

A Bigger Vision for the Big T: A Recreation and Conservation Assessment



HONOR AWARD

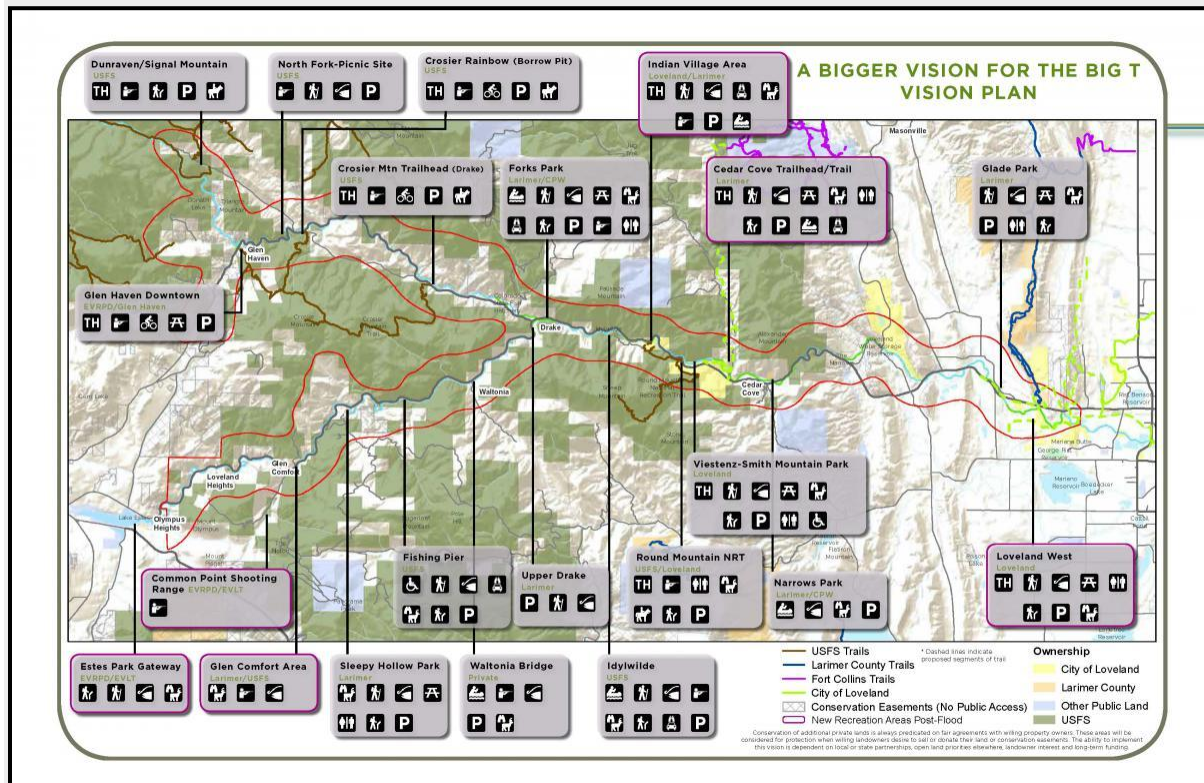
A Bigger Vision for the Big T:

A Recreation and Conservation Assessment

By: Jeremy Call, PLA, AICP

In 2013, extensive rains caused devastating flooding along 40 miles of the Big Thompson River between Loveland and Estes Park. The flooding caused two fatalities, severe erosion and sediment deposition, the destruction of 47 homes and 30 bridges, extensive damage to property and infrastructure, and loss of significant economic, riparian, aquatic, recreation, and scenic resources. Large portions of US Highway 34 and County Road 43 were destroyed,

severing the connections between Loveland and Estes Park and stranding the communities of Drake, Glen Haven, and Cedar Park, as well as canyon residents. The flood also cut off access to Rocky Mountain National Park, one of the largest tourist attractions in Colorado and a major contributor to the local, regional, and state economy.



The regional nature of this catastrophe called for a regional vision for restoring the Big T. Individual river restoration master plans developed across the Front Range were valuable in that they prioritized the most critical river-wide interventions for public safety, protection of property and infrastructure, aesthetics, ecological function, and fisheries. But they stopped short of confronting the source of the problem—floodplain encroachment by ex-urban land uses—and also omitted the top public priority of improving recreation access and experience.

A regional vision for restoring and enhancing public recreational opportunities and conserving lands along the river corridor was needed to prioritize strategic investment, coordinate funding strategies, and facilitate unified decision-making among stakeholders. The vision served to coalesce community support for future conservation and recreation initiatives and catalyze actions needed to implement strategic projects.

Building on the Big Thompson River Restoration Master Plan, A Bigger Vision for the Big T went far beyond the river restoration master plans to accelerate land conservation and land-use resilience through a regional dialogue. Working with Logan Simpson, the Open Land programs of Larimer County and the City of Loveland guided a multiagency committee through the disaster recovery effort of city, county, state, and federal recreation and conservation properties along the 40-mile river segment, which includes the North Fork. The Steering Committee included the Colorado Department of Transportation, US Forest Service, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, Estes Valley Land Trust, Estes Valley Recreation and Parks District, and the Big Thompson River Restoration Coalition.

The plan included the public's vision, which highlighted key conservation and recreation opportunities. An action plan described partnership roles with specific project costs and priorities. The plan identified appropriate recreation site locations with safety and river resiliency in mind, in order to build back better than before. It also prioritized strategic investment, coordinated funding strategies, and facilitated unified decision-making among stakeholders. The plan prioritized specific parcels for conservation on a watershed scale using a suite of criteria against viable funding sources. It also included the following recommendations:

- Removing at-risk private investments from rivers
- Incentives to encourage permanent relocation
- Updating floodplain mapping (one fatality and more than half of the structures destroyed were outside of the mapped 100-year floodplain)

Just eight months after adoption, progress is being made to carry out the plan's vision—including significant open space purchases in vulnerable locations, such as Cedar Cove and Indian Village, and redesigns of several recreation areas, the most notable of which is Viestenz-Smith Mountain Park.