



AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

City Council

STAFF

Julia Feder, Environmental Program Manager
Alynn Karnes, Land Conservation Specialist
Katie Donahue, Natural Areas Director
Ingrid Decker, Legal

SUBJECT

Resolution 2022-096 Supporting an Application for a Great Outdoors Colorado Land Acquisition Grant for the Buckeye Conservation and Front Range Gateway Project.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In partnership with Larimer County, the Buckeye Ranch Conservation Project would conserve over 1,000 acres north of Fort Collins. The County and City have been invited by Great Outdoors Colorado to submit a full grant application to support this project in their upcoming Land Acquisition program cycle.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends adoption of the Resolution.

BACKGROUND / DISCUSSION

Larimer County and the City have an opportunity to conserve a 1,000+ acre ranch north of Laporte, Colorado, within the Buckeye community of Northern Colorado. The ranch presents a critical buffer and landscape connection between an interconnected complex of conserved lands that spans the Roosevelt National Forest, State Land Board, and privately held conservation easements. The property fits into the regional priorities of both the City and County, including the Dry Creek Conservation Area (Fort Collins Natural Areas Master Plan, 2014) and Buckeye Priority Area (Larimer County Open Lands Master Plan, 2015).

Intact, landscape connections between the montane, foothills and plains are a rare occurrence on the rapidly developing Front Range. This ranch serves as one of the last remaining larger parcels on this eastern boundary that connects the mountains to the plains of northern Colorado. Conservation of the ranch would protect a highly valued large, intact property northwest of Fort Collins, situated in an area of Larimer County that is subject to significant development of 35-acre subdivisions, as well as forthcoming changes to the surrounding landscape including construction of the planned Glade Reservoir and a realignment of U.S. Highway 287.

The ranch is critical to ensure persistence and sustainability of wildlife at this eastern edge of the movement corridor and boasts high-quality habitats including intact native grasslands, and foothills shrublands, as well as wetland areas. As it stands today, this property is several miles east of the existing Highway 287 and separated by a steep hogback. Once realigned, the highway will be less than a half mile west of the

ranch and will run parallel to the property for three miles. This property will become the eastern visual backdrop to the highway and a significant feature at this newly created gateway to the City of Fort Collins. Additionally, it will continue to serve as an elk and mule deer winter range concentration area given the proximity of a planned wildlife underpass that will facilitate east-west movement of wildlife through this landscape corridor. Numerous opportunities exist for enhanced ecological outcomes through habitat restoration, including wetland and wet meadow expansion.

Current negotiations include approximately 700 acres of the ranch to be acquired in fee-simple. This area will be owned and managed as a natural area by the City. The remainder, between 200-400-acres, will stay in family ownership subject to a donated conservation easement to be held by Larimer County. Larimer County will also hold a conservation easement on the City-owned natural area. The project includes the purchase of one share of North Poudre Irrigation Company (NPIC) water with the fee-simple purchase and the encumbrance of one share of NPIC water tied to the donated conservation easement. Tying one share of water to each portion of the property allows for the leasing from NPIC for additional shares annually as needed, for both the City on its fee-simple ownership and future owners of the remainder of the ranch encumbered by the conservation easement.

CITY FINANCIAL IMPACTS

Based upon preliminary consultation with McCarty Land and Water Valuation in May 2022, the value of the portion to be acquired in fee-simple is anticipated to be between \$3,000,000-\$4,000,000. The contract purchase price will be dependent upon the appraised value disclosed in the final appraisal report, expected in September 2022. The landowner intends to donate the conservation easement on the remaining portion of the property, with an estimated total value of \$750,000-\$1,250,000.

The City and County are seeking \$766,800 in GOCO grant funding to support the total acquisition costs for this project. The remaining costs will be split 65/35% by the City/County. If GOCO does not award grant funding to this project, the City and County will continue to pursue this opportunity with a 65/35% City/County split of total project costs. In this scenario, the acquisition would likely take place over 2-3 years and would impact funds available for other Natural Areas land conservation endeavors.

BOARD / COMMISSION / COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION

At its August 10, 2022, meeting, the Land Conservation and Stewardship Board voted unanimously to recommend Council supports an application for a Great Outdoors Colorado grant relating to a land acquisition opportunity in the Buckeye region, in partnership with Larimer County.

PUBLIC OUTREACH

As part of the Mountains to Plains 2022 Zone Update, the Natural Areas Department collected public feedback about visiting the one property currently located in this zone, Soapstone Prairie Natural Area, and the management priorities identified in the update. Feedback responses included 107 comments about the plan, including 50 comments specifically about barriers to visiting Soapstone Prairie. Respondents indicated the distance to travel, and the time needed to access the site as barriers to visiting. While much smaller in scale than Soapstone Prairie, the Buckeye Conservation site would increase access to nature from north Fort Collins.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Resolution for Consideration