

AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

City Council



STAFF

Tawnya Ernst, Land Conservation Lead Specialist
Katie Donahue, Natural Areas Director

SUBJECT

Second Reading of Ordinance No. 120, 2024, Authorizing the Conveyance to Larimer County of a Conservation Easement and a Right of First Refusal on the Rocky Ridge Property.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Ordinance, unanimously adopted on First Reading on August 20, 2024, authorizes an Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) with Larimer County for the Rocky Ridge Conservation Project. The Project will conserve 484 acres in fee within the Wellington Community Separator. The Ordinance will authorize the conveyance of a conservation easement and right of first refusal on the property.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends adoption of the Ordinance on Second Reading.

BACKGROUND / DISCUSSION

The City purchased a 484 acre property in the Wellington Community Separator in May. This parcel conserves a buffer along two large reservoirs, ensuring habitat and migration corridors for wildlife and fills in gaps in the community separator – a primary goal of the Open Space Yes ballot language (Attachment 3).

For more than two decades, the City and Larimer County Open Lands have collaborated to conserve land throughout Larimer County to meet shared land conservation goals. This collaboration includes funding partnerships on various open space and conservation easement acquisitions. This acquisition and conservation easement will protect important values that confer the following public benefits:

- The property provides a critical buffer for the reservoirs and the surrounding wetlands habitat. It encompasses a mix of native and domestic grasses and previously tilled fields. Data from the Colorado Conservation Data Explorer (CODEX) reveals the property is part of the overall range for mountain lion, black bear, mule deer, brewer sparrow, Cassin's sparrow, ferruginous hawk, golden eagle, grasshopper sparrow, lazuli bunting, prairie falcon, Swainson's hawk, Virginia's warbler, Townsends big-eared bat, tri-colored bat, short-short horned lizard, milksnake, and ornate box turtle. The adjoining reservoirs have been noted as nesting range for the Great Blue Heron, a brood concentration area for Canada geese, and winter forage area for bald eagles.
- Scenic values that provide a spectacular viewshed of the foothills and City of Fort Collins' skyline.

- Open space values will contribute to existing conserved lands in the vicinity with potential recreation opportunities where appropriate.

The proposed agreement between the City and the County authorizes the County to contribute \$1,500,000 towards the City's recent acquisition of the Rocky Ridge property and the City to convey a conservation easement and right of first refusal on the property in return. The conservation easement will ensure that any development on Rocky Ridge property is limited in size and area to designated "building envelopes", and that the property will be managed to protect its conservation values in perpetuity. The City and County have also agreed that as part of the Conservation Easement, the City will retain the ability to construct a parking lot, trailhead and related amenities (vault toilets, shade structures, kiosks), along with soft surface trails.

The project addresses key criteria noted in the Land Acquisition Partnership Guidelines:

- The project aligns with the goals of the Council-adopted Natural Areas Master Plan for regional conservation and partnerships by conserving lands within the Foothills/Buckhorn/Redstone conservation focus area.
- Larimer County and the City have a positive track record of partnerships.
- The proposed partnership enhances landscape scale conservation efforts in the Wellington Community Separator (Attachment 4)

CITY FINANCIAL IMPACTS

The total cost to acquire the 484 acre Rocky Ridge property and to subsequently convey a conservation easement on said property is approximately \$5,117,600. This total includes the purchase price of the fee acquisition as well as the due diligence and closing costs associated with both the fee acquisition and conservation easement conveyance. The City's share is approximately \$3,612,350 and the County will contribute \$1,505,250.

BOARD / COMMISSION / COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION

At its June 12, 2024, meeting, the Land Conservation and Stewardship Board voted unanimously to recommend that Council approve the IGA with Larimer County to partner on the purchase of, and conveyance of a conservation easement for, the Rocky Ridge Conservation Project. (Attachment 5).

PUBLIC OUTREACH

Natural Areas staff presented the proposed partnership to the Land Conservation and Stewardship Board in a public Meeting on June 12, 2024. Larimer County Open Lands staff will present the proposed partnership to the County Open Lands Board in a public meeting on July 25. Larimer County staff will present the proposed partnership to the Board of County Commissioners on July 30.

ATTACHMENTS

First Reading attachments not included.

1. Ordinance for Consideration