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# 2006

## NATURAL AREAS PROGRAM

# ANNUAL REPORT



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## Bobcat Ridge Natural Area Opens

A major highlight of 2006 was the September 30th opening of Bobcat Ridge Natural Area. Bobcat Ridge was acquired, developed, and maintained with natural areas and open space tax dollars, and offers exceptional hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, wildlife watching, wheelchair accessible trails, and more.

The opening day celebration included food, music, a raptor release, and interpretive events. The ensuing "Month of Celebration" featured horseback rides, bird watching and native plant hikes, llama demonstrations, and historic structures.



City Council member Karen Wolkow and Judy Scherpelz release a bird.

The first trail to be open to the public is the 4.5-mile "Valley Loop." Later in 2007, an additional ten miles of trail on the higher elevations of the property will be developed. Ultimately, the trail system will include trails that easy and accessible to people of most ability levels, as well as challenging, steep trails leading to magnificent views.

Bobcat Ridge Natural Area is open from dawn to dusk. Visitors are reminded to leave their dogs at home, as this is one of the few Fort Collins natural areas where dogs are not permitted.

## Comprehensive Surveys Conducted

From May through November, the Natural Areas Program conducted two user surveys of local natural area visitors; the survey did not collect data from regional properties or Gateway Natural Area. These were the first system-wide surveys ever conducted in the City's natural areas. The quantitative survey counted the number of people visiting the natural areas and categorized by recreation type. The qualitative survey asked natural area visitors to fill out a two-page survey about their satisfaction with the City's natural areas.

The survey revealed that there are in excess of 3 million natural area visits annually and the overwhelming majority of these visits are either by hiking/walking/jogging or by bicycle.

Respondents were asked what they enjoyed about Fort Collins natural areas. The top three responses to this open ended question fell into three categories: a combination of solitude, peacefulness, and relaxing elements of natural areas; enjoying nature/wildlife; and, the well maintained trails/natural areas. Satisfaction with Fort Collins natural areas was very high, with 95% indicating they were either somewhat or very satisfied. Overall, 60% of respondents indicated they did not feel crowded when visiting natural areas. The entire report is available on line at [fcgov.com/naturalareas](http://fcgov.com/naturalareas).



# from the Director

In September, 2006, the Natural Areas Program opened its first-ever regional property, Bobcat Ridge Natural Area. Hundreds of citizens joined us in a day-long celebration. Since that day, many thousands more have visited Bobcat, with visitation greatly exceeding initial expectations.

The news from Bobcat Ridge is exciting and encouraging. As I noted in last year's annual report, the Natural Areas Program has been placing a stronger emphasis on visitor experience and service to the public. In

fact, to provide a better understanding of the perspectives of our customers, we conducted user surveys throughout much of 2006.

While the data is still being crunched, two major themes have emerged. The number of visits to our local natural areas is very high, exceeding 3 million visits a year. Our local natural areas are extraordinarily popular and well used. Secondly, visitors are expressing a very high level of satisfaction with their experiences.

We will continue to mine the data for information about how to further enhance visitor enjoyment of our natural areas. In the meantime, we will keep doing our best to conserve and enhance the natural values of these precious properties while also doing our best to make the experience welcoming and interesting.

Thank you for your continued support of the Natural Areas Program.

*John Stokes*

## Land Conservation

In 2006, the Natural Areas Program conserved 6,021 acres at a cost of \$6,155,614. Efforts primarily were directed toward conserving land in and around Fort Collins and several negotiations are well underway. In the meantime, a handful of projects in progress for the last several years were completed in the community separator and regional categories.

Two parcels were conserved in the Fort Collins-Loveland Community Separator conservation focus area. After seven years of negotiations a 76-acre parcel was acquired on the west side of South Taft Hill Road, which will be managed as a part of Coyote Ridge Natural Area. The second 72-acre parcel was donated by the Everitt Company, and is located on the north shore of Fossil Creek Reservoir.

There are several regional conservation focus area successes to report. To protect the view from Soapstone Prairie Natural Area two ranches south of Soapstone are being conserved. Natural Areas acquired the 1,360-acre Round Butte Ranch using two grants received from Great Outdoors Colorado (lottery money) to place a conservation easement on the ranch that will reduce potential development from 34 homes to two. Natural Areas also entered into an agreement to purchase the 1,760-acre Bernard Ranch over the next seven years. A conservation easement will be placed on this property as well.

A 3,873 acre in-holding at Soapstone Prairie was acquired from the State Land Board (SLB). Natural Areas traded a 440-acre sod farm, which lies within the Wellington Community Separator, for the 3,873 acres of SLB in-holdings plus \$807,000 in cash. A conservation easement on the sod farm restricts development to an additional 23 homes to be constructed in a cluster. The sod farm was the first parcel of land ever acquired by the SLB with a conservation easement on it.

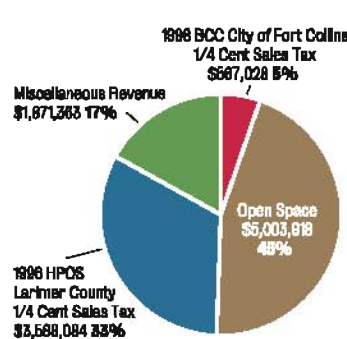
Lastly in this category, the fourth of five payments was made on the 2,600-acre Bobcat Ridge Natural Area, acquiring an additional 200 acres.

## Revenues and Expenditures

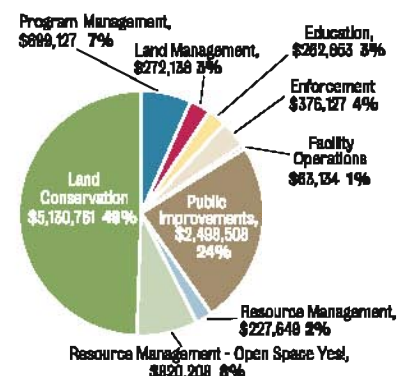
Among the NAP revenues were several grants. Great Outdoors Colorado awarded the City \$212,700 for the purchase of a conservation easement on portions of Round Butte Ranch. REI, the outdoor gear store, awarded a \$10,000 grant which funded trail improvements and education events at Pineridge Natural Area as well as volunteer training and appreciation events for 2006 and 2007. The Access Fund, a national climbing and mountaineering advocacy organization, awarded a \$1,579 grant for improvements and enhancements to the Piano Boulders climbing area at Pineridge Natural Area. The program also received \$25,000 from the State Historical Fund for cultural resource inventories at Soapstone Prairie Natural Area; as well as a State Wildlife Grant for \$32,760 for bird surveys. Finally, although not a direct grant to the Natural Areas Program, the Fort Collins Museum received a \$147,563 grant to support an oral history project for Soapstone Prairie and the Mountains to Plains project area.

The COPS noted in the expenditures graph are Certificates of Participation. These long-term financing instruments enable the Natural Areas Program to spread out the cost of Soapstone Prairie and other acquisitions over 15 years, thereby preserving funds for other land conservation opportunities.

**NAP 2006 Revenues**  
\$11,030,393



**NAP 2006 Expenditures**  
\$10,350,506





## New Volunteer Trail Host Program Introduced

In the spring, 21 Fort Collins residents completed the 20-hour orientation and field training in the Natural Areas Program's first Volunteer Trail Host class. In the fall, another 24 people were trained.

Volunteer Trail Hosts work in concert with the City's Natural Areas and Trails rangers to promote outdoor safety and provide customer service to visitors and trail users. Volunteer Trail Hosts greet visitors at local trailheads or along the City's trails on foot, bike, or horseback. They respond to questions, provide trail information, and assist trail users with other needs. The volunteers are easily recognizable in their forest green polo shirts with the natural areas logo.

It is anticipated that additional training classes will be held each spring and fall.



## Volunteers Give Over 3,500 Hours

As in years past, volunteers have provided an incredible level of service to the Natural Areas Program. Volunteer hours for 2006 totaled 3,531.

Volunteer activities included approximately 60 Master Naturalists providing 173 programs serving 5,836 people. Trail hosts gave 236 hours greeting and assisting natural area visitors. "Adopters" gave 519 hours picking up trash and litter. Other volunteers built bat and flicker houses which were distributed to the public; participated in projects to protect trees along the river from beaver damage; helped with trail work at Pineridge Natural Area and other sites; assisted with survey projects; helped to keep the native gardens at the Nix facility in great shape; conducted bird surveys; packaged wildflower seeds for distribution to the public; and provided other valuable services.



## Significant System-wide Species Data Compiled

A project to compile wildlife and plant data across the entire system of natural areas owned and managed by the City's Natural Areas Program was conducted in 2006.

### A sampling of the significant findings:

- Pineridge and Riverbend Ponds natural areas are notable birding sites. Of the 353 species of birds seen in Fort Collins, Pineridge has 212; Riverbend Ponds has 207.
- Several bird species at Bobcat Ridge Natural Area are considered unusual for this area. They include western scrub jay, sage thrasher, bushtit, grasshopper sparrow, and gray flycatcher. Riparian corridors attract these species to the area.
- The federally threatened least tern has been found at Cottonwood Hollow Natural Area.
- The federally and state threatened Preble's meadow jumping mouse has been documented at Bobcat Ridge Natural Area.
- Two state threatened fish species, brassy minnow and common shiner, occur at three natural areas.
- The federally threatened Ute ladies'-tresses orchid (*spiranthes diluvialis*) population in Fort Collins is the only known population documented in Larimer County.
- In 2006, the rare tufted loosestrife (not to be confused with the invasive purple loosestrife) was discovered at Magpie Meander Natural Area. The last time this plant was documented in Colorado was in 1903.
- The second largest known population of the federally listed Colorado butterfly plant occurs at Soapstone Prairie Natural Area. It is the only population known to occur within Larimer County.

These findings highlight the ecological value of Fort Collins' natural areas and can help to direct management decisions.



## Gateway Mountain Park Becomes Gateway Natural Area

In late 2006, the City's Natural Areas Program assumed management of Gateway Mountain Park, now called Gateway Natural Area. Located 15 miles from Fort Collins, 5 miles west of Ted's Place on Colorado Highway 14, this facility, previously managed by the City's Parks Department, is a mountain lovers paradise. It offers trails, a boat launching area, fishing, picnic shelters, and a bluegrass lawn. Dogs are allowed on leash.

While the managing department has changed, visitors will notice no difference. The entrance and facility use fees will remain the same. Recreational use will be unchanged.

Facility reservations are now taken at (970) 416-2815.



## Soapstone Prairie Natural Area Planning Progresses

Soapstone Prairie Natural Area management plan development continued in 2006 with efforts focused on defining the possible range of visitor experience, recreational opportunities, and baseline ecological and cultural conditions.

A technical advisory group has been assembled to assist in the development of the management plan. The group consists of representatives from several public and private conservation groups and recreation groups in Larimer County. From this and other work, a suite of visitor experience

opportunities was identified and will be presented to the public during 2007. Soapstone Prairie Natural Area is expected to open to the public in June 2009.

Ecological and cultural work continued at Soapstone. A cultural resource inventory funded through the Colorado State Historical Fund has revealed many new archaeological sites, ranging from possibly Clovis to historic in age, with an abundance of campsites dating to the middle and late Holocene period. A breeding bird survey, conducted by the

Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory and funded in part through a Colorado Division of Wildlife State Wildlife Grant, indicates that Soapstone Prairie Natural Area supports an impressive array of grassland bird species, some of which are declining dramatically throughout their range. These species include northern harrier, ferruginous hawk, Swainson's hawk, golden eagle, prairie falcon, long-billed curlew, mountain plover, Wilson's phalarope, burrowing owl, short-eared owl, loggerhead shrike, savannah sparrow, and others.







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