



NATURE IN THE CITY

STRATEGIC PLAN



Adopted March 24, 2015





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I am pleased to present the Nature in the City Strategic Plan.

Nature in the City is a visionary approach to preserving and enhancing our quality of life now and for future generations. As Fort Collins grows in population and as infill and redevelopment continue to urbanize our community, we want to ensure that access to nature remains a defining attribute of our city. This Plan provides a defined approach to ensure there is always nature within our boundaries.

The City of Fort Collins has a long history of valuing our open spaces. We have vibrant Natural Areas and high quality parks and trails. Nature in the City will add to these programs by identifying, acquiring and protecting a network of connections within the community. Through public and private partnerships, the program will create additional natural spaces, providing quick and easy access to nature within a 10-minute walk from anywhere in Fort Collins. Creating and protecting such natural spaces within an urban setting benefits our physical and mental health, our wildlife and plant habitats, and ultimately combines to create a distinct sense of place for the whole community.

The Nature in the City Strategic Plan reflects the input of engaged residents, community and business partners, Colorado State University staff and students, the Mayor and City Councilmembers, and City staff. It reflects an interdisciplinary effort from many City departments and significant public outreach, including an active Citizen's Advisory Committee. I want to convey my appreciation to all of the citizens who participated in this process, the Mayor and Council for their leadership, and City staff for their hard work.

Nature in the City reflects our commitment to the triple bottom line, taking into account the economic, environmental and social impacts of nature, and as such, I believe this project will shape Fort Collins both in the short term and over the next century.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Darin Atteberry". The signature is stylized and fluid, with a large initial "D" and a long, sweeping tail.

Darin Atteberry
City Manager



Photo Credit: Natural Areas Department

Executive Summary

What is Nature in the City?

Nature is a defining characteristic of Fort Collins; our community has a 40-year history of protecting nature in our City and region. Nature in the City is a planning effort that capitalizes on these long-standing efforts to further protect and integrate nature into the City's fabric through a variety of regulatory, policy, outreach and collaborative solutions. The vision of Nature in the City is to provide a connected open space network accessible to the entire community that provides a variety of experiences and functional habitat for people, plants and wildlife. This vision will be accomplished through a triple-bottom-line approach considering benefits and impacts of environmental, economic, and social variables. Efforts that enhance access for people and wildlife, the quality of natural spaces, and ongoing stewardship of those spaces are the primary focus.



Photo Credit: Rosemarie Russo

Fort Collins' Commitment to Nature

Fort Collins has a long history of protecting open space within the community; as a result, nature has become a significant part of our community's character and quality of life. This commitment to nature brings many benefits to residents including the opportunity to interact with wildlife, award-winning recreational amenities, and contributes to the city's resilient economy.

Need for this Plan

For years, the City has grown toward the edge of the Growth Management Area boundary. While City Plan has enacted policies related to infill and redevelopment since the late 1990s, development has only recently begun to focus on infill in the urban core.

These changes in development patterns have stimulated a conversation regarding how the community can balance infill and redevelopment goals while maintaining a small-town feel, and protecting important habitat for plants and wildlife. Ensuring all residents have access to nature, and opportunities to retreat from the urban environment, has been identified as a key goal by the community, City Council, and the City's Strategic Plan.

How Does Nature in the City Build Upon Existing Efforts?

Nature in the City goes beyond the borders of Natural Areas, Parks and Stormwater facilities to incorporate a connected network of nature for people and wildlife on public and private lands in the City.

The vision of Nature in the City will be accomplished by a multi-faceted approach including:

- Private/public partnerships
- Restoring existing natural spaces to increase the natural quality of sites for people and wildlife
- Working on neighborhood-scale enhancement projects
- Design guidelines to illustrate how nature can be incorporated into the urban environment
- Education, incentives and resources for landowners, business owners and landscapers
- Ongoing partnerships on new and existing City plans, policies and practices
- Targeted land acquisition to provide a connected open space network

How to Use this Plan

Nature in the City will coordinate and connect new and existing City and community resources with the needs of residents. The recommended policies within this plan are intended to be used by City staff, numerous Boards and Commissions, City Council, property owners, and other community stakeholders to identify priority actions on which to focus collaborative efforts.



Vision

A connected open space network accessible to the entire community that provides a variety of experiences and functional habitat for people, plants and wildlife.

Goals

The following goals have been prioritized to help achieve the Nature in the City vision:

- **Easy Access to Nature:** Ensure every resident is within a 10-minute walk to nature from their home or workplace.
- **High Quality Natural Spaces:** Conserve, create and enhance natural spaces to provide diverse social and ecological opportunities.
- **Land Stewardship:** Shift the landscape aesthetic to more diverse forms that support healthy environments for people and wildlife.

Photo Credit: John Bartholow

Planning Process

Nature in the City represents a 15-month planning process conducted in three phases:

Phase I – Inventory and Assessment

(January 2014 – November 2014)

This phase included extensive research and data collection of environmental, social, and economic values and impacts surrounding nature in Fort Collins. Data was collected locally and through a survey of the literature, including:

- Survey on the benefits of nature from an economic perspective and the impacts of parcels near open space, e.g., property values
- Visioning workshop and citizen surveys to assess residents' perceptions and values about nature
- Citywide bird, butterfly, and vegetation sampling

In addition to the inventory and assessment, significant community outreach also occurred during this phase to inform residents, City staff, and community organizations about the development of the plan and to solicit feedback.

More than 1,000 residents were engaged in this phase of the project.

Phase II – Strategic Planning

(November 2014 – March 2015)

Once data were collected and an initial outreach effort had been made, City staff began a strategic planning phase by assembling several subcommittees to create draft recommendations that informed the policies included in Chapter 3. A draft plan was posted online in February 2015 for public review and comment and the plan was submitted to numerous City Boards and Commissions to solicit feedback as well. City Council adopted this plan in March 2015.

Phase III – Implementation and Evaluation

(March 2015 – ongoing)

The implementation phase of Nature in the City begins with the adoption of this Strategic Plan. Numerous short-term (2015-2016), mid-term (2017-2020), and longer-term (2021 and beyond) efforts have already been identified for implementation. Where feasible, cost estimates for each action item have been provided. Projects will continue to be identified and implemented as the policies in this plan are executed.



Policies

This plan outlines 33 policies the City will pursue to accomplish the broader goals and vision of Nature in the City. Each policy identifies a key outcome resulting from implementation. The 33 policies are categorized into five policy areas.

Connectivity

During the outreach conducted for Nature in the City, the issue of connectivity, or the ability for people and wildlife to access nature without interruption, arose again and again. Regardless of age, income level, geographic location or ethnic background, the community expressed a strong desire to enhance connectivity between natural spaces, not only for people but for wildlife as well. The policies in the Connectivity Policy Area are designed to achieve that goal.

Key outcomes include:

- A connected system of nature for people and wildlife
- Access to nature via public transportation
- Innovative wayfinding and interpretation information
- A vibrant, connected Poudre River

A common theme among all stakeholder groups was identification of connectivity as a top priority for Nature in the City to emphasize.

Connectivity Policies

C1 - Increase connectivity for plant and wildlife species

C2 - Increase connectivity for residents

C3 - Prioritize transportation infrastructure to increase access to nature

C4 - Provide public transit connections to nature

C5 - Provide innovative wayfinding and informational resources

C6 - Continue to make the Cache la Poudre River a conservation priority

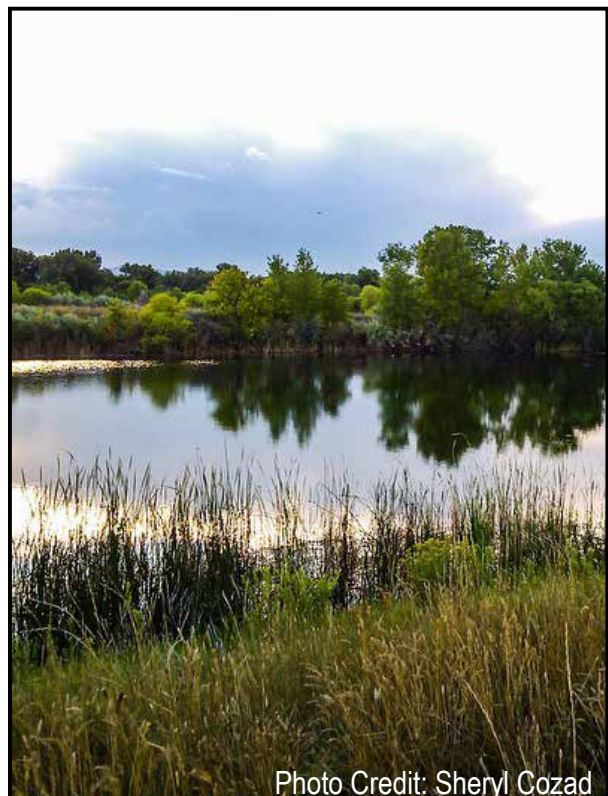


Photo Credit: Sheryl Cozad

Land Use and Development

Fort Collins' population may grow from its current 155,000 residents to between 230,000 and 255,000 not long after 2040. Throughout community discussions, a strong desire to preserve Fort Collins' small-town feel while accommodating additional growth was prevalent.

The City's Land Use Code, which governs land development, is a critical tool for addressing this balance. In addition, while many neighborhoods, businesses and districts are not currently poised to redevelop, many have expressed an interest in greater access or a greater variety of experiences with nature. These policies are designed to help meet this need through new developments, properties that redevelop, and existing neighborhoods or properties that wish to enhance their natural spaces.

Key outcomes include:

- Flexible Land Use Code requirements for open space and vegetation structure and composition
- Design guidelines and training resources to install and maintain natural spaces
- Neighborhood-scale projects to create or enhance natural spaces
- Partner with ditch companies to acknowledge multiple value of ditches
- Stormwater basin guidelines that complement Nature in the City principles
- Sustainable urban agricultural operations

Land Use and Development Policies

LU1 - Revise Land Use Code open space standards

LU2 - Develop Land Use Code changes regarding multiple tree sizes and diversity within new developments

LU3 - Create design guidelines to guide development, redevelopment and site restoration

LU4 - Develop training resources for the installation and ongoing maintenance of diverse landscapes

LU5 - Coordinate and incentivize natural space improvements at the neighborhood scale

LU6 - Support and protect the multiple values of the City's ditch system

LU7 - Provide Level of Service guidance for Nature in the City projects

LU8 - Update stormwater basin guidelines to include Nature in the City principles

LU9 - Encourage natural drainages to be re-created

LU10 - Promote and preserve urban agriculture that supports a triple-bottom-line approach

Photo Credit: Fresh Air Fort Collins



City Practices and Policy Coordination

The purpose of this policy area is to ensure the integration of Nature in the City principles into existing City programs and future planning efforts. One of the major charges of Nature in the City is to coordinate with development, infrastructure, and other plans and policies to incorporate nature where appropriate.

Key outcomes include:

- City mowing and spraying operations that adhere to best management practices, provide flexibility for site objectives to be met, ensure the protection of wildlife habitat and meet public safety and aesthetic requirements
- A darker night sky
- A complete dataset of wildlife habitat in the City's urban tree canopy
- Streetscapes with natural landscaping where appropriate
- A quieter community for people and wildlife
- Updated stormwater practices that align with Nature in the City principles
- Coordination with Nature in the City on existing and future City plans, policies and projects, ensuring nature is acknowledged as a key community value in the urban environment
- Increased recognition of the unique role nature plays in the urban environment

City Practices and Policy Coordination

CP1 - Align City mowing and weed control policies to support local species while balancing public safety and aesthetics

CP2 - Work cross-departmentally and with external partners toward a darker night sky

CP3 - Expand the City's tree inventory to include wildlife habitat

CP4 - Pollinator and bird-friendly habitat in City Streetscapes

CP5 - Provide quiet spaces in the City to escape from the urban environment

CP6 - Amend the City's Stream Rehabilitation Program to incorporate Nature in the City Principles

CP7 - Continue the City's current policies related to nature and coordinate Nature in the City initiatives with future planning and policy updates

CP8 - Coordinate with all applicable City planning processes over time to ensure opportunities to implement Nature in the City efforts and initiatives are included

CP9 - Update Nature in the City Strategic Plan

CP10 - Celebrate nature in the urban environment

Photo Credit: mrp2863198



Long-term Monitoring

The Nature in the City Strategic Plan is designed to be an ongoing guide directing how the community incorporates natural spaces into the increasingly urban environment over the next 100 years and beyond. These policies envision a longer-term application and evaluation of the Nature in the City principles.

The policies within the Long-term Monitoring policy area encourage the development of specific targets and long-term monitoring programs to aid the City in assessing whether it is on track to achieve the goals established in this plan. The policies also encourage citizen engagement in long-term monitoring.

Key outcomes include:

- Comprehensive biodiversity goal for public and private land
- Community or regional standards to assess the economic benefit ecosystem services provide
- Projects that support greenhouse gas emissions reductions as detailed in the City's Climate Action Plan
- Long-term monitoring program that tracks key indicator species

Long-term Monitoring Policies

LT1 - Set a Citywide biodiversity goal

LT2 - Establish the value of ecosystem services to the City and track the value added by existing and new projects

LT3 - Establish monitoring for carbon sequestration to support greenhouse gas emission reduction goals

LT4 - Evaluate and monitor natural spaces for air quality improvement in accordance with the Air Quality Plan

LT5 - Establish a long-term monitoring program for the City's biodiversity using citizen science projects



Funding and Incentives

During the public outreach for Nature in the City, participants said they would like to incorporate nature into their homes or businesses, but many times did not have the technical knowledge to do so, and perceived increased costs as a barrier. Financial and other incentives are important to help overcome these barriers. Key to the success of Nature in the City will be establishing public/private partnerships with residents, local businesses, e.g., nurseries and others, and developers to implement the appropriate incentives at the right scale.

Identifying, coordinating and managing all the potential projects Nature in the City may have a nexus with will also require ongoing funding for the program. Policies in the Funding and Incentives Policy Area address these issues.

Key outcomes include:

- Ongoing funding for program support and project-specific capital improvements
- A variety of incentives that help landowners, business owners and others implement Nature in the City projects

Funding and Incentives Policies

F1 - Explore a diverse set of funding options to implement Nature in the City

F2 - Implement incentives that can be incorporated into new development and redevelopment projects



Photo Credit: John Bartholow

Plan Evaluation and Implementation

A common way to evaluate a plan is through the use of performance indicators. Performance indicators are tools used to track and evaluate implementation progress over time. Performance indicators are most effective when they are aligned with the key outcomes. For Nature in the City, the performance indicators are designed to measure whether the vision, goals, and policies are being achieved.

Immediate indicators include access to nature and connected habitat measurements. Longer-term indicators may include a biodiversity goal and neighborhood engagement measures.

A number of projects are detailed in this Plan, including:

Short-term Projects (2015-2016)

- Land Use Code amendments related to open space requirements
- Comprehensive Night Skies Policy and regulatory updates
- Design Guidelines for installation and maintenance of natural spaces
- Connectivity analysis for people and wildlife

Mid-term Projects (2017-2020)

- Incorporate Nature in the City principles in the City Plan update and other planning efforts
- Acquire parcels within identified priority areas
- Neighborhood-scale programs to incorporate Nature in the City

Longer-term Projects (2020 and beyond)

- Encourage natural drainages to be re-created
- Develop level of service for Nature in the City by establishing standards for future projects
- Establish valuation for ecosystem services provided in the City



Photo Credit: Molly Rosey



Conclusion

Nature in the City is an innovative approach to preserving and enhancing the quality of life in Fort Collins now and for future generations. This initiative is part of the City's comprehensive efforts to ensure nature remains a defining attribute of our community.

As Fort Collins grows in population and as infill and redevelopment continue to urbanize our community, having a defined plan and approach to ensure there is always nature within our boundaries is an essential part of protecting a critical value of our City.

Photo Credit: Ava Diamond