

City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department
Foothills Natural Areas Management Plan - Update 2019
Executive Summary- Draft

Four local Foothills natural areas—Coyote Ridge, Pineridge, Maxwell, Reservoir Ridge, and the Foothills Trail comprise over 4,000 acres of conserved land and 22.7 miles of trail adjacent to urban Fort Collins. Their wonderful natural attributes and recreation opportunities are representative of Fort Collins’ prescient, long-term commitment to its natural areas system. In addition to their rich biodiversity, these sites are popular destinations and experiencing increased visitation as the population grows and outdoor recreation increases in popularity. This Foothills Natural Areas Management Plan update (Plan) describes various approaches to maintain and improve the rich plant and wildlife communities while also managing for enjoyable, sustainable recreation access to these beautiful landscapes.

Foothills Management Plan Goals

The mission of the City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department (Department) is to conserve and enhance lands with natural resource, agricultural, and scenic values, while providing meaningful education and appropriate recreation opportunities. The mission and values of the Natural Areas Department and community are reflected in the three main goals for the Plan:

Promote Ecological Integrity

Conserve, maintain, and restore native plant and wildlife communities to promote ecological integrity.

Provide Public Access

Provide public access planning, management, facilities, and enforcement that conserves and enhances ecological, social, and cultural resources.

Connect People to Nature

Provide engagement opportunities that inspire stewardship, deepen a connection to nature, and contribute to community wellness.

Foothills Management Plan Process Overview

Efforts were made with the Plan process to encourage more public engagement, increase transparency and consistency of decisions, and facilitate adaptive management. The public engagement process for updating the Plan has been extensive and resulted in significant public participation. The last phase of public engagement is a review of the Draft Plan and its recommendations, which will occur August 16-September 2, 2019.

To facilitate decisions on visitor use, the Department developed a new tool, the Visitor Use Impact and Decision Framework (IDF), which asks a series of questions to explore and document the potential ecological impacts, cultural resource impacts, social considerations (including public feedback), and administrative considerations associated with potential changes in use. Summaries of findings are shared with the community and are linked in this document.

This Plan marks the beginning of a new approach to the natural area management planning process. Management decisions and actions will continue to be based on overarching long-term Department goals and objectives, but public engagement opportunities will be available at more frequent intervals than the previous 10-year cycle. This Executive Summary, a [web-based story map](#), and an [Action Plan](#) will replace the written document for this Plan.

Ecological Summary

The top priority for the Foothills natural areas is to conserve, maintain, and restore native plant and wildlife communities. With a total of 267 native wildlife and 396 native plant species documented, the Foothills host a very diverse community of life. Rare plants and rare plant communities occur in the Foothills including the endemic and imperiled Bell's twinpod and several varieties of imperiled alderleaf mountain-mahogany plant communities. Wildlife that rely on Foothills habitat include nesting raptors, grassland birds, migratory birds, rare butterflies and bumblebees, large and small mammals, waterfowl and wading birds, and a variety of reptiles and amphibians.

There are 35 [plant](#) and 43 [wildlife](#) species considered Species of Interest by the Department that are documented in the Foothills. Conservation efforts can be tailored to Species of Interest when it is appropriate. Conserving intact ecosystems is the best way to protect ecological integrity and restoring landscapes is a valuable and effective tool for improving degraded habitat.

Foothills Management Plan Decisions

Trails

The Department partners with various organizations to improve recreation opportunities. Although not a part of this plan, recent projects include the Long View Trail (4.4 miles), the Fossil Creek Trail connection (1.2 miles), and the On the Rocks Trail at Bobcat Ridge Natural Area (1 mile). In the foothills, a new trail is planned that will connect Coyote Ridge Natural Area to the City of Loveland's Prairie Ridge Natural Area and will provide a new experience for recreationists and three additional miles of trail. In addition, new land was recently added to Maxwell Natural Area that includes an additional 0.5 miles of trail.

There are several potential new Foothills trails and trail connections. Two trails (in the Reservoir Ridge and Maxwell natural areas) were evaluated during this planning process. These trails were analyzed by staff using the IDF and informed by public feedback. A potential trail connection to Centennial Drive was considered at Pineridge Natural Area and determined to be not feasible due to safety concerns, lack of

partner agency support, and sensitive ecological resources. An additional three trails (that would connect to other trails) will be considered in the future as landownership and other considerations allow (see below).

Reservoir Ridge Natural Area Potential Short Loop Trail

One of the most striking results from the Foothills visitor use [intercept survey](#) was the homogeneity of respondent's demographics. To understand what visitor-use opportunities might be attractive to a broader demographic, the Department conducted informal feedback opportunities for "non-visitors" at non-traditional locations. About half of the 168 informal feedback respondents and about half of the open house respondents indicated they might use a short loop interpretive trail.

Decision: After careful consideration of three trail alignments, a short loop interpretive trail will not be implemented at this time. Instead, the Department will deepen its strategic approach to attracting diverse visitors. Find the IDF summary [here](#).

Maxwell Natural Area Potential Trail Additions

Although visitor use research revealed that crowding is not yet an issue at the four Foothills natural areas, Maxwell Natural Area is very popular and is adjacent to the proposed Hughes housing development. Two new interior east-west trail alignments to the top of Maxwell Natural Area were considered, however both alignments were within the state and globally imperiled mountain mahogany plant community.

Decision: A new interior trail to the top of Maxwell Natural Area will not be installed. Instead, the Department will contract with a professional trail builder to refresh the existing Maxwell trail to ensure sustainability while retaining the "fun" and flow that make the trail so well-loved. Community input will inform the trail refresh. The Department will also monitor the progress of the [Hughes Redevelopment project](#) and consider other management actions for Maxwell as appropriate. Additionally, the Department will pursue a new trail (on the toe of the slope and parallel to the Foothills Trail) that connects Maxwell to Laporte Avenue and the Colorado State University Foothills Campus. Find the IDF [here](#).

Management Change

Pineridge Natural Area Sledding

Despite signage that authorizes sledding, the sledding spot at Pineridge is rarely used. Due to its location near County Road 42C and unauthorized use near the road, there are safety concerns associated with the activity at this location.

Decision: The Department will discontinue sledding in this area and will advocate for a new sledding area as part of the Hughes Redevelopment project. Find the IDF summary [here](#).

Potential Trail Connections

The three trail connections described below involve various landowners, agency jurisdictions, and sensitive natural resources (please note, the Department only acquires land and easements from willing

sellers). These factors will be understood and addressed through subsequent, project-level studies before a planning decision is made. When a given trail connection is considered feasible, the Department will use the IDF and public engagement to further understand the ecological, cultural, social, and administrative conditions of the proposed connections and facilitate a decision.

- **Maxwell Natural Area to Laporte Avenue** - Exploration of a lower elevation and less technically difficult trail connection that would connect to Laporte Avenue and the CSU Foothills Campus has begun. This connection would require crossing private land parcels. The potential trail alignment would minimize impacts to wildlife habitat and avoid sensitive resources such as rare plant communities. *In progress- inform the community of progress via the Natural Areas Department website and social media by 2020.*
- **Cathy Fromme Prairie Natural Area to Coyote Ridge Natural Area**- Exploration of this trail connection was included in the Fossil Creek Natural Areas Management Plan and has been underway since that plan was prepared. Planning this trail would occur concurrently with improvements to the Larimer County Landfill (i.e., capping and transfer station) and plans for the new Larimer County Mental Health Facility that will be built on the corner of Taft Hill Road and Trilby Road. Alignments for this trail connection are being explored that would minimize the impact to sensitive natural resources. *In progress- inform the community of progress via Natural Areas Department website and social media by 2022.*
- **Reservoir Ridge Natural Area to the Poudre Trail**- Connecting the Foothills Trail to the Poudre Trail has been a long-time aspiration. A connection would require crossing private land parcels. The Department only acquires land and easements from willing sellers. *This is a long-term goal; the timeline is unknown.*

Conclusion

The Foothills natural areas are a treasured community asset, hosting excellent wildlife and rare plant habitat, scenic views, and ample opportunities for the community to connect with nature. The challenge for the future will be sustaining the natural values of the Foothills natural areas amidst a period of significant population and recreation growth. The path forward will be guided by decision-making that is rooted in data gathering, professional judgement, best available science, and transparency, in alignment with the Natural Areas Department's conservation [mission](#).

For more information visit the Natural Areas Foothills Management Plan webpage: www.fcgov.com/naturalareas/foothills-plan