

# WORK SESSION AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

City Council



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## STAFF

Dean Klinger, Community Services Director  
Katie Donahue, Natural Areas Director  
Julia Feder, Environmental Planning Manager

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## SUBJECT FOR DISCUSSION

**Natural Areas Strategic Framework Update.**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this item is to provide Councilmembers with an overview of the Natural Areas Strategic Framework and receive feedback on preliminary draft components and community engagement efforts.

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## GENERAL DIRECTION SOUGHT AND SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED

1. Do Councilmembers have feedback about the proposed vision, values, and goals?
2. Do Councilmembers have feedback on the outreach that was conducted and informed this plan?

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## BACKGROUND / DISCUSSION

### PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Natural Areas Strategic Framework provides grounding direction for the department's Conservation and Stewardship Planning (CSP) process and serves as an update to the 2014 Natural Areas Master Plan. CSP guides the management of Natural Areas properties to protect habitat and scenic values, while supporting public access for the community. CSP is rooted in the language of the City of Fort Collins Open Space Yes! and Larimer County's Help Preserve Open Space tax initiatives that fund most of the Natural Areas' efforts. These ballots, alongside previous department master plans, informed the development of CSP's elements. The Strategic Framework aims to define a 10-year vision and department values, in addition to updating existing goals.

### ROLE OF THE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Natural Areas planning occurs at two levels: systemwide and across management zones. The Strategic Framework is the systemwide plan that provides structure for other Natural Areas' planning efforts. Utilizing themes from ballot language and Citywide guidance, it provides foundational planning components (vision, values, and goals) that frame up the next level of planning, management zone updates. The Strategic

Framework sets the vision for the next 10-20 years, is updated every ten years and adopted by City Council.

At the management zone level, land is categorized into six geographic zones that are defined by ecosystem type. Management zone updates are iterative and present an opportunity for adapting management techniques to new science or responding to conditions in the field. Comprehensive management zone updates are completed on a rotating basis every seven years and provide an in-depth evaluation of implementation priorities. These updates create a regular opportunity to gather targeted community input. They highlight the unique character of each zone, identify management actions, and are administratively adopted by the department Director. Management zone tactics inform annual work planning and biannual budgeting. Together, the Strategic Framework and management zone updates serve as a comprehensive guide to the department's work.

Previous Natural Areas master plans catalog historic and ongoing department efforts. These plans continue to serve as important reference documents to the department's evolving work. The Strategic Framework does not intend to replace these documents or replicate this approach. Rather, the Strategic Framework orients towards the north star of conservation while providing an updated planning structure that ensures the department's vision, values, and goals reflect community feedback. This revised approach supports the action-based planning that takes place during management zone updates.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY**

Since the fall of 2023, Natural Areas Department (NAD) staff has performed a range of engagement activities to understand community desires for natural areas. Statistically valid results from the countywide 2023 Our Lands Our Future (OLOF) questionnaire grounded community engagement efforts. For the purposes of the Strategic Framework, staff only considered OLOF responses from City of Fort Collins residents.

Additionally, a variety of groups, including partner agencies, City departments, and the broader community provided input on the role of NAD and their desires for conservation and stewardship. More than 4,000 community touch points informed the drafting of the vision, goals, and values. Engagement methods included:

- Individual interviews with members from the Land Conservation and Stewardship Board (LCSB) and multiple presentations at LCSB meetings throughout this process
- Individual interviews with the City and County ballot writers
- A Super Issues Boards and Commissions Meeting
- Small group discussions with historically underrepresented groups
- Interactive discussions with a Technical Advisory Committee representing diverse perspectives
- Online questionnaire
- Interactive tabling at community events and natural area trailheads
- Social media blasts
- A project website

In summary, feedback collected across the community indicates strong support for the continued protection of land and water resources, environmental stewardship, and habitat preservation. Engagement themes included a desire for NAD to take a comprehensive approach to managing natural areas, balancing

conservation, access, and community engagement, including a desire for enhanced educational programming and communication. Additionally, the community expressed value in NAD's ability to leverage partnerships to extend the impact of its work.

## **VISION, VALUES and GOALS**

The Strategic Framework proposes updates to the existing department vision and goals, in addition to defining department values. The vision, values, and goals map closely to City values and plans, while remaining rooted in the language of City of Fort Collins Open Space Yes! and Larimer County Help Conserve Open Space ballot measures and the existing Natural Areas Department mission: *To conserve and enhance lands with natural resource, agricultural, and scenic values, while providing meaningful education and appropriate recreation opportunities.*

### **Vision**

The 2014 Natural Areas Master Plan established a vision specific to that planning document: *Through the work of the Natural Areas Department, a diverse system of conserved and restored lands will connect community members to nature. These conserved lands will protect nature and contribute to the health and wellbeing of our community.*

While the intent of this 2014 Natural Areas Master Plan Vision remains and is reflected across all levels of planning, the Strategic Framework proposes an updated vision to extend across all Natural Areas work. The vision statement intends to inspire action and reflect the desired condition that drives these efforts. The proposed vision statement for Natural Areas:

*Thriving ecosystems for a greater Fort Collins community*

### **Values**

Natural Areas Values reflect the foundation provided by the Open Space Yes! and Help Preserve Open Space ballot initiatives, and themes expressed by the community throughout the public engagement process. Natural Areas Values reflect the City's values, while prioritizing the department's distinct focus on ecological protection and management.

Values define how the department will work across goals and will be used as a filter to determine what and when initiatives are implemented. Values will serve a similar function to the "Priorities" referenced in recent management zone updates.

#### *Resource Protection*

Natural Areas commits to preserving species and features characteristic of the region's ecosystem and heritage. This may include prioritizing:

- Protecting threatened and endangered species
- Enhancing populations of critical common species
- Creating and enhancing wetland habitats using secured water resources
- Safeguarding and honoring cultural and paleontological resources

### *Ecological Function*

Natural Areas takes action to sustain and improve the health and performance of natural systems. This may include prioritizing:

- Connecting rivers and streams to their floodplain and sustaining instream flows
- Introducing disturbance management to mimic natural cycles
- Supporting ecological research and sharing discoveries with the community to further inspire stewardship
- Monitoring and collecting data to inform ecological management

### *Connectivity*

Natural Areas protects a connected landscape of conserved land to support ecosystems and create movement corridors that provide a balance of services to both wildlife and people. This may include prioritizing:

- Conserving properties adjoining previously conserved spaces
- Sustaining the health of the Poudre River Watershed
- Linking neighborhoods to nearby natural areas

### *Partnership*

Natural Areas leverages shared decision-making and invest in increasing the impact of our conservation actions through building relationships across City departments, agencies, and with community groups. This may include prioritizing:

- Working with Larimer County Department of Natural Resources to conserve land and water, and providing habitat protections across Northern Colorado
- Leveraging cross-department expertise and opportunities to meet Natural Areas goals along with other City goals such as stormwater protection, safe routes to school, and affordable housing
- Supporting region-wide efforts such as the Poudre Trail and the Colorado Front Range Trail

### *Safety & Wellbeing*

Natural Areas provides safe environments for community members to engage with and find renewal through time spent in nature, while also protecting and ensuring the safety of these natural systems. This may include prioritizing:

- Implementing education and communication campaigns focused on high water safety
- Emphasizing the importance of practicing proper trail etiquette so that all community members can enjoy their experiences and recreate respectfully
- Providing Ranger presence and support across the Natural Areas system through cordial and informational contacts, alongside regulation enforcement

### *Belonging*

Natural Areas ensures programs and places are welcoming to all and encourages a diversity of experiences. This may include prioritizing:

- Supporting natural spaces near to the places the community lives, works, learns, and plays through Nature in the City investments and programming
- Creating fun and formative educational experiences for young people to encourage a lifelong love of the outdoors
- Translating print and digital materials, such as signs and brochures

*Service*

Natural Areas demonstrates honesty, transparency, inclusivity, and respect by providing authentic and diverse engagement opportunities that focus on listening and active participation. This may include prioritizing:

- Offering diverse volunteer opportunities across natural areas that encourage community stewardship
- Seeking input from surrounding neighborhoods and diverse community groups when onboarding new natural area properties
- Providing clear and concise instructions for permitting

*Integrity*

Natural Areas implements the community’s vision and values by responsible management of community ecological, financial, and social resources. This may include prioritizing:

- Utilizing data-informed planning processes
- Maximizing the impact of dedicated sales tax funding and reporting on an annual basis
- Ensuring that employees have access to the tools and support needed to complete their work

**Goals**

The Strategic Framework proposes four updated goals that will organize the work of the department and support future planning. By updating the scope and intent of the goals, the department aims to:

- Strongly support the organization’s conservation-first mission
- Reflect the major themes heard in public engagement, specifically the importance of habitat protection and management, engagement, connectivity, and access
- Provide useful guidance for more specific layers of planning
- Furnish a documented direction using language that is approachable and easily understood

Previous Goal	Proposed Goal
Conserve and Protect Land and Water	Conserve and Protect Land & Water
Protect and Improve Ecosystem Health and Resilience	Strengthen Habitats and Ecological Resilience

Previous Goal	Proposed Goal
Provide Meaningful Education and Appropriate Recreation Opportunities	Support Access to Nature
Responsibly Steward the Community’s Resources	Foster Community Connections and Stewardship

*Goal 1: Conserve and Protect Land & Water*

The protection of land and water sustains connected landscapes, sensitive and important habitats, and the cultural connections and heritage of the region. With a deep commitment to the conservation mission, Natural Areas supports the biodiversity and landscape of Northern Colorado.

In the coming decade, Natural Areas will:

- Work with willing landowners to acquire additional properties
- Continue to conserve riparian corridors, regional landscapes, community separators, and neighborhood open spaces
- Engage private landowners through securing and monitoring conservation easements
- Protect flows in the Cache la Poudre River and enhance instream flows

*Goal 2: Strengthen Habitats and Ecological Resilience*

Healthy ecosystems are vital for plants and wildlife, providing vibrant habitat, clean water, and resilience in changing conditions. Through restoration and adaptive management, Natural Areas works to take a data-informed approach to improve the condition of regional ecosystems.

In the coming decade, Natural Areas will:

- Restore land, rivers, streams, and water bodies through application of best available science
- Conduct baseline inventories and grow long-term monitoring programs to guide adaptive management
- Promote habitat resilience through responsible disturbance management
- Invest in the recovery and reintroduction of native, rare, endangered, or locally extinct species, while also working to maintain strong populations of more common species

*Goal 3: Support Access to Nature*

Human connection to nature supports wellbeing, inspires a sense of community, and instills a conservation ethic. Through diverse opportunities to connect with nature, Natural Areas contributes to the overall welfare of our community in ways that are grounded in and balance resource protection, equity, and inclusion.

In the coming decade, Natural Areas will:

- Develop and maintain a sustainable trail system to minimize erosion, protect habitats, preserve water quality, and better adapt to changing conditions
- Support connections between the places the community lives, works, and plays to natural areas

- Promote regional trail connections in partnership with adjacent agencies
- Encourage visitors to stop and soak up the experience of being in nature by providing opportunities for quietude, respite, and discovery

#### *Goal 4: Foster Community Connections and Stewardship*

Engagement and education bolster the community's commitment to conservation and land stewardship. Natural Areas inspires people to protect the environment on conserved lands, and beyond.

In the coming decade, Natural Areas will:

- Engage diverse audiences through a variety of education and outreach programs that meet each group where they are with inclusive messaging and transparency
- Uphold safety across the community through regulation enforcement and education about wildlife, visitor etiquette, and resource protection
- Inspire volunteerism to create a diverse network of natural area ambassadors that drive community actions around conservation
- Work with historically underserved community members and the Native American and Indigenous community to honor connections to nature

#### **NEXT STEPS**

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In Q1 2025, staff will seek additional input from the public on a Strategic Framework draft. This will include presentations to and receiving feedback from interested boards and commissions. A final draft plan will be released and considered for adoption by City Council by Q3 2025.

#### **ATTACHMENTS**

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1. Land Conservation and Stewardship Board Minutes, September 11, 2024 (excerpt)
2. Land Conservation and Stewardship Board Minutes, October 9, 2024 (excerpt)
3. Presentation