were more ranger patrols (47%) and call boxes (28%). Some of those who did not respond to the question noted that they did not respond because they already felt safe in these areas.

## Key Themes

*Balancing conservation and recreation ♦ Enhancing infrastructure ♦ Managing unwanted activities ♦ Maintaining safety ♦ Easing tensions between user types*

**Balancing conservation and recreation.** Both protecting natural habitats and maintaining or increasing opportunities for human recreation were priorities among respondents. The Poudre River natural areas were praised for providing important habitats, improving water quality of the Poudre River, and providing a haven for both wildlife and people. As one person shared,

*Riparian zones, particularly corridors, are tremendously important for wildlife in arid and semi-arid regions such as ours. The City's natural areas provide great value in preserving much of the riparian habitat in the Poudre corridor.*

Some respondents expressed concern that heavy use of the Poudre River natural areas for recreation was negatively impacting the conservation in these areas. As one person shared,

*[I am] concerned we will "love them to death" like Rocky Mountain National Park. How do we keep all these areas as natural as possible? Maybe a need for more educational outreach by the city.*

Responses mentioned negative impacts from high use related to littering, the use of "social trails," and dog owners who allow their dogs to explore off-leash and do not pick up after their pets. A few people also mentioned the impact of horses and their waste. See the below section on "Managing unwanted activities" for more discussion on this topic.

Others requested better river access and additional soft-surface trails for recreation. A few respondents suggested that channeling these activities into dedicated areas would help reduce some of the negative impacts associated with heavy use. As one person shared,

*Some areas are loved to death and show a lot of wear, we should establish more formal access to the water to reduce the number of unofficial paths to the water.*

While respondents were not asked to prioritize between human use/recreation and conservation, a few comments volunteered that they prioritized conservation. As a few respondents shared,

*This is one of our most important habitat zones. As the community continues to grow, it is getting used more and more..This should not be a sacrifice zone but rather a protected, conserved area that has habitat prioritized above human use.*

And,

*I highly value and respect the City's efforts to restore and conserve ecologically functional riparian areas, including the plant and animal life. Recreation should come second to those functions - when the river corridor is healthy, the recreation options are richer!*

**Enhancing infrastructure.** Respondents suggested that the infrastructure of the Poudre River natural areas be enhanced through additional trash cans, more educational signage, and improvements to parking lots at places like Riverbend Ponds Natural Area.

Trails and additional river access points were a slightly more contentious issue. Several respondents supported additional soft-surface trails for walking, running, mountain biking, and river access, as demonstrated in the four comments below.

*I would like to see improved access and connectivity of these areas along the river corridor, specifically via soft surface trails, to allow for increased access to nature for longer stretches while being close to town.*

*Consider adding more launch sites for small crafts like canoes and kayaks.*

*I very much enjoy running along the river, especially on gravel/dirt/cinder paths where they exist. More, please!*

*Please improve the soft-surface trails and mountain biking opportunities throughout this corridor. The terrain and ease of access make this an ideal space to create unique high-quality trail experiences for family-friendly/beginner level riders. Urban singletrack trail systems are seeing tremendous success across the country, both in terms of user experience and in improving resource protection.*

A smaller number opposed additional trails because of concern about impacts to wildlife and habitats, saying things like:

*Please do **\*NOT\*** add additional paved trails; there are plenty of places where the existing paved trails get close to the river. It's important to maintain the undeveloped riparian areas as they are.*

And,

*I am concerned that increased pressure to build more developed recreation will damage the ecological values and natural environment for which the natural areas were created. Please do not build a "bike park" in the corridor. If such a thing is to be built it should be on some less ecologically and aesthetically valuable lands (brownfields).*

There was support for acquiring new natural areas, and some suggested a specific off-leash dog natural area to provide a safe outlet for these types of users.

**Managing unwanted activities.** Respondents identified littering, walking with dogs off leash, and camping as current safety and/or nuisance issues in natural areas. Trash/waste was one of the most common issues brought up across open-response questions. As one respondent shared,

*I feel completely safe at any time of day in the River corridor. I do wish, however, that there were more trash and recycling receptacles. There is a depressing amount of trash ranging from fishing trash to gum wrappers to clothing to fast food wrappers*

Respondents differed in their overall orientation to managing these unwanted activities. Some wanted more active enforcement of natural areas rules by rangers, including more citations and “zero tolerance” approaches. According to one respondent,

*[We] need stiffer penalties for off-leash dogs and people who don't bag \*and dispose of\* their dogs' poop.*

Others suggested additional presence/patrols by rangers to better deter unwanted activities. Finally, a smaller number recommended education (including signage) to emphasize the shared responsibility for stewardship in natural areas. As one person shared,

*We LOVE these areas and appreciate all the work the staff put into them. We always try to pick up any trash when we are there.... But I think it might be nice to have some signage about all working together to take care of our parks (picking up trash and especially fishing line and hooks- we find lots of that despite the container but the pond.)*

**Maintaining safety.** Overall, most respondents felt safe in the Poudre River area. Some expressed surprise that issues of safety were even raised in the feedback form; a few respondents recognized that their identity and experiences may mean that they feel safer than others in natural areas.

The most common responses to the question about what would increase feelings of safety in this area were ranger patrols and call boxes. About 30% suggested that additional ranger patrols would make them feel more safe, and just under 20% suggested call boxes.

Some respondents expressed feeling unsafe because of people who are transient or experiencing homelessness, saying

*The reason I feel unsafe is the transient/homeless population who have excluded other users.*

Or,

*The homeless camps are a problem from trash, to drugs, to verbal attacks. At times, I am scared to walk along the Poudre River.*

**Easing tensions between user types.** Finally, though natural areas were recognized as an important public asset, responses suggested some tensions among different “user types,” including pet owners and non-pet owners, housed community members and people experiencing homelessness, and even bikers and non-bikers. One person grappled with this tension, saying:

*Help us understand how to interact with homeless people. I've never had a problem but it causes me to be concerned about safety and yet I feel that is unfair to them.*

Additional opportunities for community-building, celebration of the universality of natural area use in our community, and education regarding shared responsibility for stewardship may ease these tensions.

## Mountains to Plains (MTP) Zone Feedback

The Mountains to Plains (MTP) Zone contains some of the last remaining intact, high-quality shortgrass prairie and foothills shrublands along the Front Range of Colorado. [Soapstone Prairie Natural Area](#) (“Soapstone Prairie”) is the only City of Fort Collins natural area in the MTP Zone, and at 22,497 acres, is the largest natural area in the system. Soapstone Prairie is surrounded by a network of other conserved open spaces owned and managed by diverse partners including Larimer County, the Nature Conservancy, and conservation easements on privately-owned land.

Responses to the feedback form included 107 comments about the plan, 50 comments about barriers to visiting Soapstone Prairie, and 13 open comments about what visitors enjoy about Soapstone. No comments were received in Spanish.

Just under 75% of respondents had visited Soapstone Prairie, and many expressed appreciation for the uniqueness of the site. As one respondent shared,

*I really appreciate Soapstone and Red Mountain because they are so different than any of our other natural areas, and are accessible for those of us on the North side of town.*

Common barriers to visiting Soapstone Prairie included distance and the time needed to access the site, as well as the inability to bring dogs. As one person noted,

*[The] no dog policy... is a big barrier for us since our dog loves to hike with us and we would not leave him at home just to go to a no-dog area.*

Some respondents also mentioned concerns about unpredictable wind and weather, and the relatively short season of use as significant barriers to visiting Soapstone Prairie.

Overall, many respondents reacted positively to the MTP Zone Update, but some found it to be too long, and requested a summarized version. Some comments indicated that community members felt that their input wasn't included in plans, noting that no new trails were proposed despite public comments and requests for additional trails. As one person shared,

*I am not in favor of the plan. I think it falls well short of the community's needs. [The Natural Areas department] does not give any weight to recreation. The community desires more trails, and every plan, regardless of the zone, routinely rejects this call for trails. [The Natural Areas department] has not approved a new natural surface trail in many years. This is a direct affront to the community.*

## Key Themes

*Balancing conservation and recreation ♦ Accentuating Soapstone Prairie's unique qualities ♦ Pursuing collaborative and community-engaged management practices*

**Balancing conservation and recreation.** Respondents prioritized both protecting natural habitats and maintaining/increasing opportunities for human recreation. When asked what they enjoyed

about Soapstone Prairie, several comments indicated the unique habitats and wildlife that Soapstone contains. As one person shared,

*[I appreciate the] chance to visit a natural prairie ecosystem and see plants, birds and wildlife that can't be found elsewhere. And the bison.*

Another respondent compared it specifically to other natural areas, saying

*[Soapstone] is a great example of more traditional and classic conservation as opposed to the urban conservation natural areas in the city limits. The ecological quality will just always be better up there at Soapstone.*

While many appreciated that the area was not currently heavily used for recreation, others prioritized their ability to recreate at Soapstone Prairie. As two commenters shared,

*My favorite activity is to mountain bike the Cheyenne Rim early in the morning. Stunning!*

*You've got an excellent area for mountain biking that is away from the other front range crowded trails / parking areas. Keep doing what you're doing, it's great!*

Some comments requested trail improvements to address issues with muddiness, and others requested expansion of trails and opportunities for recreation, saying things like

*The trail system [at Soapstone] is too limited. Plover Trail, the eastern half of Pronghorn & the wash trails have no value to bikes. Expanding access to bikes would be a HUGE improvement - ie Towhee Loop & more trails.*

While respondents were not asked to prioritize between human use/recreation and conservation, a few comments volunteered that they prioritized conservation. As one commenter shared,

*It is \*not\* the purpose of Natural Areas to be recreation areas. Keep sticking to your guns on limiting trails and usage. Northern CO has a plethora of mountain biking, hiking and trail-running opportunities; the large untrailed portions of [Soapstone Prairie] need to remain that way as a reserve for plants/animals/air/quiet. If anything, reduce bike access and enforce existing restrictions.*

**Accentuating Soapstone Prairie's unique qualities.** In addition to praising the unique habitats and wildlife present at Soapstone, some respondents highlighted the unique opportunities to celebrate cultural and historical heritage on the site. As one person shared,

*I'd love to see some more attention given...to the indigenous history that's been virtually erased in NoCo. The Lindenmeier stuff is super cool, but also super ancient. [Especially] with bison nearby, seems like an opportunity to help visitors imagine the area pre-colonization.*

**Pursuing collaborative and community-engaged management practices.** Respondents expressed support for management practices that engage both the community and partner organizations. While many people were in support of the MTP Zone Update as drafted, some commenters felt that the public engagement had not been widespread enough, while others felt that the feedback given had been neglected or ignored. According to one respondent,



*It's disappointing to see that no significant public outreach or input went into this update. It states that more trail opportunities are highly desired, but then it also states that no additional trail opportunities will be pursued. Why ignore what the public values and wants to see for the area? Working directly with user groups to develop a comprehensive regional trail plan is highly needed!*

Other than the opportunity for regional trail systems, there was not a clear indication among comments of what collaborative management might look like, though there was support for the idea. As one person shared,

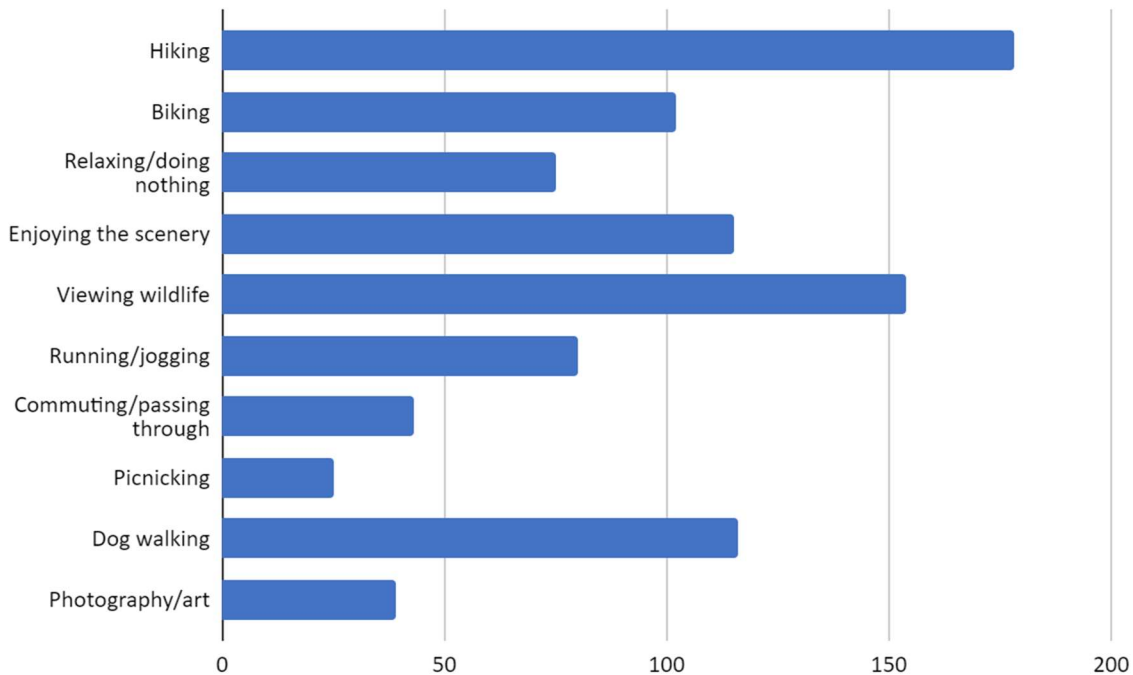
*[I appreciate that Soapstone] is a significant cultural site that was created in partnership and has the potential to be managed in that same collaborative vein.*

Overall, it is clear that this site has significant community value as a cultural, recreational, and ecological site. Ongoing opportunities for community and partner agency involvement would be valuable to prevent future tensions around management practices.

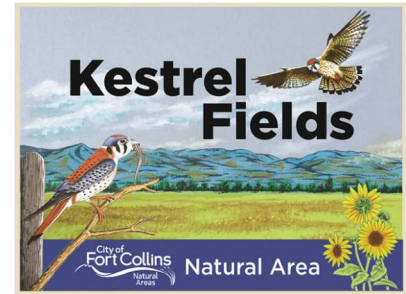
## Kestrel Fields Trail Alignment Feedback

[Kestrel Fields Natural Area](#) is planned to open in early 2023 as an conservation agriculture focused property supporting a working farm and public access trails on roughly 70 acres. Feedback questions for Kestrel Fields focused on the entrance sign, trails, and use types. Natural Areas received 256 responses regarding trail alignment, 124 comments about trail changes, and 274 responses about signage.

When asked how they anticipated using the natural area when it opens, the top responses were hiking, viewing wildlife, dog walking, and enjoying the scenery (see graph below).



When asked about entrance signage for the property, the majority of respondents (70%) preferred sign option #2, pictured right.



## Key Themes

### *Prioritizing access and connectivity ♦ Enhancing trails*

Approximately 57% of respondents were in favor of the suggested trail alignment. About a third said they would “maybe” be in favor of the proposed trail alignment, and about 8% were not in favor. Some respondents felt they could not make a decision about the trail without understanding the type of trail (gravel, paved, etc.).

Comments about trail alignment largely requested additional connectivity to neighborhoods and other trail systems, as well as a larger loop throughout the site. For example, these two respondents shared,

*I wish there was access to the Stonecrest community...it would allow my family to access the natural area workout going out to Taft or Vine. Connecting to form a loop along the western edge of the farming area to create a loop would also be great.*

And,

*Would it be possible to create a large loop trail encircling the entire natural area that would have spurs connecting Vine, Havel, Lawrence, and Liberty to the large loop? If so, that would be awesome! Thanks for asking!*

While most comments about trail alignment requested additional trail length, a few responses expressed concern about privacy for adjacent homeowners or maintaining habitats. As one person shared,

*Move the trail away from the property lines. [Property] owners do not want folks so close to their home. Privacy issues; do not solve with trees, as that obscures view...[property] owners need to know that folks right along their fence line is not a "normal" walker/visitor thing (know when to be concerned and when not to).*

## Conclusion

Responses to the feedback form indicated a great deal of care and passion for the City’s Natural Areas. While respondents did not all agree on specific strategies or policies, many shared common values and visions for these spaces, including feeling safe, having easy access from their neighborhood, being able to pursue recreational activities like mountain biking and dog walking, and having opportunities to find relaxation and respite from the noise and commotion of day-to-day life. Emphasizing the shared love of these spaces, and the opportunities for natural areas to exist for both ecological and recreational benefit will be important as Natural Areas seeks to incorporate these values and visions into management policies and practices.

## Appendix A: Coding Memo

Cactus Consulting LLC ("Cactus Consulting") is a research consulting business located in Fort Collins, CO. Their mission is to use social science to help local governments and nonprofits make progress on the prickly or "wicked" problems of our time, from climate change to housing affordability.

Cactus Consulting employs qualitative data analysis to assign specific "codes" to sections of text in an attempt to link across comments and create a broader framework of meaning and understanding. By understanding both the broader themes across different opinions, and the specific concerns or comments of community members, clients can make better, community-engaged decisions about programming and policy.

This analysis was guided by the principles of Grounded Theory, which allows key themes and ideas to emerge rather than beginning with a predetermined list of ideas or words. The coding process begins with open coding, which is designed to allow themes to emerge rather than beginning with a predetermined set of ideas or themes. This first stage of coding encourages variety and creativity in assigning codes to small units of text (Glaser 1978). Multiple codes for a single unit of text are used when appropriate to avoid early bias towards specific concepts or themes (Charmaz 2006). These themes were then cross-checked with Natural Areas Department staff to ensure that written comments were reflective of the feedback they heard during community engagement.

The next stage of coding, focused coding, zeroes in on specific codes that appear to be the most useful or relevant (Glaser 1978). After focused coding, the theoretical coding stage related codes that have remained relevant to each other (Charmaz 2006; Glaser 1978). According to Charmaz, theoretical codes are "integrative" and "lend form" to relevant codes (Charmaz 2006: 63).

A breakdown of themes is included on the following page. Though we hope that the community priorities identified accurately represent the collective engagement of community members, we recognize that data collection and analysis is inherently influenced by our personal experiences and biases. In this case, our coding was grounded in the researcher's experience as an able-bodied white woman.

Theme	Subtheme	Parent Code	Child Code(s)
balancing community priorities	Priorities	conservation	habitats, vegetation, wildlife, water quality
		recreation	Biking, fishing, horses, hunting, water recreation,
creating a safe and welcoming environment for all user types	Priorities	general priorities	safety, relaxation, equity, access, cleanliness, uniqueness of spaces
		managing tension between user types	pet owners, people experiencing homelessness
		managing unwanted activities	trash, off-leash dogs,
	Strategies	infrastructure	parking lots, signage, trails
		enforcement	rangers, expanded regulations,
		education	