



Poudre River Zone Natural Areas  
2022 Engagement Cycle Feedback



## Introduction

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. This resulted in 285 responses regarding what people enjoy or appreciate about the Poudre River Natural Areas, 120 comments about the conservation of the Poudre River Zone Natural Areas, 111 open comments, and 62 comments about safety. Three respondents provided answers 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.

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 ♦ 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.

## 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: Supplemental Resources

[Coding Memo](#)