Open Space, Natural Areas, Parks, and Recreation

WHAT ARE THE CITY’S CURRENT VALUES?

This section addresses open spaces, natural areas, parks and recreation, and stormwater multi-use projects under separate headings below. (See the Environment and Utilities Snapshot for more information about Stormwater treatment and flooding.)

Open Space and Natural Areas
Fort Collins residents and visitors of all ages and backgrounds enjoy and are passionate about their natural areas. On any given day, people can be found taking advantage of recreation (for example, walking, horseback riding, biking, wildlife viewing, and fishing) and other opportunities. Natural areas also conserve habitat for wildlife, help provide clean water in streams and rivers, conserve working farms, protect views, and offer respite from the built environment.

The City’s world class Natural Areas Program has become a core part of Fort Collins’ identity and culture. Having conserved 40,000 acres since its start in 1992, the program continues it mission to conserve land. It also stewards these lands, which includes restoration of habitat, and maintenance of visitor amenities, such as trails and restrooms. Ongoing land conservation efforts are focused on the Local and Community Separator Focus Areas, as defined in the Land Conservation and Stewardship Master Plan. Other aspirations for the Natural Areas Program, include:

- Conserve additional natural areas located throughout the community and along the Cache La Poudre River which offer opportunities to experience nearby nature,
- Increase the diversity of the spectrum of the community served,
- Provide stewardship including restoring and enhancing stream corridors and wildlife habitat,
- Conserve community separations between Northern Larimer County communities,
- Conserve farms, especially ones producing local food, and

- Quality public improvements providing world class visitor experiences and interpretive programs

OPEN SPACE INITIATIVES AND RECOGNITION

Natural areas and trails have become part of the culture and identity in Fort Collins. Fort Collins citizens have voted on multiple occasions to support a tax to support the Program. In the 2008 Citizen Survey, the City’s natural areas were rated as very good or good by 93% of the respondents, one of the highest ratings of any city endeavor.

In addition, Natural Areas and associated recreation are mentioned as one of the key factors for the City, having received numerous recognitions, such as: Ranked 1st Best Place to Live and Work for Young Professionals (pop. 100,000-200,000): Next Generation Consulting - March 2009; and One of Top 20 Places to Thrive: Best Boomer Towns - February 2009.

Parks and Recreation
Parks, trails and outdoor recreation facilities provide spaces for important community social and wellness activities. Residents’ quality of life is greatly improved by having facilities that invite physical
activities at all levels, gathering places for social activities, opportunities to connect with nature, and places to recharge ourselves. *City Plan* goals have sought to: ensure Fort Collins’ parks, trails, and outdoor recreation facilities legacy for future generations; provide a wide variety of high-quality recreation services and opportunities; create an interconnected regional and local trail system; promote community; and focus on enhanced ecologically sound and green practices. The City’s values related to parks, trails, and recreation facilities include:

- Providing community benefits and essential services;
- Inclusivity and accessibility;
- Stewardship of public spaces and resources;
- Excellence/high-quality facilities providing wellness and fulfillment for residents; and
- Beauty and innovation, providing a wide range of experiences.

**Stormwater/Open Lands**

Flooding and water quality problems result from not planning for the impacts of urbanization on watersheds and natural stream/river corridors. Preventing flooding requires protection and enhancement of natural corridors and treatment of urban runoff. The City’s stormwater division values are to protect people and structures from flooding, which is a serious threat to Fort Collins. (See the Environment and Utilities snapshot for more information about runoff treatment and flooding issues.) Drainage Basin Master Plans also express values related to open lands and recreation including developing stormwater projects that protect water quality, provide habitat, and foster recreation and learning opportunities (in addition to flood protection).

**PARTNERSHIPS**

Conserving natural resources, building facilities, and managing the City’s natural areas, parks, trails, and stormwater facilities requires interdepartmental and external partnerships.

**CITY COLLABORATIONS - NATURAL AREAS, PARKS, AND STORMWATER**

The City has frequently combined efforts to achieve multiple objectives for natural areas, parks, and stormwater. Utilities and Natural Areas have partnered in the purchase of the following properties, which Natural Areas manages: Redwing Marsh, Udall, Prospect Ponds, Red Fox Meadows, River’s Edge, and Gateway. Parks and Natural Areas have partnered on the purchase of the following sites: Butterfly Woods, Spring Creek Gardens, and Magpie Meander/Soft Gold Park. City partnerships to provide multi-purpose projects with a stormwater function as well as providing recreation and wildlife habitat have occurred, too. Some examples are: Sheldon Lake/City Park Nine Detention Basins, Rolland Moore, Spring Canyon, Udall, Riverbend Ponds, and Red Fox Meadows.

**COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

In addition, the City has worked with other community organizations to purchase and manage properties, build improvements, build trails, apply for grants, address stormwater and restoration, including:

- Larimer County,
- The Nature Conservancy and Legacy Land Trust,
- Cities of Loveland, Timnath, and Windsor,
- Poudre School District,
- Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO),
- The Discovery Museum (for a future visitor information area in the lobby and interpretation of the natural resources found in the City’s natural areas), and
- Numerous private landowners.
WHAT HAS THE CITY ACCOMPLISHED?

The City's Natural Resources, Parks Planning, and Utilities Departments have worked individually and jointly to advance natural area, parks, trails, and stormwater projects and programs as described below.

Natural Areas

Provided widespread conservation and restoration of natural areas

The City has conserved 40,000 acres since program inception in 1992. Since 1997 and the time of City Plan, the City has:

- Conserved 35,477 acres (2,089 acres local, 3,224 acres community separator, and 30,164 acres regional);
- Increased the number of acres of land restored to natural conditions each year;
- Conducted restoration at many very heavily disturbed sites, such as gravel mines, fields, and abandoned commercial and residential sites; and
- Helped conserve 14 working farms and ranches to help maintain local agricultural production and enable farm and ranching families to continue their work.

Expanded public access to natural areas

Since 1997, the City has:

- Opened two new regional natural areas to the public (Bobcat Ridge and Soapstone Prairie) and assumed management of Gateway in the Poudre canyon;
- Opened local natural areas including: Cathy Fromme Prairie, Coyote Ridge, Kingfisher Point, Cottonwood Hollow, Running Deer, Arapaho Bend, and Fossil Creek Reservoir; and
- Purchased natural areas that remain to be opened including: Eagle View, Hazaleus, Udall and Pelican Marsh (which will be opened in 2010).

Increased recreational, educational, and volunteer opportunities within natural areas

Since 1997, the City has increased access to natural areas as follows:

- Opened 21 natural areas for public recreation use; and expanded trails in natural areas by 75 miles;
- Improved recreation opportunities and handicapped access to natural areas by providing accessible paved parking spaces, paved and crusher fines trails, picnic shelters, vault toilets, fishing piers, and wildlife viewing areas; and
- Greatly expanded natural and cultural resource interpretive features; programs led by volunteer Master Naturalists and staff, the Volunteer Ranger Program, and many other volunteer opportunities.

Parks

Expanded parks and parks facilities

The citizens of Fort Collins have continued to enjoy parks, trails, and outdoor recreation facilities since the time of the 1997 City Plan. Parks, trails, and outdoor recreation facilities have grown to keep pace with increased population and demands for recreational services. Many parks now contain new elements, such as dog parks and skate parks. The 2008 Parks and Recreation Policy Plan Update included extensive public outreach and community feedback and the community expressed support for parks, trails, and facilities.
Since 1997, the City has:
- Developed two community parks (Fossil Creek and Spring Canyon), five neighborhood parks (Soft Gold, Harmony, Homestead, Waters Way, and Registry) and two mini-parks (Rabbit Brush and Oak Street);
- Expanded the paved trail system by 12 miles and replaced over four miles of old asphalt with new wider concrete; and
- Opened the Gardens on Spring Creek Horticulture Center for the public’s use and enjoyment.

Stormwater/Open Lands

Stormwater projects completed

The Drainage Basin Master Plan (2004) identifies numerous projects to address flooding and stormwater quality problems in the City and meet recreation and wildlife habitat objectives. Since 1997, the City has accomplished the following:
- Completed a stream health assessment, as part of the Master Plan, to better understand habitat stream quality;
- Completed erosion studies on streams, such as Fossil Creek and Mail Creek, to support buffer limits for new development; and
- Revised floodplain regulations to address public safety along the river and stream corridors.

Since 1997, the City has expanded the paved trail system by 12 miles and replaced asphalt.

Udall wetland (before).

Udall wetland restoration project (after).

Rolland Moore Spring Creek bridge.
WHAT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES REMAIN?

Challenges and opportunities for natural areas, parks, and stormwater multi-use areas are addressed in the following sections.

Open Space and Natural Areas

Assuring long-term financial viability and maintaining a long-term balance between land conservation and stewardship

Natural Areas currently manages 34,500 acres (54 square miles) and 95 miles of trails. (Some of the 40,000 acres are held in easement and managed by other partners.) Natural Areas needs to plan for future land conservation and recreation improvements while, at the same time, balancing those needs against adequate stewardship resources for the existing portfolio of natural areas and improvements. Achieving this balance will be an ongoing challenge.

Striving to reduce the carbon footprint from operations and restore habitat

The City continues to find ways to reduce the carbon footprint caused by the Natural Area Program’s operations and maintenance activities. It is also working to restore habitat to enhance native biodiversity and habitat connectivity and efficient and effective ways to perform restoration.

Managing for outstanding visitor experience while there are increasing demands for uses on natural areas

The City will continue to work with the community to manage and balance an outstanding visitor experience with the increasing demands for uses of natural area lands.

Parks

Providing parks and trails to a growing community and maximizing program resources

To address growth of the community, Fort Collins will need to: (a) consider additional costs associated with building and operating planned future parks and trails, and (b) make the best use of limited resources to maintain parks. Long-term economic stability will depend on prioritized decision-making, identification of core services, and maximized, efficient use of resources. The parks system also should apply green practices to all aspects of the program.

Stormwater/Open Lands

Planning for most suitable uses given competing needs for remaining open land

As the City approaches build out, the potential for adverse impacts to urban watersheds, streams, and the Cache La Poudre River increases, while the City’s ability to solve existing stormwater problems decreases. This is because many of the solutions
to address stormwater problems require vacant land, which is becoming less available and more costly.

**Balancing protection and restoration with urbanization**

The opportunity to protect and restore the health of urban streams and the Cache La Poudre River creates challenges for funding and working with private landowners. Addressing stormwater pollution, created by impervious surfaces, while promoting higher density urbanization might be conflicting goals if not addressed jointly.

**Addressing multiple and sometimes conflicting regulations and values**

Watersheds, stream corridors, and the Cache La Poudre River traverse other jurisdictions with potentially conflicting values and regulations. These challenges will demand innovative solutions with multipurpose functions and cooperation amongst various City departments and other jurisdictional agencies.

**WHAT ARE THE CROSS-CUTTING TOPICS?**

This snapshot contains topics that cross-cut with others. Parks, open lands, and trails have significant economic benefit in a community—many surveys show these features are a key factor in business development and selection of a community and the reason Fort Collins wins awards for livability. Healthy natural systems contribute to clean air and water, which in turn contribute to community health. Some of the interrelated topics are listed below.

- **Arts Outdoors**: Continued integration of education, arts, and culture as part of open spaces, natural areas, parks, and stormwater projects.
- **Open Lands Achieving Multiple Functions**: Stormwater, Parks and Recreation, and Natural Areas will continue to explore opportunities to partner on acquiring lands for multiple uses: to enhance and restore streams; to improve water quality and flood water detention; to provide and enhance trail corridors to connect open lands; to enhance wildlife habitat and corridors; to provide neighborhood natural areas; and to improve bicycle and pedestrian access to schools, parks, natural areas, shopping areas, and neighborhoods.
- **Protecting Lands for Food Production**: Protection of small parcels and larger agricultural land where local food production can take place contributes to local health and economy and helps maintain some agricultural identity.
- **Ecological system approach to planning**: Defining suitable land uses based on land characteristics (e.g., best sites for agriculture, wildlife habitat, and urban development).

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

**Sources**

- Cache La Poudre River Natural Areas Management Plan (2002)
- Commercial Use Policy (2009)
- Easement Policy (2001)
- Flood Mitigation Plan Annual Review (2008)
- Foothills Natural Areas Management Plan (2007)
- Fossil Creek Natural Areas Management Plan (2005)
- General Management Guidelines (2001)
- Parks and Recreation Policy Plan (2009)
- Bobcat Ridge Natural Area Management Plan (2005)
- Soapstone Prairie Natural Area Management Plan (2007)