Urban Zone
Public Engagement Summary

CITY OF FORT COLLINS NATURAL AREAS DEPARTMENT

Background

To manage the network of City of Fort Collins Natural Areas, eastern Larimer County is divided into six management zones based on geography. The Urban Zone is composed of ten natural areas distributed throughout Fort Collins. While many are located along the Spring Creek trail (e.g., Fischer, Ross, Mallard's Nest, Tanglewood, The Coterie) others are located elsewhere (e.g., Puente Verde, Goose Hollow, Redwing Marsh, Kestrel Fields, Red Fox Meadows). These sites serve multiple purposes including habitat preservation, stormwater protection, automobile-free commuting, and recreation.

At the time of this summary, the Urban Zone management plan was being updated. To inform the update, a feedback form was developed to assess attitudes related to the Urban Zone. The data collection procedure was not probabilistic, nor can these data be considered representative of the general community. This report offers one data point for decision-making and benchmarking against other data collection efforts. Natural Areas values and considers input that is expressed in many other forms, in addition to the feedback form.

Methods

Between March and July of 2023, Natural Areas staff and volunteers solicited feedback from natural area visitors. A total of 303 responses were collected in both English and Spanish. Nine participants responded in Spanish.

Data analysis was guided by principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 2006) and analyzed with Dedoose software by Natural Areas staff.

A breakdown of the origin of feedback forms is below:

Feedback Form Origin	Percentage of Forms
Website, fcgov.com/feedback	32%
Natural Areas station at Bike to Work Day	24%
Kids at the Park event	12%
Red Fox Meadows trailhead tabling	10%
Neighbor to Neighbor event	6%
Other events	16%

Demographics

More females (43%) than males (33%) participated. Most respondents were white (68%), and more than half (62%) were under the age of fifty. Annual household incomes ranged widely with twenty-six percent of respondents earning between $50,000 and $99,000. Between fourteen and twenty-seven percent of participants chose not to respond to demographic questions.

Gender	Percentage

Female	43%
Male	33%
Gender non-conforming	2%
Decline to specify	22%
Race/Ethnicity	**Percentage**
White	68%
Hispanic/Latino/Spanish Origin	5%
African American/Black	1%
American Indian/Native Alaskan	1%
Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander	1%
Middle Eastern/North African	1%
Two or more races	1%
Decline to specify	22%
Age	**Percentage**
≤ 14 years old	1%
15 to 19	2%
20 to 29	10%
30 to 39	20%
40 to 49	15%
50 to 59	12%
60 to 69	17%
≥ 70 years old	9%
Decline to specify	14%
Annual Household Income	**Percentage**
< $10,000	6%
$10,000 to $14,999	4%
$15,000 to $24,999	3%
$25,000 to $34,999	3%
$35,000 to $49,999	6%
$50,000 to $74,999	13%
$75,000 to $99,999	13%
$100,000 to $149,999	12%
$150,000 to $199,999	8%
≥ $200,000	6%
Decline to specify	27%

Open-ended responses

A question asking respondents, "**How was your experience visiting any of the Natural Areas on the map?**", garnered a wide range of responses (*n* = 280). Sixty-two percent of participants expressed having a positive experience (*n* = 174) with comments like "excellent," "amazing," "awesome," "great," "good," and "very nice."

Other common responses were interpreted and coded as "love and appreciation" (n = 66) for natural areas, mentions of "nature and wildlife" (n = 45), "ease of access" to the natural areas (n = 22), and "well maintained infrastructure" (n = 32).

One respondent summarized their natural area experience as:

> *"Wonderful! Love the accessibility, parking, and trail variety. They're always clean and well kept."*

Another described the respite natural areas provide for wildlife and visitors alike:

> *"They are beautiful spots teeming with wildlife. I love hearing birds, seeing creatures skitter by, and smelling the fresh air. They make for a nice break from the busy pace of everyday life."*

Opportunities to improve infrastructure (n = 17) included wayfinding signage, play structures for children, improving trail connectivity and trails, adding more benches and picnic areas, additional bridges and crosswalks, and improved prairie dog management related to infrastructure near The Coterie Natural Area.

Managing user conflict was cited thirteen times and included comments related to litter, persons experiencing homelessness, dogs off-leash, dog waste, maintenance activities, and social trails.

Only three respondents reported a negative experience in any of these natural areas, and this was related to general disappointment, dissatisfaction with prairie dog management, and social trails.

When asked, **"What are your thoughts about the plants and animals that live in these Natural Areas?** (n = 271), seventy percent responded with a positive impression of the two communities. Opportunities to view wildlife (n = 53) co-occurred in twenty percent of responses citing a positive impression.

Participants also attributed the diversity and variety (n = 23) of both natural area landscapes and plant and wildlife communities to their overall impression of these communities. Further the availability of these natural areas within city limits (n = 20) was cited as important for plants, animals, and humans alike. Seven percent of responses cited the nature-based educational opportunities (n = 20) that the Urban Zone natural areas provide. One participant eloquently captured these sentiments:

> *"My hobby is birding and these natural areas are great places to see wild birds without traveling far from home. I've also seen a variety of mammals, snakes, turtles, etc. Viewing wildlife is the primary reason I visit natural areas … I am just beginning to study and appreciate plants and trees and look forward to using these natural areas as my classroom."*

Other responses asserted the importance of and need to further "protect and preserve" (n = 37) habitat for plants and animals. Suggestions for improving habitat (n = 36) included adding more

natural areas, restoring native plants and reducing invasive species (*n* = 24), and managing use conflicts (*n* = 9) like dogs off leash, roaming cats, litter and homeless encampments.

Participants were asked to respond to, **"What do you enjoy or appreciate about the natural spaces throughout Fort Collins?"** (*n* = 260). Thirty percent of respondents expressed appreciation for nature and wildlife. Additionally, nature and wildlife co-occurred with other themes in nearly half of responses (*n*= 112). The most common co-occurrences were recreation (*n* = 15), ease of access (*n* = 15), and that natural areas were located within city limits (*n* = 15).

The ease of access of the Urban Zone natural areas was cited in over twenty percent of responses (*n* = 58), while conservation values (*n* = 46) were expressed eighteen percent of the time. An appreciation for the quantity of (*n* = 22) and diversity or variety (*n* = 26) of natural areas was evident in responses. Further, respondents often remarked on the peace and quiet (*n* = 16) that natural areas provide within the city (*n* = 32) and their therapeutic (*n* = 25) and recreational benefits (*n* = 32).

One participant expressed:

> *"I appreciate being able to use these areas in a variety of ways to connect to nature right out my back door. I would like to encourage Natural Areas to continue to allow people to be part of these Natural Areas in a variety of ways (biking, walking, bird watching, foraging, picnicking, walking dogs, playing in streams, etc.). These areas are such an opportunity to connect with nature in small, daily doses, noticing seasonal changes and learning along the way. I would encourage the establishment of more Urban natural areas in other areas of town, and efforts to get even more people to use these places as ways to connect to nature."*

The final item on the feedback form offered participants the opportunity to share more unspecified comments, it read, **"What else would you like the Natural Areas Department to know?"** (*n* = 195). Slightly more than fifty percent of additional comments focused on love and appreciation for natural areas (*n* = 36) and staff efforts (*n* = 63). Thoughts like,

> *"We appreciate all you do to provide a safe place for our family, community, and plants & animals to enjoy."*

And,

> *"You are doing a great job. Really great job. I'm proud to live in a town that has upheld our values to protect natural spaces..."*

were evident throughout the responses.

Additionally, opinions of continued or increased protection and preservation of natural spaces (*n* = 25) occurred in thirteen percent of responses.

Slightly more than twenty percent of responses contained suggestions for improvement (n = 44). These suggestions included adding more infrastructure (e.g., signs, benches, shade structures), better vegetation management, and improving trails for persons with disabilities. Similarly, nearly ten percent of comments included mentions of the need to better manage use conflicts (n = 18). These comments centered around persons experiencing homelessness, dogs off-leash, and bikes traveling too fast.

Conclusion

Ten natural areas encompass the Urban Zone which offers access to nature within city limits. To inform the Urban Zone management plan update, community feedback was collected from March through July of 2023. Over 300 responses were collected in both English and Spanish at various community events and through an online feedback portal. These responses were thematically coded using principles of Grounded Theory and analyzed with Dedoose software by staff.

Throughout the feedback, participants indicated having positive interactions within the Urban Zone. They frequently expressed sentiments of love and appreciation for these areas and encouraged expanded land conservation and continued preservation of natural spaces throughout the city. Similarly, participants placed importance on wildlife and nature in general, and extolled the benefits of these areas as providing respite for plants, animals, and humans alike within city limits. Future management efforts in the Urban Zone should include infrastructure improvements, continuing to pursue opportunities for habitat and trail connectivity, and managing visitor conflicts through shared responsibility.

The data collection procedure used in this report was not probabilistic, nor can these data be considered representative of the general community. This report offers a single data point for decision-making and benchmarking against other data collection efforts. Natural Areas values and considers input that is expressed in many other forms, in addition to the feedback form.