

DATE: September 27, 2011

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Pre-taped staff presentation: none

WORK SESSION ITEM FORT COLLINS CITY COUNCIL

SUBJECT FOR DISCUSSION

Great Outdoors Colorado Rivers Corridor Initiative.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) recently announced a Colorado Rivers Corridor Initiative grant opportunity. Its purpose is to: “provide more places and facilities for Colorado’s citizens and visitors to enjoy the state’s vast river resources while maintaining the important river ecosystems and natural values they provide.” Interested entities are required to submit a concept paper by October 14th. GOCO will review the papers and determine who is eligible to apply for grant funding with a final proposal due sometime in late 2011 or early 2012.

The purpose of this work session is to provide Council an opportunity to review and provide input to two grant concepts. One of the concepts will be submitted by the City, the other will be submitted by Larimer County with the City as a partner. The City concept encompasses the downtown Poudre River reach from Shields to Linden and consists of a series of improvements to create a “River trail”, as well as a “River park”, or focal recreation area, in the vicinity of Legacy Park. Many of the improvements associated with the downtown project will help maintain or enhance natural attributes of the River. The County proposal is designed to make significant progress towards completing the Fort Collins-to-Greeley Poudre River recreation trail. The project will begin at Arapaho Bend Natural Area and extend east nearly to Windsor. The proposal includes trail easement acquisition as well as trail and parking lot construction, including an underpass at I-25.

GENERAL DIRECTION SOUGHT AND SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED

1. Is Council generally comfortable with the concepts as described?
2. Are there additional concept elements that Council would like to consider?

BACKGROUND / DISCUSSION

The Poudre River holds an iconic status for the Fort Collins community. It was the original agricultural, business and commercial hub of the City and has evolved into a popular recreation and conservation corridor. Over time, the City Natural Areas Program and Parks Department have acquired substantial land holdings along the corridor. These lands are managed for their natural values and habitat and for active recreation, such as bike riding, walking, and fishing. In arid Colorado, approximately 90% of all biological diversity occurs on stream and river corridors and the Poudre is no exception.

The community and City have invested substantial resources to improve, maintain, and restore the Poudre River corridor. Seventeen natural areas are sprinkled from Overland Trail road to I-25. The City-managed Poudre River paved recreation trail runs from the CSU Environmental Learning Center on the City's eastern edge to Overland Trail and Lions Park, where it connects with the County-managed Poudre River paved trail which continues west through LaPorte to Watson Lake near Bellvue. In the proposed downtown project area, nearly the entire reach on both sides of the River is buffered by three City parks and four natural areas. In addition, resources continue to be invested to improve the corridor including: ecological restoration and recreation improvements at McMurray Ponds Natural Areas; Linden Street road and aesthetic improvements; and conversion of the asphalt recreation trails to concrete in the Gustav Swanson Natural Area and portions of the Poudre Trail.

While much has been achieved, there is much to be done. Two geographic areas of the corridor in particular could be greatly improved by implementing recreation-related and habitat restoration improvements. These areas encompass the downtown river reach from Shields to Linden, and the area from Arapaho Bend to Windsor.

Shields to Linden

The Poudre River reach from Shields to Linden Street receives a substantial amount of use by the community. The goal of the proposed downtown project is to deepen the visitor experience of the River corridor through a variety of recreation, habitat, and floodplain improvements. The land primarily is in public ownership, including McMurry, Salyer, River's Edge and Gustav Swanson Natural Areas, as well as Martinez, Legacy and Heritage parks. In summer months, thousands of people throng to the area to swim, tube, picnic, walk, bike, fish, bird watch, and have a good time. Although recent visitor numbers are not documented, a survey conducted five years ago determined that over 500,000 people a year use the River corridor, with much of that use occurring in the downtown area. Furthermore, over the last few years, City staff has noticed a dramatic increase in summer use. Staff expects this use trend to continue, especially with the completion of the Fort Collins Museum and Discovery Science Center and the Mason Street Transportation Corridor.

The high visitation numbers speak to the intrinsic attractiveness of the River as well as to the success of community-funded improvements. Unfortunately, however, there also are obstacles to visitor enjoyment. The obstacles discourage use by the community and contribute to unsafe, unsustainable, and damaging situations. Less-than-ideal conditions include, for example, poor wayfinding both around and in the River (for boaters/tubers/hikers); steep and rip-rapped River banks with no safe and/or sustainable ingress/egress; a poor quality parking area on the immediate edge of the River with rip-rap shoring (at Legacy Park); and, a lack of well-designed, sustainable, picnic, fishing, and swimming areas. In addition to discouraging use by the community, the poor conditions contribute to degradation of the natural values of the area. For example, recreationists enter and leave the River in unsafe locations with steep banks which contributes to erosion and bank instability. Given these conditions, there is both a need, and an opportunity, to provide much-improved visitor amenities that will not only accommodate, encourage, and facilitate safe, enjoyable visitor use and beautification; but that will also maintain, conserve, and enhance the natural values of the area.

Staff, including representatives from Natural Areas, Parks, and Stormwater, with assistance from consultants with expertise in the design of River parks and ecological restoration, has developed a vision and concept for the River corridor from Shields to Linden. The concept includes a series of

proposed improvements that will greatly improve the visitor experience and that will help maintain and enhance the environment. Major elements of the concept were drawn from the recently completed *Poudre River Natural Areas Management Plan*. The concept is driven by two central elements: an instream River trail and River park.

For the purposes of this GOCO grant round, staff is proposing a variety of improvements from Shields to Linden that will connect our community with the River and greatly enhance the experience of tubers, boaters, swimmers, anglers, children, and families. The instream River trail primarily consists of a readily accessible and floatable River with wayfinding, safe and sustainable ingress/egress, channel features to enhance flow during low flow periods and to protect banks in high flow, and modifications to mitigate structural impediments to the extent feasible (given the potential difficulty associated with moving and/or modifying structures in the River).

For this GOCO grant, staff recommends including modification of the so-called “boat chute”, which is located next to the Engines Lab, to create a better recreation amenity for both kayakers and tubers. Staff also recommends including small structures downstream of the Lake Canal Diversion to distribute the two-foot drop for tube or boat passage and to eliminate the vertical drop. With these proposed improvements a continuous, safe, and enjoyable float will be possible from Shields to Linden.

The improved boat chute would likely become a location for people to gather and watch boaters and tubers. Experience and studies at other in-river play features have determined that perhaps the most popular activity associated with the play features is watching from the shoreline. In addition, various economic studies of features in Colorado and elsewhere (including a recently completed study on the Poudre by Dr. John Loomis at Colorado State University) have shown a substantial return on investment associated with the features.

A longer-term goal (that would extend beyond the scope or timeline of this three-year GOCO grant) is to remove or modify structures in the River through town. In particular, the Lake Canal diversion structure near Legacy Park could be modified to provide an elevation drop for better tubing and kayaking. Staff does not recommend including this as an element in the GOCO grant proposal because it is uncertain as to whether or not it could be achieved within the three-year grant deadline. Nevertheless, staff believes it should be an element for future consideration and it could be built later as a “snap-in” component.

In addition to the development of a River trail, the proposed concept includes a water park, or a focal recreation and gathering place. Legacy Park is a good location for a water park, which could include various elements such as a beach area for safe access to the River, good ingress and egress for tubers and boaters, and picnic shelters. The water park would be designed to accommodate relatively high numbers of people. A major improvement would entail moving the parking area at Legacy Park to a more sustainable location. The parking area currently is located immediately adjacent to the River and heavily rip rapped at the River’s edge. The lot would be moved to a different location in the Park, away from the River, and the old lot would be rehabilitated as a recreation and riparian area.

An additional major improvement is a proposed pedestrian bridge to be located just north of the Museum. The bridge, which was originally conceived of by the Poudre River UniverCity connections group, would provide much-needed, safe, and convenient access to visitors from both

sides of the River. It would tie into a trail on the north side and make possible the completion of a loop trail from the Museum to the Hickory Street pedestrian bridge (approximately 0.5 miles upstream).

In addition to these elements, there would be numerous other potential features and improvements from Shields to Linden associated with both the River trail and River park. These include: riparian restoration along banks, natural exploration areas and/or wild zones, additional take-outs and put-ins for safe boating and tubing, fishing spots, formalization of some volunteer trails, removal of inappropriate trails, improved wayfinding and interpretation of cultural and natural features, and new trails to sustainable facilities such as beaches and fishing spots.

All improvements would be designed to mitigate the damage currently caused by undirected recreation activities as well as to improve the integrity of habitat for over one contiguous mile of the River. The project will integrate ecological enhancements that are in keeping with the recommendations presented in the *Poudre River Natural Areas Management Plan*, and will protect existing high-quality areas, increase the extent and quality of the riparian woodland, restore the Poudre channel, lower flood levels, create wetlands, and make the River more accessible to all. In addition, amenities will include eco-educational features and nature exploration play areas geared to enhance whole family outdoor experiences and to help build the community's understanding and appreciation of the River resource.

The approximate cost of the improvements associated with this project is \$5 million. The City would need to generate about 50 to 60% of this amount for a competitive grant proposal. Some funds are available from the River and stream restoration and rehabilitation funding in Keep Fort Collins Great; restoration funds from Natural Areas; and, some Conservation Trust monies. Additional revenues from remainder Building Community Choices (BCC) monies and from private fundraising are likely to be necessary.

Arapaho Bend to Windsor

The Poudre River recreation trail from Laporte to Greeley is largely completed with the exception of the portion from the Environmental Learning Center to Windsor. Larimer County Open Lands has developed a concept for GOCO consideration that could help acquire much, but not all, of the needed right-of-way as well as to construct portions of the River recreation trail and connecting trails. While the City's downtown project focuses on a River park and River trail, this project is anchored by acquisition of trail right-of-way and trail construction, as well as the addition of a parking lot at Arapaho Bend Natural Area and the I-25 trail underpass.

Specific elements of the project that the City would undertake include:

- A relocated and improved parking lot at Arapaho Bend Natural Area
- trail underpass at I-25 and the River
- Trail connections from the new parking lot and Harmony transit center to the I-25 underpass

Specific elements of the project that would be undertaken by Larimer County and other partners include:

- Trail construction from the I-25 underpass to Harmony
- Approximately 1.5 miles of trail construction from the River Bluffs Open Space northwest towards Fort Collins to close some of the gap.
- Acquisition of approximately 3/5th's mile of trail right-of-way

City participation in this project would help achieve several important objectives. First, it would do a great deal to help complete the Poudre River trail from Fort Collins to Greeley, an important regional priority. Second, the City would be able to receive an approximately 50% funding match for improvements that it already plans to build. This would offset roughly \$1 million of approximately \$2 million in planned City expenditures. In addition, the City's match to this project will increase the ability of Larimer County to receive match for its portion of the project on the east side of I-25. City funds for this project would come from the Conservation Trust Fund (which is designated by Council for trail construction) and from Natural Areas' contribution to trail construction.