

Natural Areas Master Plan Executive Summary

Naturally Yours: to Protect, to Discover, to Enjoy

There is a growing understanding and appreciation for the symbiotic relationship between local land conservation and human wellbeing. The joy of a child playing at the water's edge; the deep contentment of an afternoon spent fly casting in the middle of town; the music of birdsong on a warm spring day; a quiet walk, or a hard run on the Foothills Trail as the sun rises – these descriptions hint at the deeper meaning and values of the City of Fort Collins natural areas system. Local conservation offers two fundamentally intertwined benefits: the preservation and support of the diversity of life, and support for human health and wellness.

The primary mission of the Natural Areas Department is the conservation and restoration of habitat. For over 20 years the City has been conserving land by purchasing it outright, or by acquiring conservation easements. Over 40,000 acres have been conserved to date and over the next ten years land conservation will continue to be at the front and center of the Department's efforts.

The land conservation, restoration, and stewardship work of the City and its partners has helped provide and enhance a wide variety of habitat. At the same time, this fundamental conservation work also contributes to what human health experts characterize as the highly beneficial effects to human wellbeing of outdoor activity. Made possible by a series of citizen-initiated sales taxes, the Natural Areas Department's land portfolio provides 110 miles of trails on 40 sites open to public use and provides numerous opportunities for connecting and re-connecting with nature.

Fort Collins' natural areas are an extraordinary expression of our community's commitment to biological diversity, environmental protection, and human wellbeing. And – as demonstrated by the September 2013 flooding – natural areas help mitigate potentially disastrous flood flows, indicating how important natural areas are to our economic resiliency and safety.



White pelican on McMurry Natural Area
(Photo by Norm Keally)





Staff, volunteers, and visitors at Gateway Natural Area
(City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department Photo)

A Continuous Dialogue: Community Involvement in the 2014 Master Plan Update

Every year the City uses a variety of means to listen to and incorporate ideas from the community. The 2014 *Natural Areas Master Plan* builds upon a number of previous and ongoing outreach efforts and partnerships in order to continuously understand stakeholders and be responsive to public preferences regarding land conservation, stewardship, and recreation efforts. From biennial Fort Collins Citizen Surveys, to *Our Lands – Our Future* outreach in 2012 and 2013, to open houses and online surveys for this 2014 *Master Plan* outreach effort, it is crystal clear that Fort Collins citizens remain enthusiastic about land conservation and outdoor recreation.

Over 20 Years of Accomplishments

The Fort Collins community can be deservedly proud of its role in the local conservation movement. In the past ten years, the Natural Areas Department has tripled the acreage of conserved land, substantially increased education and volunteer efforts, tackled complex river and grassland restoration projects, plunged into efforts to improve river health, expanded ranger and visitor services to meet community needs, opened up a dozen new natural areas to the public, doubled the miles of natural surface trails, conserved regional and even globally important cultural resources, raised the awareness of the need to conserve local agricultural lands, stepped up environmental sustainability efforts, and greatly improved numerous other aspects of land stewardship for the City's natural areas.

To date, the efforts of the City have resulted in

- **34,800** acres conserved by acquisition for public use
- **5,800** acres protected through conservation easements that are managed by private landowners
- **900** acres of recreational rights leased on reservoirs to help protect key wildlife habitat.
- **75%** of the land conserved has been conserved since the 2004 *Master Plan*
- **110** miles of trails created and maintained on 40 natural areas
- Over **2 million** visits to natural areas occur each year
- **8-10%** of Fort Collins' population participates annually in Department education, outreach, and volunteer opportunities

Master Plan Priorities

Continuing the Natural Areas Success Story

The Natural Areas Department will continue to:

- Aspire to its vision: Through the work of the Natural Areas Department, a diverse system of conserved and restored lands will connect community members to nature. These conserved lands will protect nature and contribute to the health and wellbeing of our community.
- Stick to its core mission: The mission of the Natural Areas Department is to conserve and enhance lands with natural resource, agricultural, and scenic values, while providing meaningful education and appropriate recreation opportunities.

The Natural Areas Department will act to:

- Conserve land, water, wildlife corridors, and trail connections.
- Restore habitat.
- Provide visitor and recreation services.
- Provide education, interpretation, and volunteer opportunities.
- Contribute to the character and culture of our City.



*Hogback at Coyote Ridge Natural Area
(Photo by Crystal Strouse)*



*Great horned owl at Bobcat Ridge Natural Area
(Photo by Norm Keally)*

Nurturing Nature

The Natural Areas Department works to bring natural areas into better ecological condition. Resource Management priorities include:

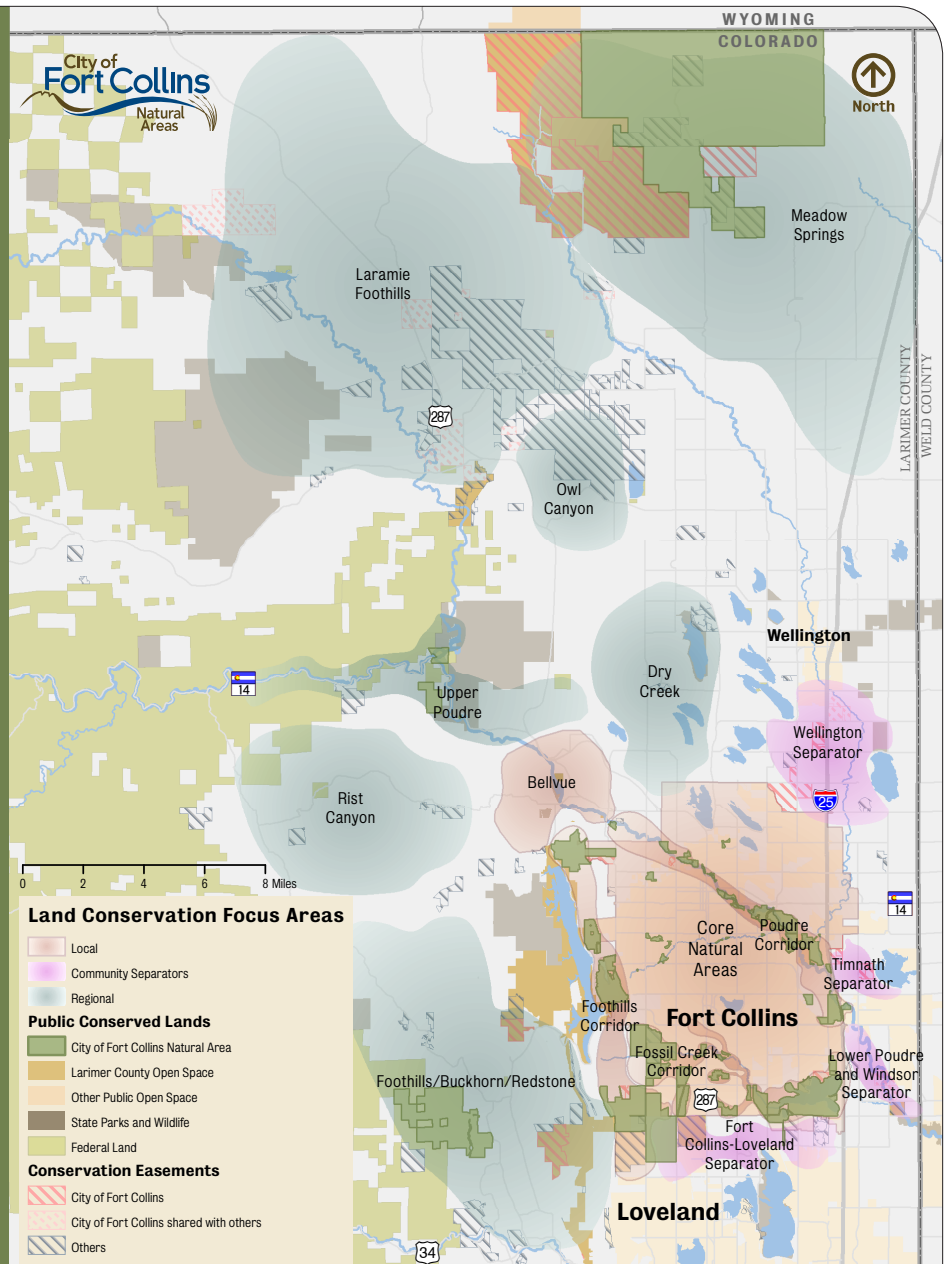
- Substantially complete grassland restoration in southwest Fort Collins and foothills natural areas.
- Reintroduce endangered or threatened native wildlife into suitable landscapes including the black-footed ferret and bison to Soapstone Prairie Natural Area.
- Aspire to create “Wilderness in the City”--places that feel wild and remote and exceed traditional expectations for urban natural areas.

Land and Water Conservation

The City conserves land valued by the community. Sites ranging in size from 1 acre to 22,258 acres protect a wide diversity of native plant communities, including mature cottonwood forests, foothills shrublands, wet meadows, emergent marshes, and shortgrass prairies.

Priorities for land conservation were identified by focus areas in the 2004 plan and refined for this plan through the *Our Lands – Our Future* project as described in Chapter 3 of this *Master Plan*. The intent of the focus areas is to identify land and water with conservation values that may be considered for conservation when willing owners desire to sell or donate their land, water, or conservation easements. A fundamental guiding principle of this plan is to maintain the community's core focus on biologically significant lands, or lands that have the potential to contribute to biological integrity and richness. An additional principle is to acquire water in order to enhance and sustain habitat; to link it to appropriate lands (such as productive farmland); and, to satisfy water rights administrative obligations. Based on these principles and the focus areas and in order of priority the Natural Areas Department will conserve:

- Lands within the local focus areas particularly the Poudre River, the Bellvue area, and adjoining foothills.
- Agricultural land in the Wellington Separator.
- Regional lands as opportunities and funding permit.



The City's ability to achieve the community's future land-conservation aspirations hinges on the extension of Larimer County's "Help Preserve Open Space" sales tax (see Chapter 2, Funding and Expenditures). Extending this county-wide funding source would enable the City to conserve additional land over the next ten years while appropriately stewarding the lands it currently manages.

Successful Partnerships

The tremendous progress toward conservation and stewardship of natural areas in Fort Collins could not have occurred without the support of the community and numerous partners within and outside of City government. These funding, stewardship, and research partnerships will continue to be extremely important over the next ten years to meet future community priorities.



Outstanding Volunteers and Invigorated Minds

Natural Area volunteers are incredibly special people who dedicate their time to education, conservation, and excellent customer service. In 2013, 1,633 volunteers donated over 10,000 hours, which is the equivalent of five full-time employees. Master Naturalists and Assistants provided over 200 educational activities and events about everything from mountain lions to cultural history to astronomy. Every educational program offered was free, including field trips for 1,300 students to natural areas. Specific priorities are to:

- Use diverse and creative strategies to connect people to nature.
- Ensure offerings engage and reflect the demographics and diversity of the entire community.
- Meet the community's expectation to give back to the places they love by expanding opportunities for service learning and other volunteer involvement.



*Widow skimmer dragonfly at Cottonwood Hollow Natural Area
(Photo by Dave Leatherman)*



*Great blue heron on the Poudre River at Gustav Swanson Natural Area
(Photo by Norm Keally)*

The Cache la Poudre River

As it has for over 20 years ago, the Cache la Poudre River will remain a high conservation priority. Going forward the City will place continued emphasis on land conservation and additional emphasis on conserving and restoring ecological functions. In addition, the Natural Areas Department will help convene and collaborate with partners such as City departments, water users, and nonprofit organizations to further protect and improve the overall health of the Poudre River ecosystem. Goals include sustaining and improving water flows, implementing restoration projects that connect the river to its floodplain, creating rich wildlife habitat, improving aesthetics, and providing appropriate recreational opportunities.

Recreation and Visitor Services Improvements

The City is passionate about providing enjoyable and sustainable opportunities for the public to enjoy the natural and cultural treasures it manages. Natural Areas public improvements staff will maintain a natural surface trail system that supports a variety of recreational experiences, while minimizing multiuse conflicts and negative impacts on conservation values. Rangers will continue to provide visitor services and enforcement to protect resources and maintain safety. Illegal camping issues will be addressed through collaboration with the Social Sustainability Department, Police Services, and community social service organizations. Maintaining high quality customer service, as measured by Citizen Survey reports, is a key metric of success.



*Reservoir Ridge Natural Area
(City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department Photo)*



*Soapstone Prairie Natural Area
(Photo by Norm Keally)*

Conserving Our Heritage

Conserving natural resources - the Natural Areas Department's primary mission - often means conserving associated cultural and historic resources and the connection between people and landscapes. A *Master Plan* priority is to protect these irreplaceable resources for future generations to learn from and enjoy.

The Department will seek to utilize non-Departmental resources, including grants, to conserve and restore cultural resources. It also will develop policies to guide its work to fund and manage cultural resources; and, it will pursue state or federal historic designation for noteworthy structures, such as the Warren Ranch buildings on Soapstone Prairie Natural Area.



*Sod Farm Conservation Easement in the Wellington Separator
(City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department Photo)*

Local Agriculture

The City utilizes agricultural practices on some lands to benefit habitat and to mimic ecological processes. These practices can also benefit the local economy. The Natural Areas Department also holds conservation easements on farmland. These farms remain in private ownership and provide community separation as well as economic and some habitat benefits. In the past few years, various City departments have explored more ways to support urban agriculture and local food production for sustainability and human health.

The Natural Areas Department's local agriculture priorities are to:

- Conserve working agricultural lands with prime soils and water, including lands that could be used for local food production typically through conservation easement acquisitions.
- Pursue both resource conservation and agricultural activities on conserved working farms and ranches.
- Utilize appropriate agriculture-based management activities such as haying and grazing as a tool to aid in restoration and to help replace lost or impacted ecological processes.

Three Top Challenges

Help **Preserve** Open Space

Larimer County's "Help Preserve Open Space" ¼-cent sales tax supports a substantial portion of the Natural Areas Department operating and stewardship expenses and constitutes approximately 1/3rd of the Department's revenues. If HPOS is not extended beyond its 2018 sunset, it would be virtually impossible for the Department to provide adequate maintenance while also continuing to conserve, restore, and manage habitat.

Larimer County Commissioners have placed an extension of HPOS on the November 2014 ballot.



*Soapstone Prairie Natural Area
(Photo by Charlie Johnson)*

Feel the **Love**

Natural areas are popular: over 2 million visits occur annually. But with Fort Collins expected to grow by 100,000 people over the next 25 years, the number of people recreating in natural areas will likely exceed visitor carrying capacity in the more popular sites. When carrying capacity limits have been breached, negative impacts can include damage to natural values that are beyond the site's capacity to absorb as well as compromising the visitor experience beyond acceptable levels.

The *Master Plan* proposes many solutions such as: acquiring more land and developing more trails, monitoring visitor use, improving site access, escalating educational outreach, improving natural surface trail sustainability and connectivity, and resolving multiuse conflict. In addition, this *Master Plan* expands the spectrum of recreational offerings on select natural areas to include sport and family-friendly fishing, areas for solitude, off-trail nature exploration, natural play areas for children, and limited hunting opportunities.



*Soapstone Prairie Natural Area
(Photo by Lauryn Rae)*

The **Heat** is On

Global climate change and extreme weather events are expected to increase and the impacts on natural resources will be profound, including shifts in plant and animal communities, increased fire and flood events, and alteration in the Cache la Poudre water temperature, flows, and water quality and quantity. Land conservation and restoration could play a role in mitigating the effects of local climate change.



*Gateway Natural Area
(Photo by Richard Ernst)*

Looking Forward to the Next Decade and Beyond

During the next ten years, the Natural Areas Department will serve our community by implementing its mission to conserve land and water, restore natural systems to build ecological diversity and resiliency, and provide learning opportunities and safe and appropriate user experiences.

Fort Collins' natural areas will be affected by regional, national, and global environmental trends, but with the support of the community, including the voters of Larimer County, the City will continue to play an important role in meeting these challenges over the next decade and beyond.

*Milky Way above Bobcat Ridge Natural Area
(Photo by Jeremy White; Courtesy of National Park Service)*

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