

Green Living Coloradoan Article

By Zoe Whyman, City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Community Relations Manager
zwhyman@fcgov.com, 970-221-6311

Your Natural Areas; After 20 Years, What's Next?

Natural areas are part of what makes Fort Collins such a special place to live. You have 39 natural areas to experience with over 100 miles of trails to explore. The City's Natural Areas Department is wrapping up a year of celebration of the two decades since the first citizen-initiated sales tax that funds natural areas. You, the citizens of Fort Collins and Larimer County have voted to support natural areas sales tax ballot measures four more times since 1992. Thank you voters and thank you everyone that participated in the many celebratory activities.

What does the future hold? There will be many opportunities to care for the conserved land and for outdoor experiences. The Natural Areas Department's rehabilitation and restoration efforts help natural areas become more biologically diverse and sustainable. The ultimate goal is for natural areas to have at least 70% native vegetation. While many sites meet or exceed this standard, there are numerous natural areas that are undergoing transformation slowly, over time from abandoned farmland or industrial uses.

In addition to their biological richness, natural areas are great places to play and learn. With over 100 miles of trails and numerous facilities such as restrooms, fences, and kiosks, there is much to enjoy and maintain. We hope to continue to provide fun and meaningful educational activities and events for thousands of people a year and hands-on volunteer projects. We hope to continue all the parts of natural areas that you love.

Fortunately, the community has strongly supported natural areas with a City dedicated sales tax that expires in 2030. In addition, City of Fort Collins Natural Areas receives a portion of Larimer County's open space sales tax. The County's sale tax expires in 2018 unless renewed by the voters. The potential expiration of the County tax represents a significant challenge to the Natural Areas Department since we rely on it for a majority of our operating expenses.

In the next few years the community will be discussing these opportunities and challenges and deciding the way forward. For example, the Natural Areas Department will be updating the Natural Areas Master Plan which sets the direction for your natural areas for the next 10 years. You can be involved and we very much hope that you will share your thoughts with us at fcgov.com/naturalareas. In the next 20 years, the community will make some crucial choices about our natural areas and their future.