

Mountains to Plains Zone  
2022 Engagement Cycle Feedback



## Introduction

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.

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. Approximately 10% of respondents were under 30. Just under half (~48%) were over 50.

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.*

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.

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.*

## Key Themes

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

**Balancing ecology and recreation.** Both protecting natural habitats and maintaining/increasing opportunities for human recreation were priorities among respondents. When asked what they enjoyed about Soapstone, 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. 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 ecology, a few comments volunteered that they prioritized ecology. 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 SPNA need to remain that way as a reserve for plants/animals/air/quiet. If anything, reduce bike access and enforce existing restrictions.*

**Accentuating Soapstone'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! Another person shared,*

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, responses demonstrate 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.