

AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

City Council



STAFF

Katie Donahue, Natural Areas Director
Julia Feder, Conservation and Stewardship Manager
Kate Rentschlar, Environmental Planner
Barb Brock, Finance Analyst II

SUBJECT

First Reading of Ordinance No. 012, 2026, Appropriating Prior Year Reserves for River Restoration and Visitor Use Improvements at Arapaho Bend Natural Area and Related Art in Public Places Program.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this item is to request an appropriation of \$4,900,000 from the Natural Areas Fund into the Natural Areas' 2026 budget for a river restoration and visitor use improvement project at Arapaho Bend Natural Area and transferring \$46,000 to the Cultural Services and Facilities funds to meet the City's 1% dedicated funding requirement for Art in Public Places.

Arapaho Bend Natural Area (ABN) is a biologically rich and culturally significant 534-acre parcel in need of ecological restoration due to past infrastructure development, gravel mining, and degradation along the Cache la Poudre River (Poudre River). Visitation at this site has increased by 400% over the past decade, impacting natural resources and creating unsafe conditions. A river restoration project and visitor use project at ABN were identified as top priorities for implementation through Natural Areas' planning processes. Design and permitting for the projects began in 2025. The restoration's focus is on improving river health metrics and the visitor use improvements center on safety, improved access, and resource protection.

The City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department (FCNAD) has accrued funds for both projects over several years and has the full funding amount needed to complete the projects. Both projects are on track to begin construction in August 2026. This timeline is a year ahead of the anticipated schedule when the 2025/2026 budget was created and approved, requiring funds to be appropriated into Natural Areas' 2026 budget. Completing the projects a year earlier will save the City further costs from inflation.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends adoption of the Ordinance on First Reading.

BACKGROUND / DISCUSSION

FCNAD is funded through dedicated City and County sales taxes. Between the two taxes, the FCNAD annual expenditures fluctuate around \$16-19 million. While most of FCNAD's work is carefully scheduled,

a core part of the mission is to conserve and protect land, which cannot always be predicted. Purchasing land or a conservation easement requires a willing landowner and often unexpected opportunities arise to make key investments. Due to the flexibility needed to take advantage of these opportunities, Natural Areas keeps significant funds in reserve. Natural Areas currently has approximately \$24 million in reserves.

FCNAD gradually saves money over several years to implement larger restoration and visitor use projects. This fiscally responsible practice ensures that the entirety of a project is funded before it goes to construction. With this method, FCNAD can typically implement 2-3 large projects a decade. These projects are closely aligned with the values and goals identified in the 2025 Natural Areas Strategic Framework including ecological function, supporting access to nature, and enhancing the safety & wellbeing of the community.

The need for river restoration at ABN was first identified by the 2016 State of the River Report and in 2021 the project was selected as a top priority for implementation by the Multi Criteria Decision Analysis (MCDA) for FCNAD restoration projects. The need for the project was further supported by the 2025 River Health Assessment Framework sampling efforts. The visitor use project at the site was first identified as a priority in the 2011 Poudre River Plan, again in the 2023 Poudre River Zone Update, and was ranked high in the 2025 MCDA visitor use project prioritization. FCNAD originally targeted 2027 as the year to implement both projects. However, staff have worked efficiently to bring this project forward a year earlier. Completing the project a year in advance could save the City upwards of \$250,000, based on average inflation rates. These savings will be used to fund FCNAD's next large capital project.

CURRENT ECOLOGICAL CONDITIONS

ABN supports a species and habitat-rich ecosystem with impaired ecological functions. FCNAD monitoring results from the last decade support the need for restoration to improve ecosystem functions like nutrient cycling and hydrology. Key results include:

- 318 out of 534 acres are rated as poor or fair vegetation condition.
- Overall river health conditions are rated as C (75%) in the River Health Assessment Framework (RHA).
- Dry-ups and extremely low flow conditions are common in fall and winter, resulting in lower water quality and degraded river health.

RESTORATION SCOPE AND CONSTRUCTION

FCNAD began the full design and permitting for the restoration project in the spring of 2025. The goals of the scoped restoration project include:

- Reconnect approximately 28 acres of floodplain to raise RHA Floodplain Connectivity indicator.
- Improve hydrologic conditions for native fish by creating slow velocity habitats and increasing in-channel habitat complexity.
- Convert low-quality gravel mine ponds into riparian and wetland habitats.
- Raise RHA scores for Aquatic Habitat and River Dynamics.

The total cost for design, permitting, construction, and five years of post-implementation adaptive management is estimated to be \$3.7 million. Design and permitting will be completed by mid-2026 with construction taking place from August – November 2026.

CURRENT VISITOR USE CONDITIONS

Visitation to ABN has increased significantly since 2020 with an estimated 164,000 visitors in 2024, or 450 visits a day, making ABN one of the most visited City natural areas. The site currently features two parking lots maintained by FCNAD, with a combined capacity of approximately 20 vehicles. Neither parking lot is designed to current standards, causing inefficiencies, and dysfunction. Existing conditions cause overflow parking along Strauss Cabin Road, presenting serious safety concerns for community members given the narrow roadway conditions, increased traffic volume, and higher vehicular speeds.

Further site considerations include:

- Vegetation damage and degradation along the banks of Beaver Pond from dispersed access from Strauss Cabin Rd.
- Eastbound vehicles on Horsetooth driving through north parking lot fencing, mistaking the lot as roadway since it is located in the Horsetooth right-of-way.
- Insufficient restroom facilities for the level of visitation.
- Lack of ADA accessible amenities with no accessible pathway to the river or ponds.
- Barriers to school and public programming due to lack of restroom and parking facilities.

VISITOR USE SCOPE AND CONSTRUCTION

FCNAD began full design and permit of the visitor use project in summer of 2025. The goals for the scoped visitor use project include:

- Reduce damage to riparian habitat along Beaver Pond by creating a designated access point to the pond and revegetating eroded areas.
- Alleviate safety risks by developing standard parking lots that provide functional off-street parking and closing on-street parking adjacent to Beaver Pond.
- Increase educational opportunities with the addition of bus parking, vault toilets, and interpretive kiosks.
- Improve access for community members with disabilities with ADA parking, wheelchair-friendly paths, and an accessible fishing pier.

The cost for construction is estimated to be \$1.3 million. Design and permitting will be completed by mid-2026 with construction taking place from August – November 2026. Adaptive management will continue from there.

CITY FINANCIAL IMPACTS

This Ordinance will appropriate \$4.9 million of Natural Areas' Funds to construct habitat and visitor use projects at Arapaho Bend Natural Area. If the funds are not fully expended, they will revert back to Natural Areas funds.

BOARD / COMMISSION / COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION

At its January 14, 2026, meeting, the Land Conservation and Stewardship Board, unanimously (8-0) recommended that City Council approve the Ordinance to appropriate \$4.9 million in Natural Areas' funds for river restoration and visitor use improvements at Arapaho Bend Natural Area.

PUBLIC OUTREACH

In the 2023 Larimer County Our Lands, Our Future received over 1,000 statistically valid responses. Respondents indicated their top priority was protecting, enhancing the health of, and having access to the region's water resources.

Community members have also voiced a need for visitor use improvements at this site. In 2024 and 2025, Natural Areas conducted visitor surveys at Arapaho Bend Natural Area to gain a better understanding of visitors and their experience on site. 385 visitors shared their feedback. The results highlighted the need for improved amenities on site. Natural Areas' standard for satisfaction with amenities is 80%. Several facilities rated below the standard, such as restrooms (18%), informational signage (62%), trash receptacles (64%) and parking areas (72%).

Lastly, Natural Areas is hosting a neighborhood meeting as part of the Development Review Process on January 26, 2026 to allow neighbors to voice their thoughts on the visitor use project. This meeting has not been conducted at the time of AIS submittal.

ATTACHMENTS / LINKS

1. Land Conservation and Stewardship Board Meeting Minutes, January 14, 2026 (Excerpt)
2. Arapaho Bend Project Locations
3. Ordinance No. 012, 2026