

Outstanding Planning Project – Merit: El Paso County Parks Master Plan

The purpose of the project was to update the El Paso County Parks Master Plan, last updated in 2005. The Master Plan is an important document and element of the overarching County Master Plan that guides planning and development of parks, trails and open space. It is also used in the development application review process to ensure that developers contribute to an orderly system of recreation and open space facilities, and provide appropriate dedications of land, easements and fees.

The scope of the project was broad and deep, to develop a robust set of recommendations for parks, trails and open space and to do so countywide, an area covering approximately 2,158 square miles. El Paso County is now the most populous County in Colorado with approximately 620,000 residents and has been challenged to keep pace with parks and recreation needs, even in a soft economy, and to preserve open space areas with outstanding, if not unique, natural attributes. To be effective, the Master Plan needs to address high-level goals and objectives as well as specific action items and how to accomplish them. (See Chapter 8 for the Implementation Plan with actions items, priorities, potential partners and funding sources.)

The intent of the project was to update the Master Plan with broad stakeholder involvement, tapping into all sectors of the population, so that the final product would represent the community's vision and provide a shared roadmap for implementation. Several innovative methods were used (as described later in this application) to ensure public participation. Partnerships are valued and encouraged in the Master Plan as a practical means of moving forward and to provide the collective energy to advance goals and implement specific projects.



The story of the Master Plan in a nutshell, in terms of the tangible actions and improvements it will provide for the citizens of El Paso County is as follows:

- **Parks** - The County's focus for parks remains on provision of regional facilities. The Master Plan recommends development of two new regional parks to serve potential higher growth areas in north/central and central/south El Paso County. Maintaining and upgrading existing facilities and enhancing communication with park users to maximize satisfaction are other top priorities.
- **Trails** - The County currently provides and maintains 100 miles of trails, most of which are regional trails that accommodate multiple uses. The Master Plan envisions over 700 miles of trails and bike routes in the long term, which includes off-street regional trails and multi-modal routes. Connectivity with other regional trails is a high priority.
- **Open Space** - The Master Plan builds upon the candidate open space areas identified in the 2005 Master Plan with comprehensive Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis, including Colorado Natural Heritage Program data, specific assessments and stakeholder input. The result is 27 identified "candidate open space" areas that will be subject to additional analysis and conservation through voluntary programs, collaboration with willing land owners and groups, and the land development process.
- **Recreation and Cultural Services** - The Master Plan proposes the addition of a new nature center in northern El Paso County once current facilities have been upgraded and funding can be secured. Goals include building on existing successful programs, expanding opportunities that focus on natural and cultural resources and agricultural heritage, and increasing partnership and collaboration as a programming strategy.



Innovation- The project was innovative and robust in terms of public engagement with a multi-pronged approach that brought over 500 people into the process. Stakeholder engagement techniques included: stakeholder interviews with parks and recreation insiders and experts; "Meetings-in-a-Box" which were turn-key neighborhood meetings hosted by fifteen citizens and held in back yards, living rooms and schools; a web-based survey and social media tool which fostered dialogue on needs and recommendations; a dedicated webpage with up-to-date information on the planning process and products; a Master Plan Committee of citizens and technical experts to advise on process and content; traditional public meetings, a work session with the Board of County Commissioners; and Park Advisory Board and Planning Commission hearings. At the Park Advisory Board and Planning Commission hearings there were no objections, only positive comments. (Chapter 7 provides a more detailed description of the public engagement process.) The other area of innovation was the resource analyses for proposed trails and open space using GIS. The team developed a Trailshed Analysis that helped focus recommendations on priority connections. While using multiple GIS layers to ascertain value is not new, the data we selected and how we combined the attributes ultimately provided a very useful and highly visual analysis that highlighted high-value lands for open space for preservation. One participant commented that we had essentially created a green infrastructure plan for the region. (See Chapter 7 for a detailed description of the analyses and the Open Space Composite Map.)

Transferability - The process and techniques used to develop the plan - from public engagement, to resource analysis, to development of recommendations, to development of an Implementation Plan that is pragmatic and new-age in terms of operating with scarce resources and third-party funds -are all transferrable. In addition to our parks, trails and open space application, the techniques could be used for development of other statutory master plan elements, such as neighborhood plans or transportation plans, or for site-specific master planning.

Quality - The appointed and elected bodies that reviewed the Master Plan and members of the public have complimented the team on producing a very high quality plan that is useful, informative and enjoyable to read. Staff and consultants both participated in drafting text and conducting analyses, providing state-of-the art information as well as local knowledge. Consultant analysis approaches were tailored to local needs and data. El Paso County IT Services provided truly outstanding maps that are useful and contain a wealth of information. Finally, Chapter 8, the heart of the Master Plan, provides all the substance that a comprehensive, forward-looking master plan document needs, with Mission Statement, Goals and Objectives, Facilities Classifications, and Implementation Plan. In our experience a good implementation plan is the difference between a plan that sits on the shelf and one that is a dynamic, living document.

Community Progress - The Master Plan process and document have fostered community dialogue on much valued parks, trails and open space assets and we are already working with public and private partners to implement it. We now have a shared understanding of needs and priorities and how to work together to address them. The planning process and document are regional in nature, supporting the notion that we can do more working together to improve our community than we can as individuals. Parks, trails and open space are integral to the high quality life in the

Pikes Peak region, as affirmed in our surveys, and by moving forward with the actions in the plan, we are promoting social, environmental and economic health.

Effectiveness- Since its adoption in early June, the Master Plan has already been used to develop the draft 2014-2018 Parks Capital Improvement Program and budget, which is traditionally presented to the Park Advisory Board for endorsement in July. It was used to launch a collaborative Trails Working Group with local military installations with the goal of implementing high-priority trails that provide access to and from military bases. It has been used as background for the Regional Non-Motorized Transportation Plan update, recently initiated by the Pikes Peak Area Council of Governments. It has been consulted on a daily basis to prepare recommendations on development permit applications for the Park Advisory Board, Planning Commission and Board of County Commissioners. We receive calls frequently from citizens that are excited about the Master Plan and want to know how they can help implement it. In the wake of the Black Forest Fire, the Master Plan will help the community rebound by providing hope and justification for requests for grants and other third-party improvement funds.

Other Factors- We believe the Parks Master Plan and the process used to develop it provides the whole package of attributes of an outstanding planning project: great public engagement and ownership; a defensible planning process that used public input, best available science and information technology; transparency to build public trust a provide clear thread of logic from mission and goals to specific recommendations; a thoughtful and comprehensive implementation strategy; high quality maps, images and text; and a truly useful product.