

Outstanding Planning Project – Honor: Adams County Open Space, Parks and Trails Master Plan

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ADAMS COUNTY COLORADO OPEN SPACE, PARKS & TRAILS MASTER PLAN

Adams County needed to update the 1998 master plan due to new challenges and opportunities....

CHALLENGES



Loss of wildlife habitat



Water channelization & degradation

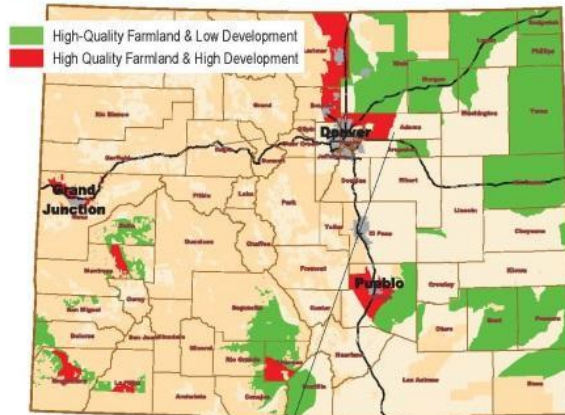


1,500+ acres altered from aggregate mining

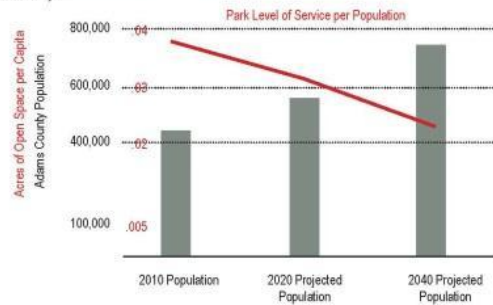


Impacts of increased urbanization

Loss of productive statewide important soils and prime farmland



Adams County



OPPORTUNITIES



Preserve cultural and historic resources



Promote outdoor learning and experiences



Provide places to recreate



Connect trails

The plan for Adams County provides the vision that was lacking for the County to address tremendous changes that have occurred as a result of rapid urbanization over the past ten years. The Master Plan update provided the opportunity to be forward thinking about the parks, trails and recreation needs of residents for the next ten years, and propose a new role of open space to serve as a garden for a metropolis. The County's Transfer of Development Rights program was not appropriately addressing open space and agricultural preservation issues, and loss of farmland to urbanization had become the norm. Statewide, Colorado has been losing over 75 acres of farmland per day according to the American Farmland Trust, with the counties along the Front Range, and Adams County in particular subject to sprawling development pressures that are consuming valuable agricultural and open space lands. A new paradigm for protected open space agricultural lands is proposed in the Master Plan, suggesting a model for food production to flourish in coexistence with development.

In a County that rarely votes for tax increases, residents expressed their desire for the continued enhancement and expansion of the open space, parks, and trails system by voting for and incrementally increasing a dedicated sales tax that will remain in place at least until 2026. The County- Wide Survey conducted for this Master Plan updated provided similar feedback with 82% of respondents agreeing that there is not enough open space protected. The strategies provided within the Master Plan chart a roadmap to preserve natural resources, address issues of food production and preservation of local agriculture, and include opportunities for residents to experience the outdoors in natural settings. This plan strikes a balance between the multitude of urban and rural community values and adapts the open space and parks program to the needs of today and the future.

The planning document serves as an update to the 1998 Master Plan. The updated plan is the foundation and guide for the County to support park, trail and open space projects that have clear public value, protect public interest and provide public access to desirable, critical, and well-designed facilities.

Innovative: Prior to this plan update, the County had accomplished much of the goals set in 1998 by developing a wildlife sanctuary, conserving critical lands, creating trail networks, and developing regional recreation sites. Considerable success can be credited to foresight in anticipating growth pressures that threaten to diminish the amount and quality of agricultural lands and ecological resources. The establishment of this comprehensive vision is now serving the needs of an ever increasing population.

This Master Plan update marks a new era in providing parks, open space, natural resource stewardship, and recreation opportunities to Adams County residents and visitors. The updated plan is unlike past agricultural preservation plans in its conceptualization of adapting agricultural land uses to create a viable economic future in urbanized areas and applying open space resources toward preservation of agricultural land. For example, the Local Food Production District is a concept outlined in the plan that captures the location benefits and richness of existing agricultural lands to create a unique place within the metro area. The development of a hub for specialized food, tourism development, and community enhancement are all hallmarks of the updated plan. The strategies and action items included in the plan include the creation of new partnerships between the County, City of Brighton, a variety of non-profit agencies, land trusts, extension offices, property owners, and farmers. The recommendations of the plan have also lead to the formation of a new task force to initiate steps in creating this district. The Parks and Open Space Master Plan recommendations informed the County Comprehensive Plan creation and provided for new land uses that encourage agro-tourism.

Transferable: This process is replicable in other communities and counties, and the results are already being used to update the Trails, Parks, and Open Space plans for three cities within Adams County. The Policy Implications for County Regulations and the Potential Funding Sources resources listed within the Action Plan provide useful information to communities wishing to undertake similar initiatives.

Quality/Excellence: Adams County is marked by citizen distrust of elected officials and suspicion of tax dollar expenditures attributed to past scandals. The project team was therefore challenged to restore public trust and government official support needed to generate support and ensure the adoption of the Master Plan. Quality communication and a transparent process were hallmarks of this plan. A statistically valid County-wide survey was undertaken to gauge resident support for Parks, Open Space and Trails initiatives and priorities. The survey and public engagement supports the need for continued investments guided by the revised Master Plan.

The plan was adopted after only two public hearings. This speedy approval was due in part to the many letters of support and testimony provided by local agencies and residents. An outpouring of recognition of the value and need for implementation of this Master Plan encouraged the unanimous County Commissioner and Planning Commission motion for adoption.

Promotes community progress: Coordination with the County Comprehensive Plan and Transportation Plan updates is one notable way the Open Space, Parks and Trails Master Plan advanced multiple community goals. Inclusion of the Open Space, Parks and Trails Master Plan within the other two planning processes ensures that elements such as trails, bike paths, and land use designations are coordinated and incorporated into other planning projects. The Plan promotes an open space system that conserves agricultural lands throughout Adams County; preserves and enhances important wildlife habitats and corridors; and protects and improves significant natural and scenic resources such as wetlands, floodplains, and unique land forms. The plan identifies corridors for trail development and open space conservation that link to the open space systems of adjacent counties and communities while retaining the natural, cultural, and agricultural qualities of the County.

Public participation: A public engagement strategy was designed to involve all communities and interest groups within Adams County which range from urban communities to the west to rural agricultural and sparsely populated areas to the east. Roughly 700 provided input for the plan. The project's public engagement included a County-wide survey to understand the current perceptions, priorities, values and goals for the County's open space, parks and trails. Two rounds of public meetings, in addition to stakeholder meetings, were held to further develop the public's vision, values and priorities and to gain feedback on the draft plan. Additionally, the consultant team met with a

Technical Review Committee and Stakeholder Committee throughout the process to gain insight and guidance on the direction of the plan. The planning team facilitated relationships with nine cities and four surrounding counties along with referral agencies provided comments to improve the draft plan. The County Parks and Open Space staff were excited that this project initiated the creation of partnerships with agencies with related missions, such as public health agencies, LiveWell Colorado, the Adams County Office of Sustainability, agricultural extension offices, and recreational interest groups.

Effective: The Master Plan facilitated the reallocation of County funding to initiatives for the 2013 fiscal year. The Open Space Advisory Board has found new footing as a result of this plan to direct land acquisition and is quickly pursuing expansion of the existing program. The concept of the Local Food Production District has sparked interest from property owners, economic development leaders, and health agencies. The Parks and Open Space department is the recent recipient of a grant to conduct a healthy food assessment as a result of a new partnership with a local health agency.

Since the adoption of plan, several recommendations have moved forward. The Local Food Production District planning process has begun with the City of Brighton. The acquisition of additional open space along the Big Dry Creek corridor will help preserve the floodplain and will also likely facilitate a future regional trail connection. Multiple trails and trail connections are being designed and parks are being remodeled to fix drainage issues and better serve park visitors as well as gain new amenities. Per the plan's recommendations, the County is looking into opportunities to provide additional water based recreation for county residents since this was one of the highest rated qualities for parks/open space.