



NATURAL AREAS **STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK**

THE GUIDE TO CONSERVATION AND STEWARDSHIP



July 2025



*Cover photo: Sunrise at Reservoir Ridge Natural Area
Photo by: John Bartholow*

*Left: Mountain view from Arapaho Bend Natural Area
Photo by: Mark Yoder*

ACCESSIBILITY

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More information at: <https://fcgov.com/non-discrimination>





*Right: Night sky at Bobcat Ridge Natural Area
Photo by: Jeremy White*

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We acknowledge and honor the lands situated within the City of Fort Collins as the original homelands of the Hinono'eiteen (Arapaho), Tsétséhéstàhese (Cheyenne), Numunuu (Comanche), Caiugu (Kiowa), Čariks i Čariks (Pawnee), Sosonih (Shoshone), Oc'eti S'akowin (Lakota) and Núuchiu (Ute) Peoples.

This area is an important site of trade, gathering, and healing for these Native Nations. These lands are home to a diverse urban Native community representing multiple Native Nations and Indigenous Peoples. Despite forced removal and land dispossession, they continue to thrive as resilient members of our community. We are grateful for Native community members and honor the rich cultural heritage they bring to our collective community. We further recognize and value their social, intellectual, economic, and cultural contributions.

The City of Fort Collins is committed to supporting, partnering, and working with the Native and Indigenous community.



*Left: Foothills sunrise from Fossil Creek Wetlands Natural Area
Photo by: Rick Price*

*Right: Natural Areas Staff 2025
Photo by: City of Fort Collins*



NOTE FROM NATURAL AREAS STAFF

The City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department would like to thank the voters of Fort Collins and Larimer County for supporting the ballot initiatives that fund the work that is so close to the heart of the community. For over three decades, these dedicated sales taxes have conserved over 55,000 acres and 114 miles of trail in and around Fort Collins.

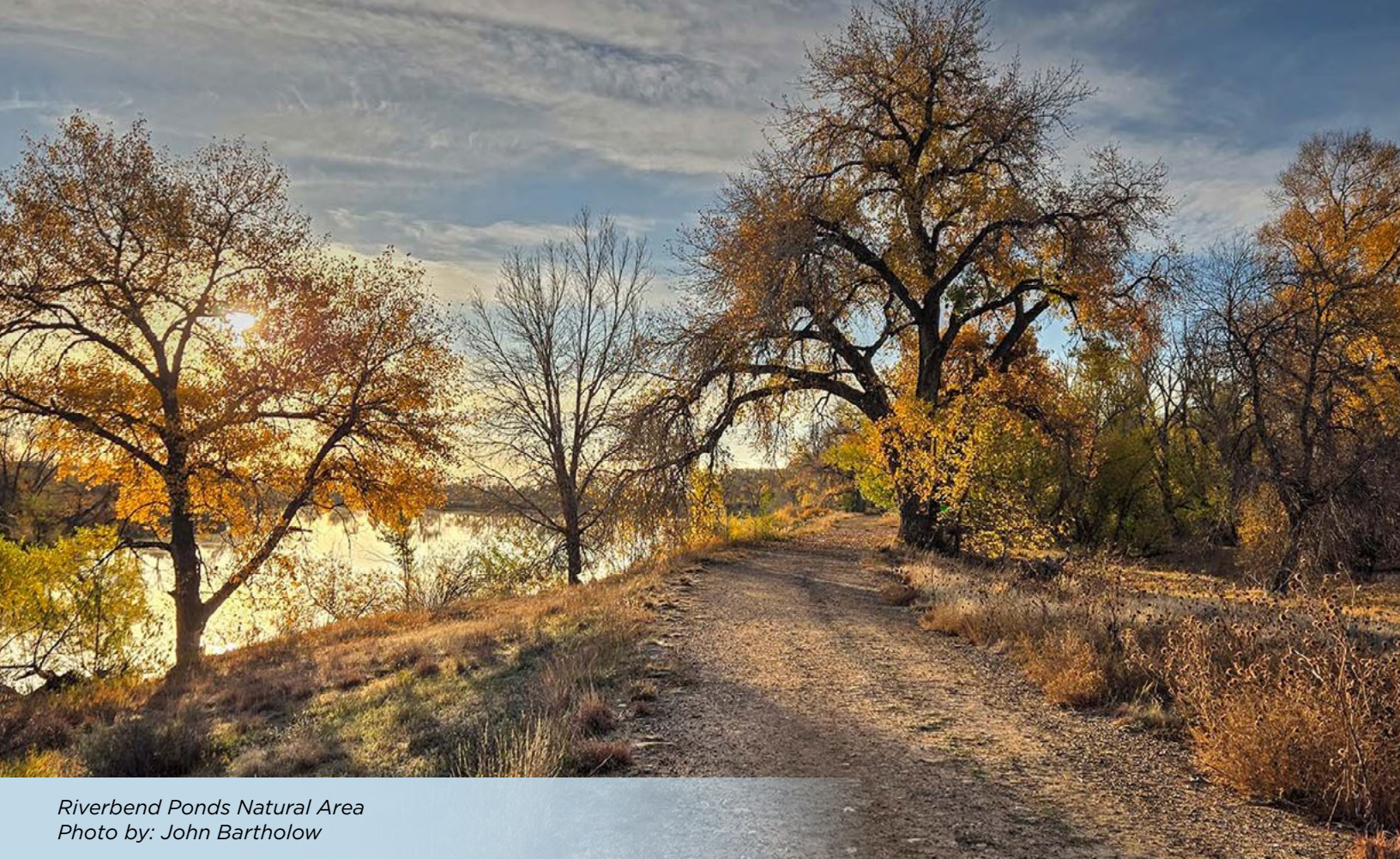
Thanks to the foresight of community members, thriving habitats and a connected landscape of conserved land remains a priority in a fast-growing community. Protected spaces locally and regionally allow everyone to connect with nature. Residents continue to share their support for forward-looking management that will help protect these special spaces in a changing world.

We look forward to working with the community to enhance the protection of our precious natural spaces and enjoy all the reasons these are treasured places. We invite you to join us in supporting Natural Areas' growth and strong management in the coming decade!

- City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department Staff

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*Riverbend Ponds Natural Area
Photo by: John Bartholow*

NATURAL AREAS DEPARTMENT MISSION:

To conserve and enhance lands with natural resource, agricultural, and scenic values, while providing meaningful education and appropriate recreation opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

The City of Fort Collins Natural Areas Department (the Department or NAD) recently celebrated 30 years of service to the Northern Colorado community through permanent land conservation while providing access to nature and meaningful education.

Over three decades, the Natural Areas Department has grown from protecting and managing 13 sites to 53 natural areas, across 55,000+ acres with 114 miles of trails.

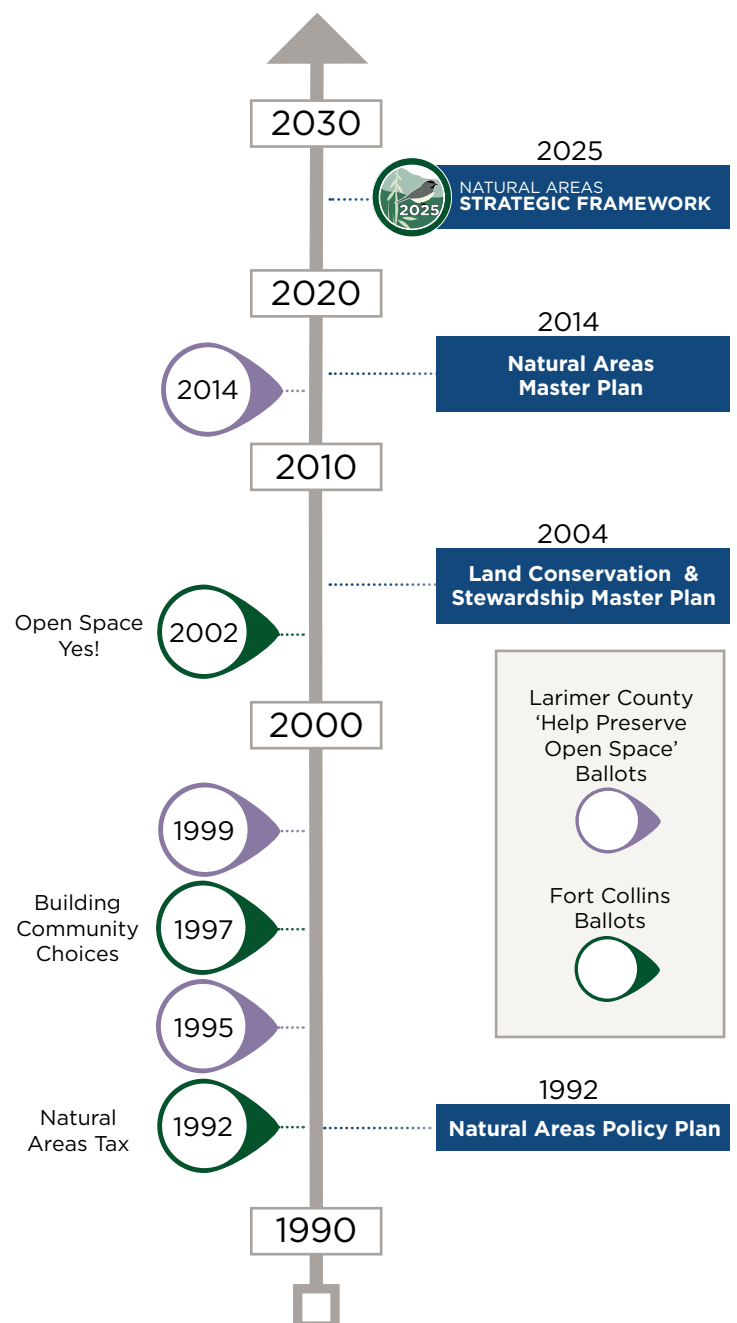
Natural areas protect a diversity of habitats, wildlife, and native plant communities while enhancing the community's health, cultural connections, scientific knowledge, and economic vitality.

DEPARTMENT GUIDANCE

The community highly values natural areas and voters have funded conservation through citizen-initiated, dedicated city and county sales taxes since 1992. City staff have built community-informed guidance documents for conservation and stewardship that ensure land acquisition and management align with the ballot language and community feedback. The 2004 and 2014 NAD Master Plans provide robust documentation of the history, funding, land and water conservation, and stewardship activities over the Department's history.

LOOKING AHEAD

The Strategic Framework uses the ballot language as an anchor, draws on citywide guidances such as the City Mission, Vision, and Values, and incorporates the experience and lessons learned over three decades of managing natural areas to create high level guidance and direction for NAD's work. Future projects, Management Zone Updates, and initiatives will be reviewed to ensure that they meet one or more of the values and goals outlined in this document.



CHALLENGES NATURAL AREAS WILL FACE IN THE COMING YEARS INCLUDE:

- Increasing risks of flooding, wildfires, invasive species, and stressed ecosystems due to climate change and population growth
- Increasing needs for infrastructure maintenance and lifecycle replacement
- Increasing visitation and recreation use
- Competing, diversifying, and conflicting community interests
- Limited opportunities to conserve and protect additional land and water

OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE COMING YEARS OF NATURAL AREAS INCLUDE:

- Building on land conservation accomplishments through future acquisitions and conservation easements
- Bringing together people who value natural spaces
- Partnering with a greater number of volunteers, non-profits, community members and other agencies to conserve land, improve habitats, and provide visitor opportunities
- Building resilience and community around natural areas

WHY PLAN NOW

While the goals of land conservation are inherently long-term, the surrounding world is constantly evolving. The goals and values defined in the Strategic Framework will anchor NAD in consistently delivering its mission while addressing emerging challenges and opportunities. These factors will guide planning for projects, prioritization of actions, and ongoing adaptive management over the next 10-20 years.



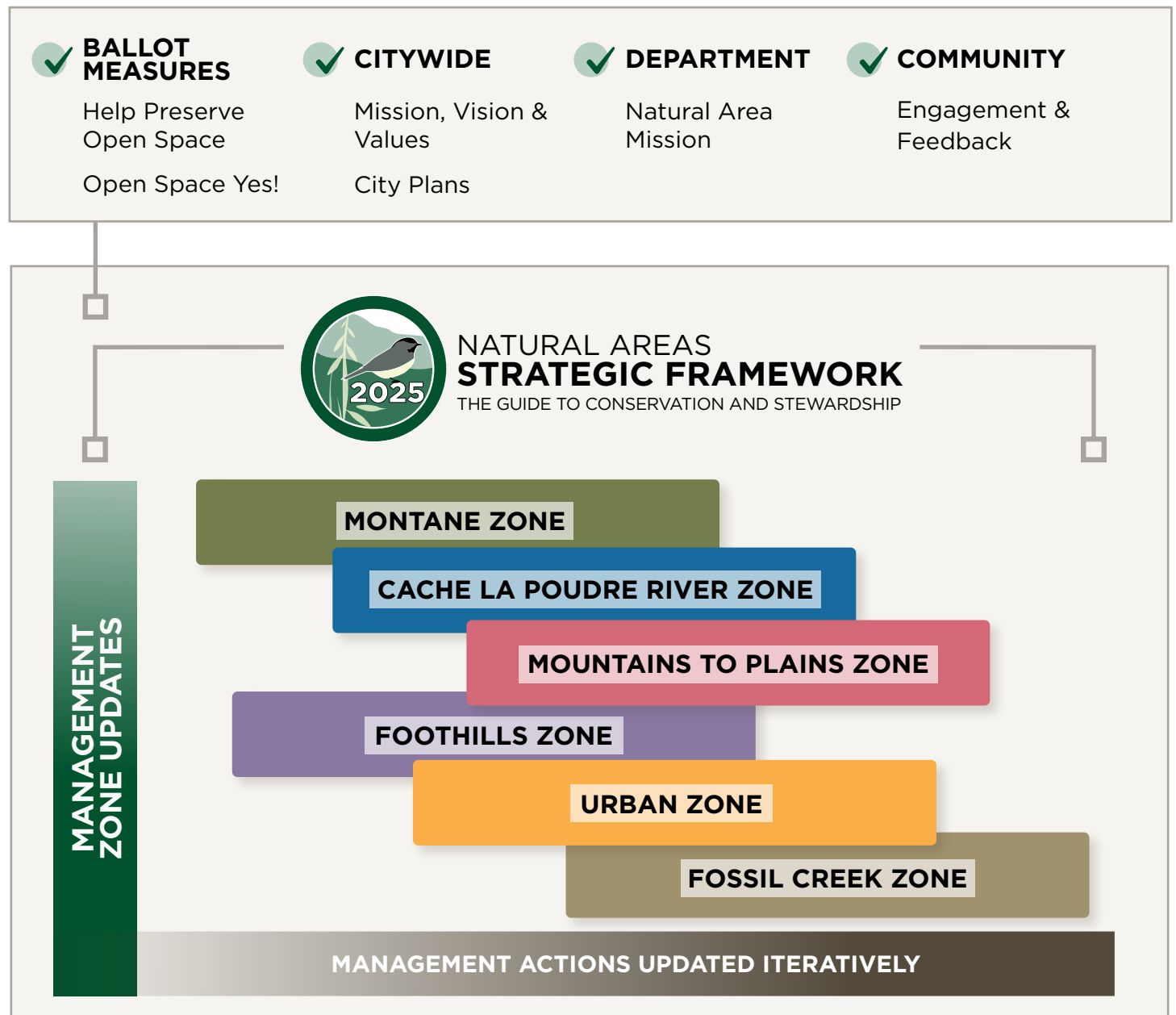
American tree sparrow (Spizelloides arborea) resting on rabbitbrush (Ericomeria nauseosa)
Photo by: City of Fort Collins

NATURAL AREAS STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

THE GUIDE TO CONSERVATION AND STEWARDSHIP

CONSERVATION AND STEWARDSHIP PLANNING

The vision, values, and goals defined in the Strategic Framework provide direction to the Department's planning and prioritization processes. To support site-specific management, natural areas are organized into six zones representing similar ecosystems and regions. Each zone completes a management update every seven years. Together, the Strategic Framework and Management Zone Updates provide a planning toolbox that supports the Department to determine specific management actions that will be taken in the coming years. Annual metrics and Department reports share stories of actions taken and progress towards goals.



**NATURAL AREAS
STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK**
THE GUIDE TO CONSERVATION AND STEWARDSHIP

MANAGEMENT ZONES

Growth Management Area

0 ½ 1 2 3 4 Miles



0 ½ 1 2 Miles

MOUNTAINS
TO PLAINS

MONTANE

FOOTHILLS

URBAN

URBAN

FOSSIL CREEK

POUDRE RIVER

The Natural Areas Department Strategic Framework takes into context the ways the Fort Collins community is changing today and will continue to evolve in the coming decade, including a growing population, evolving science and lessons learned in land management, and pressures like climate change.

The Strategic Framework aligns with the ballot direction that funds natural areas and builds on NAD's current plans, initiatives, and efforts to refine guiding principles and provides direction for the next 10-20 years. The Strategic Framework features:

VISION

The vision provides inspiration to ground and motivate future actions. It describes the ideal state towards which the Department works.

VALUES

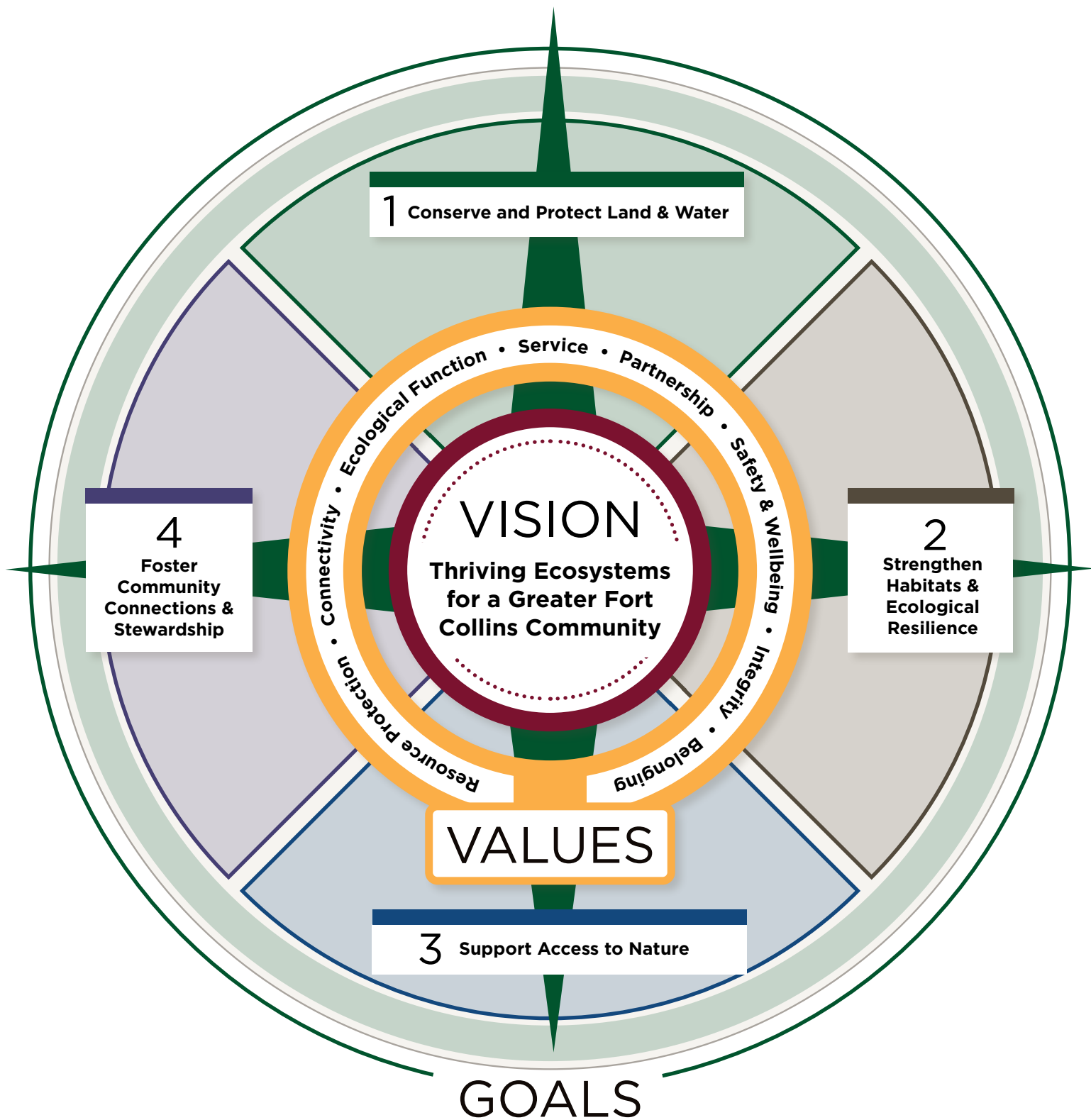
The NAD values reflect the City's values while highlighting the Department's distinct focus on ecological protection and management. These values play an important role in the Department's planning and prioritization.

GOALS

The Strategic Framework goals create the building blocks for the long-range functions of the Department and describe the major areas of work in the coming decade.



*Coyotes at Fossil Creek Reservoir in the winter
Photo by: Brent Eelman*



NATURAL AREAS STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

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VISION



*Summer at Soapstone Prairie Natural Area
Photo by: City of Fort Collins*

THRIVING ECOSYSTEMS FOR A GREATER FORT COLLINS COMMUNITY



**NATURAL AREAS
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VALUES



*Walking west at Coyote Ridge Natural Area
Photo by: City of Fort Collins*



RESOURCE PROTECTION

•

ECOLOGICAL FUNCTION

•

CONNECTIVITY

•

INTEGRITY

•

SAFETY & WELLBEING

•

BELONGING

•

SERVICE

•

PARTNERSHIP

VALUE: **RESOURCE PROTECTION**

The Department supports species and features characteristic of the region's ecosystem and heritage.

This includes prioritizing actions such as:

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



Examples of Resource Protection:

RESTORATION TO SUPPORT CRITICAL COMMON SPECIES

The rich habitat corridor created by a chain of natural areas along the Poudre River spans over 2,000 acres. NAD's stewardship of these properties, along with large-scale restoration projects at McMurry, North Shields Ponds, Kingfisher, and Running Deer natural areas, has led to an increase in common native wildlife and plants such as plains cottonwoods, chokecherries, and beavers.

INTEGRATED RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AT SOAPSTONE PRAIRIE

Soapstone Prairie Natural Area protects 22,000 acres of shortgrass prairie and riparian habitats, alongside cultural resources, such as the Lindenmeier Site, a National Historic Landmark. Cultural resource surveys and guidance from Native American and Indigenous partners will inform planning and project efforts, as the Department works to sustain and improve ecosystem health.

*Left: Bison (Bison bison) at Soapstone Prairie Natural Area
Photo by: City of Fort Collins*

*Right: Flowers blooming at Crossline Canyon
Photo by: City of Fort Collins*

VALUE: **ECOLOGICAL FUNCTION**

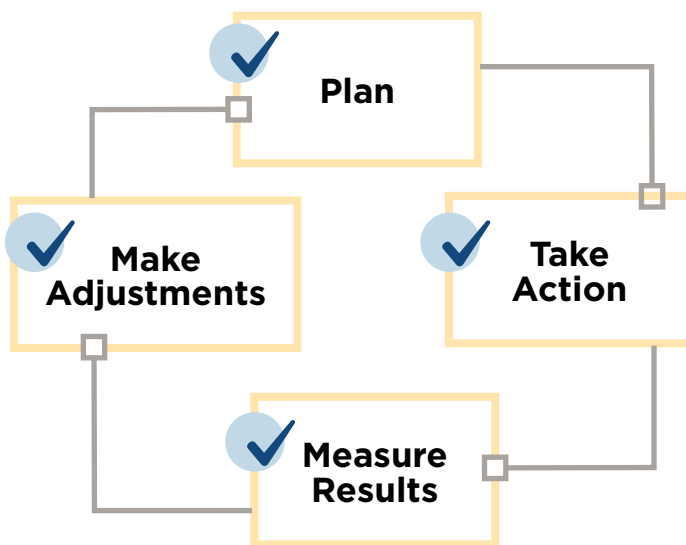
The Department works to sustain and improve the health and resilience of natural systems.

This includes prioritizing actions such as:

- Connecting rivers and streams to their floodplain and sustaining instream flows
- Introducing or continuing 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 adaptive ecological management

Disturbance Management is the process of using selected natural disturbances such as fire or grazing to stimulate plant growth and encourage system resilience.

Adaptive Management:



Examples of Ecological Function:

MIMICKING NATURAL DISTURBANCE TO ENHANCE PRAIRIE HEALTH

In the Mountains to Plains Zone, Soapstone Prairie Natural Area contains some of the last remaining intact, high-quality shortgrass prairie and foothills shrublands along the Front Range of Colorado. Application of tools such as responsible grazing and prescribed fire allow the Department to support threatened and rare species of plants and animals that have evolved with these natural disturbances.

WORKING TO KEEP WATER IN THE POUDBRE RIVER

In the Poudre River Zone, the City of Fort Collins is collaborating with regional partners on the Poudre Flows Plan, an innovative project that aims to reconnect 52 miles of the Poudre River during times of low flow. Under the plan, Natural Areas, Fort Collins One Water Utility, and other partners are upgrading existing water infrastructure to deliver protected instream flows that preserve and improve the health of the Poudre River.



NATURAL AREAS STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

THE GUIDE TO CONSERVATION AND STEWARDSHIP

VALUE: **CONNECTIVITY**

The Department 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 includes prioritizing actions such as:

- Conserving properties adjoining previously conserved spaces
- Sustaining the health of the Poudre River watershed
- Supporting connections to natural areas between the places the community lives, works, and plays
- Supporting regional efforts to create an interconnected multi-use trail network while protecting natural resources



Examples of Connectivity:

LOCALLY AND REGIONALLY CONNECTED TRAIL SYSTEM

The City of Fort Collins offers an extensive trail network that includes more than 50 miles of paved trails weaving throughout the community and creating regional connections to neighboring cities such as Loveland, Timnath, Windsor, Laporte, and Greeley. Complementing this system, the soft surface trails create connections between conserved lands managed by municipal, county, state, and federal agencies. Together, these trails physically connect the community both locally and regionally while providing visitors with access to nature.

HABITAT CONNECTIVITY: YEARS IN THE MAKING AT MAGPIE MEANDER

The 21 natural areas in Poudre River Zone represent years of relationship-building and conservation work – sometimes just a few acres at a time. In northwest Fort Collins, Magpie Meander Natural Area has grown to 72 acres over nine years through six acquisitions. This protects a relic river oxbow, important wetland and riparian habitat, and creates connections between neighborhoods and the river ecosystem.

*Left: Connecting with trail at Soapstone Prairie Natural Area
Photo by: City of Fort Collins*

*Right: Pineridge Natural Area
Photo by: City of Fort Collins*

VALUE: **INTEGRITY**

The Department implements the community's vision and values by responsible management of the community's ecological, financial, and social resources.

This includes prioritizing actions such as:

- Utilizing data-informed planning and management processes
- Maximizing the impact of dedicated sales tax funding while considering the long-term budget forecast
- Ensuring that employees have access to the tools and support needed to complete their work
- Reporting annually on revenues, expenses, and progress towards goals



Examples of Integrity:

THANK YOU VOTERS!

City and County sales taxes fund NAD's mission to conserve sensitive habitats and provide public access to nature thanks to two community-initiated ballot measures. NAD maintains a long-range financial plan that spans the life of each tax initiative and projects funds available for land acquisition, habitat enhancement, operations, maintenance, and staffing. Each year, NAD publishes an annual report outlining major accomplishments towards the ballot language mandates and department goals.

CLEANUP AFTER CAMERON PEAK FIRE

Following the Cameron Peak Fire's run through Bobcat Ridge Natural Area, a new concern emerged. Post-fire inspection revealed a previously undocumented dump site. Staff weighed options including keeping the dump site in place and monitoring for contamination or removing all the potentially hazardous materials from Bobcat Ridge. Knowing that in this fire adapted landscape the site was prone to burn again, NAD moved quickly to fully remediate the dump and remove all hazards. By leveraging internal and external collaborations, NAD completed the project on time and under budget.

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VALUE: **SAFETY & WELLBEING**

The Department provides safe environments for community members to engage with, be physically active in, and find renewal through time spent in nature, while also protecting natural systems.

This includes prioritizing actions such as:

- Implementing education and communication campaigns focused on visitor safety
- Emphasizing the importance of practicing proper trail etiquette
- Providing ranger presence and support across the system through cordial and informational contacts, alongside regulation enforcement
- Factoring mental health and wellness benefits into decision making
- Implementing projects to ensure ADA compliance and enhancing experiences for diverse abilities

Examples of Safety & Wellbeing:

COLLABORATING TO ENSURE RIVER SAFETY

As snow melts from the Rockies, outdoor enthusiasts flock to the Poudre River to enjoy tubing, white water rafting, fishing, picnicking and kayaking. However, during peak runoff when the river conditions can be dangerous and even deadly, public safety messaging and patrol is critical. During high water flows, NAD partners with cross-City departments, Poudre Fire Authority, and the Poudre Heritage Alliance on coordinated river access point closures and consistent messaging to keep the public informed.

SOAPSTONE PRAIRIE WAYFINDING PROJECT

Soapstone Prairie Natural Area is a remote and vast site with over 30 miles of single-track trail. While visitation is lower than other natural areas, Natural Area Rangers frequently field calls from visitors lost on the trail system. In 2024, based on visitor feedback, the Department designed and implemented a more comprehensive wayfinding sign program at Soapstone Prairie. Since installing updated signs, visitors have called for assistance less often and have provided positive feedback on the reliability of the signs.



*Left: Wayfinding sign at Soapstone Prairie
Photo by: Logan Simpson*

*Right: Participants in Club Outdoors jumping in the tall grass
Photo by: City of Fort Collins*

VALUE: **BELONGING**

The Department ensures activities and places welcome all and encourage a diversity of experiences.

This includes prioritizing actions such as:

- Acquiring natural spaces near the places the community lives, works, learns, and plays
- Creating fun and formative educational experiences for young people to encourage a lifelong love of the outdoors
- Translating print and digital materials, including signs and brochures
- Providing volunteer stewardship opportunities for community members to give back to the places they love

Examples of Belonging:

NATURE RIGHT OUTSIDE YOUR DOOR

Since 2015, the Department has managed implementation of the municipality's Nature in the City program that works to integrate nature into every corner of the community and everyday life. From pollinator patches to hands on, outdoor classrooms, the community finds diverse ways to connect with nature across over 100 projects.

BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING NATURE

In partnership with the local Boys & Girls Club organization, NAD engages kids in deep and meaningful education programs each summer. The Club Outdoors program works with kids that otherwise might not have opportunities and time to spend outside with their families. This three-week summer experience includes a series of field trips and hands-on experiences ranging from dip netting in the Poudre River to nature journaling at Reservoir Ridge Natural Area.



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VALUE: **SERVICE**

The Department demonstrates honesty, transparency, inclusivity, and respect by providing authentic and diverse engagement opportunities that focus on listening and active participation.

This includes prioritizing actions such as:

- Offering diverse volunteer opportunities across natural areas
- Engaging surrounding neighborhoods and diverse communities in zone-based planning and project implementation efforts
- Providing clear and concise instructions for permitting
- Educating about regulations and how they protect natural areas and visitors
- Communicating wayfinding, accessibility and programming opportunities using a variety of media

Examples of Service:

CITYWIDE SITE CLEANUP TEAM

Since fall 2022, a team of multiple City departments and community partners has met weekly to organize outreach and support for unhoused community members and coordinate cleanups for sites with trash and hazardous materials. This collaboration provides inclusive engagement, transparent data collection and analysis to inform future actions, and explores alternative shelter options and programs for those experiencing homelessness. As a part of this team, NAD protects sensitive resources while ensuring the safety of staff and creating a welcoming environment for all.

NIGHT SKY MONITORING

Light pollution can disrupt wildlife's breeding and migration patterns, reduce survival, and deter animals from using their natural habitat. In collaboration with the National Park Service, the Department trained community members to monitor artificial light levels in natural areas to help the Department and community understand potential wildlife impacts and educate neighbors on night sky friendly updates to exterior outdoor lighting.



*Left: Lunar eclipse in dark skies
Photo by: Greg Halec*

*Right: On the trail at Kestrel Fields Natural Area
Photo by: City of Fort Collins*

VALUE: **PARTNERSHIP**

The Department leverages shared decision-making and invests in increasing the impact of conservation actions through building relationships across City departments, agencies, and with community groups.

This includes prioritizing actions such as:

- Working with Larimer County Department of Natural Resources and regional municipalities to conserve land and water and provide habitat protections across Northern Colorado
- Leveraging cross-department expertise and opportunities to meet NAD goals alongside other City goals such as stormwater protection, safe routes to school, increasing pollinator habitat, and affordable housing
- Supporting region-wide coordination efforts such as NoCoPlaces regional planning, the NoCo Fireshed Collaborative, and trails such as the Poudre Trail and the Colorado Front Range Trail
- Completing routine surveys of plants and animals and contributing to regional data sets and monitoring efforts

Examples of Partnership:

PARTNERING FOR CONSERVATION AND CONNECTIONS AT KESTREL FIELDS NATURAL AREA

The 73-acre Kestrel Fields Natural Area provides access to nature, a safe route to schools, and the opportunity to experience a diversity of conservation activities. As the site of one of two pilot conservation agriculture projects, Kestrel Fields supports small-scale restoration alongside fields of locally grown fruits and vegetables. One of the most important projects on this site is a native seed bank project, which provides critical supplies for restoration projects throughout the Natural Areas network.

URBAN PARTNERSHIPS TO ADDRESS MULTIPLE CITY GOALS

In northwest Fort Collins, a cross-City partnership supports multiple goals through the acquisition of and planning for the 54-acre Puente Verde Natural Area. The site will eventually support multiple stormwater detention ponds designed to mimic natural habitats, like what is found on the beloved Red Fox Meadows Natural Area. Additionally, NAD is holding 2 acres of the property with existing buildings that may be purchased by the City's Social Sustainability team with an eye toward development of affordable housing.



NATURAL AREAS STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

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GOALS



*Sunrise at Soapstone Prairie
Photo by: City of Fort Collins*



CONSERVE AND PROTECT LAND & WATER

•

STRENGTHEN HABITATS & BUILD RESILIENCY

•

SUPPORT ACCESS TO NATURE

•

**FOSTER COMMUNITY
CONNECTIONS & STEWARDSHIP**

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NATURAL AREAS STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

THE GUIDE TO CONSERVATION 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.

NAD supports the biodiversity and landscape of Northern Colorado through continued dedication to its *conservation-first* mission. As the region grows, less land and water are available for acquisition and the cost of acquisition increases. At the same time, there are still connections to be made, important habitats to be conserved, opportunities to add more water to riparian areas, and chances to make access to nature more equitable.

The Department will address these challenges and opportunities by:

- Working with willing landowners to acquire additional properties
- Continuing to connect riparian corridors, regional landscapes, community separators, and neighborhood natural areas
- Engaging private landowners to secure and monitor conservation easements
- Protecting flows in the Cache la Poudre Watershed and enhancing instream flows

Examples of Conserving and Protecting Land & Water:

PROTECTING LAND TO SUPPORT REGIONAL CONSERVATION NETWORK

Between 2022 and 2023, the Department partnered with the Larimer County Department of Natural Resource to acquire two properties, adding 675 acres of conserved land to Bobcat Ridge Natural Area. This regional natural area creates a buffer between the protected wildland of the Roosevelt National Forest and more developed urban areas to the east, while allowing visitors to enjoy access to a broad landscape of conserved land. This conservation effort was a priority because of its adjacency to previously conserved NAD land, as well as its proximity to large areas of protected open space. By acquiring this property, NAD extended protections for many large mammal species frequently found in this area including elk, black bear, mountain lions, and of course, bobcats.

In the coming decade, the Department will prioritize protecting land and water with high conservation value including unique wildlife habitats, rare plants, instream flows, and extending landscape-scale conservation work. The Department will work to introduce these areas to the community in ways that respects and upholds the integrity of these ecosystems.



*Sunset at Bobcat Ridge Natural Area
Photo by: City of Fort Collins*

A NEW NATURAL AREA FOR NORTHWEST FORT COLLINS

In northwest Fort Collins, just off Wilcox Avenue, the Department has been working to protect a series of properties along Dry Creek, a tributary of the Poudre River. Between 2017 and 2022, six properties were acquired totaling approximately 40 acres. This area has long been identified as both a wildlife corridor and a part of the community in need of trail connections for residents. The Department prioritized this area for acquisition to help address adjacent neighborhood feedback that they felt disconnected from nature and the Poudre River corridor.

In the coming decade, the Natural Areas Department will continue to acquire properties that can serve as neighborhood natural areas and uphold the unique character and heritage of the community. The Department will work to ensure all residents have access to high quality nature.

The Natural Areas Department will establish updated metrics tracking land and water conservation, including the balance of local and regional land protection and flow protection efforts.



NATURAL AREAS STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

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GOAL 2: STRENGTHEN HABITATS & ECOLOGICAL RESILIENCE

Healthy ecosystems provide a wide range of habitats, clean water, and protection in changing conditions, allowing plants and wildlife to thrive. Through restoration and adaptive management, the Department works to take a data-informed approach to improve the condition of ecosystems.

As the climate changes and the regional population grows, plants and wildlife risk losing key habitat elements resulting in potential loss to biodiversity. The resulting less complex natural systems are more susceptible to natural events such as fire and flooding.

The Department will address these challenges by:

- Restoring land, rivers, and water bodies through the application of best available science
- Conducting baseline inventories and growing long-term monitoring programs to guide adaptive management
- Promoting habitat resilience through responsible disturbance management
- Investing in the recovery and reintroduction of native, rare, endangered, or locally extinct species, while also working to maintain strong populations of more common species
- Supporting cross-City objectives for resilience including flood conveyance, carbon sequestration, and heat island mitigation

Examples of Strengthening Habitat and Ecological Resilience:

MANAGING FOR CHANGING CONDITIONS ON COYOTE RIDGE NATURAL AREA

Just southwest of Fort Collins, sits a complex of conserved lands, including Coyote Ridge Natural Area. This acreage provides an important separator between two quickly growing Northern Colorado communities. It also tells the story of the Department's evolving approach to restoration and ongoing management. Between 2007 and 2022, staff restored 800 acres of a former dryland wheat field to a native shortgrass prairie - 50 acres at a time. Over these years, the Department's restoration practice evolved to incorporate the use of diverse seed mixes and to prioritize ongoing monitoring. In recent years, assessments of bird and plant diversity across this area demonstrated the need to integrate disturbance into the maturing restoration project in order to maintain the vitality of the restored habitat.

In the coming decade, the Department will integrate beneficial disturbance across Coyote Ridge and other natural areas through the use of tools such as grazing and prescribed fire. Using these tools, NAD will work to support wildlife and plants, while enhancing community resilience.



*Red fox (Vulpes vulpes) seen at it's namesake
Red Fox Meadows Natural Area
Photo by: Norm Keally*

KEEPING WATER IN THE POUDRE RIVER AND IMPROVING IMPORTANT HABITAT

In partnership with Fort Collins One Water Utility, the Department set out to maintain a unique City water right that keeps flows in the Poudre River for fish, wildlife, and recreation. The Colorado Water Law principle of “use it or lose it” means water users must prove they are actively using water rights for the intended use or potentially lose the ability to use that water in the future. By reviving a relic side-channel on Colorado State University’s Environmental Learning Center, the Department worked to protect existing instream water rights and improve fish and wildlife habitat, while reconnecting Running Deer Natural Area to the river’s floodplain. The project also built refuge pools to support the rare, native Plains Topminnow, and installed large wood structures to

mimic the natural ecological function of animals such as beavers. These structures reduce the force of high flows, improve conditions for wildlife, and concentrate flows to support fish habitat.

In the coming decade, Natural Areas will work with regional partners to restore sections of the Cache la Poudre River and its tributaries, informed by the results of the Poudre River Health Report. These efforts will work to improve ecological function and protect the health of the river.

Natural Areas will track progress by monitoring the acres actively managed to improve plant and wildlife habitat and the overall health of the Poudre River watershed. Management actions will adapt based on monitoring results.



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GOAL 3: SUPPORT ACCESS TO NATURE

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

Access to nature draws people from across the region to Fort Collins. As more people get out to enjoy natural areas, they bring unique interests and needs. While NAD and other regional agencies face growing visitation pressure on resources, they also recognize a growing need to provide places of respite for community members in a busy world.

NAD will address these challenges by:

- Developing and maintaining a sustainable trail system to minimize erosion, protect habitats, preserve water quality, and better adapt to changing conditions
- Enhancing existing and developing new visitor amenities to meet or exceed accessibility standards where possible, ensuring a broad range of inclusive nature-based experiences for all ability levels
- Monitoring visitor use trends and community desires to provide welcoming and inclusive experiences in nature
- Providing high-quality visitor experiences while protecting critical natural resources
- Participating in partnerships that foster a coordinated visitor experience across the region and align with state-level policies and initiatives

Examples of Supporting Access to Nature:

SUSTAINABLE TRAIL MANAGEMENT IN FOOTHILLS NATURAL AREAS

Natural areas just west of Fort Collins provide excellent wildlife and plant habitat, scenic views, and a treasured opportunity for the community to connect with nature. While the terrain and interconnected trail system make foothills natural areas a coveted destination for outdoor enthusiasts, the erosive soils, high visitation, and steep slopes pose significant challenges for ongoing maintenance and use. To protect sensitive resources and create more sustainable conditions, NAD staff rerouted several foothills trails, reduced grades, blended soils, and installed check ramps for durability. As this effort continues, more trails can remain open to the public when the region experiences wet and muddy conditions, and staff can tackle ongoing maintenance more sustainably.

In the coming decade, the Department will monitor existing trail conditions and visitor use, while designing new trails to minimize erosion, protect habitats, preserve water quality, and provide high quality and inclusive visitor use experiences.



*Learning on the trail at Kestrel Fields Natural Area
Photo by: Bill Walton*

ADVANCING ACCESSIBILITY THROUGH DATA INFORMED DECISION MAKING

In 2024, the Natural Areas Department launched a multi-year trail inventory initiative using the High Efficiency Trail Assessment Process (HETAP) to gather detailed, objective data on trail conditions. This advanced technology records grade, cross-slope, width, and obstacles to provide a comprehensive picture of trail accessibility. The information will be shared with the public through maps and on-site signage, helping visitors of all abilities choose the trail that best suits their accessibility needs. The data will also guide the department in planning and prioritizing future trail maintenance projects.

Over the next decade, the Natural Areas Department will focus on collecting, digitizing, and publicly sharing comprehensive trail condition data to provide users with up-to-date information to help them navigate trails confidently and safely. In addition, the Department will collaborate with local and regional partners to share this data for integration into broader, regionally connected trail systems.



NATURAL AREAS STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

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GOAL 4: FOSTER COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS & STEWARDSHIP

As Fort Collins' population changes, how people experience natural areas continues to evolve. Natural Areas' engagement and education bolster the community's commitment to conservation and land stewardship, inspiring people to protect the environment on conserved lands and beyond.

The Department will work to keep stewardship at the heart of the Fort Collins community by:

- Engaging diverse audiences through a variety of education and outreach programs that meet each group where they are with inclusive messaging and transparency
- Upholding safety across the community through regulation enforcement and education about wildlife, visitor etiquette, and resource protection
- Inspiring volunteerism to create a diverse group of natural area ambassadors that drive community actions around conservation
- Working with the Native American and Indigenous community and other historically underserved community groups to honor connections to nature
- Bolstering stewardship beyond the boundaries of natural areas through investment in community-led projects and support resources

Examples of Fostering Community Connections and Stewardship:

UPDATED SIGNS TO PROVIDE CONSISTENT AND WELCOMING MESSAGING

In 2024, the Department embarked on an ambitious multi-year project to establish consistent sign messaging, design, placement, and quantity across natural areas. An initial sign inventory identified over 2,400 signs of various designs and messaging across the natural areas system. Additionally, an analysis of best practices for effective and welcoming sign messaging was completed. Together, the inventory and analysis provide a data-informed foundation for the new NAD Sign Manual that will guide signage across the natural areas moving forward.

In the coming decade, the Department will implement a strategy to ensure messaging is effective, accessible, consistent, and provides important information in a welcoming format.



*Exploring the river bottom at McMurry Natural Area
Photo by: Bill Walton*

COLLABORATIVE VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

With training in first aid, visitor engagement, local ecology, safety, and stewardship, the Volunteer Ranger Assistants (VRAs) extend the reach of Larimer County and City Rangers to educate the public. In 2023, 81 VRAs contributed 1,672 hours of service and made more than 6,300 contacts with community members visiting natural areas and open spaces across Larimer County. This partnership expands the service and safety of visitors, while cultivating community stewards.

In the coming decade, the Department will continue to engage volunteers to support the diverse aspects of its conservation and stewardship efforts. Volunteers not only dedicate their time and talents to the Department's mission, they are community ambassadors.

The Department will evolve metrics related to the impact of community connections and track stewardship actions across the community.

VRA Lynn Larkin reflects on her experience:

"The beautiful Colorado outdoors has been my love for my entire life. When I learned Natural Areas, in partnership with Larimer County Open Space, has a Volunteer Ranger Assistant Program, I immediately applied. This opportunity has enhanced every aspect of my outdoor experience. In addition to continuing education and training, I can do what I love best, hiking, with additional skills and support."

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In creating this Strategic Framework, staff actively sought diverse perspectives to help the document embody community-supported conservation and stewardship.

The Strategic Framework reflects the breadth and depth of perspectives from all segments of the community. Data collection and analyses used mixed methods, integrating survey results and conversations. This allowed a comprehensive approach to building insights on public perceptions and preferences.

Broad community input was gathered in the following ways:



**Our Lands Our Future
Questionnaire Responses**

QUESTIONNAIRES



AWARE

Efforts to make people aware of engagement opportunities or visited the project website.

16

**Community Wide
Events Attended**

- ✓ Website
- ✓ Newsletters
- ✓ E-news
- ✓ Social Media Posts
- ✓ Questionnaire Postcards



INFORMED

Those that interacted with the website by clicking on a link, attending an event, or asking a question.

2,400

**Interactions at
Community Events**

1,830
**Total Website
Views**



ENGAGED

Residents who have given direct feedback, taken a questionnaire, or participated in an activity.

8

Historically
Underrepresented
Focus Groups

3

Technical Advisory
Committee Meetings

13

External Partner
Organizations
Engaged

5

Other City
Departments
Engaged



Whitewater rafting on the Poudre River
Photo by: City of Fort Collins

The community’s feedback, along with foundational guidance including ballot measures, the Department’s Mission, and City direction, helped develop the NAD vision, values, and goals articulated in this Strategic Framework. Below are themes heard from the community that helped shape the development of the vision, values, and goals.

THEMES FROM ENGAGEMENT

- ACCESS
- HABITAT PRESERVATION
- PLANNING & FUNDING
- COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
- HEALTH
- SAFETY
- CONNECTIVITY
- INCLUSION
- SPECIFIC PLACES
- EDUCATION
- LAND CONSERVATION
- STEWARDSHIP & MAINTENANCE
- EQUALITY
- PARTNERSHIPS
- VISITOR EXPERIENCE



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN ACTION

The Department has worked hard to build relationships with historically underrepresented groups through purposeful communication and programs. Focused engagement for the Strategic Framework elevated the voices of those who may not have been involved in the past and gave the Department an opportunity to learn and to incorporate feedback.



LISTENING TO LOCAL EXPERTS

A Technical Advisory Committee, comprised of representatives from a variety of disciplines ranging from conservation groups to natural area visitors representing specific community interests, provided input reflective of their experiences and perspectives. Agencies and non-profit partners from across the region, as well as various City departments, also provided input throughout the process.



Top left: Community engagement at Kingfisher Point Natural Area

Photo by: The City of Fort Collins

Middle left: Workshop with local experts

Photo by: The City of Fort Collins

Bottom left: Forest bathing at Gateway Natural Area

Photo by: The City of Fort Collins

*Right: Blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*) flowering*

Photo by: The City of Fort Collins

NATURAL AREAS STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

THE GUIDE TO CONSERVATION AND STEWARDSHIP





Mountain lions (Puma concolor) and coyote (Canis latrans) at Bobcat Ridge Natural Area
Photo by: City of Fort Collins



CONCLUSION

The vision, values, and goals set the groundwork for future priorities, policies, and work plans that the Department will review on a constant basis. By working together, Fort Collins and the region can be ready for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

The Natural Areas Strategic Framework builds on past and current plans, policies, and programs. For more information on other plans and policies, please visit www.fcgov.com/naturalareas/ or contact the Department at 970.416.2815.

NATURAL AREAS STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

THE GUIDE TO CONSERVATION AND STEWARDSHIP



Left: Black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigris*) at Soapstone Prairie
Photo by: City of Fort Collins

Right: Shrub planting at Kestrel Fields Natural Area
Photo by: City of Fort Collins



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PLANNING TEAM:

- Kristy Bruce, Environmental Planner
- Rachel Balduzzi, Public Engagement Senior Supervisor
- Julia Feder, Conservation & Stewardship Planning Manager
- Todd Juhasz, Environmental Planner
- Jenny Roberts, Environmental Planner
- Kelly Smith, Senior Environmental Planner

NATURAL AREAS

CONTRIBUTING TEAM LEADS:

- Katie Donahue, Natural Areas Director
- Matthew Parker, Ecological Stewardship Manager
- Aaron Reed, Built Infrastructure Manager
- Zoe Shark, Community Connection & Protection Manager

TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE:

- Beth Bullard, Poudre Heritage Alliance
- Hannah Casey, Overland Mountain Bike Association
- Heather Dannahower, Front Range Community College
- Dr. Ricky Frierson, Warner College of Natural Resources (CSU)
- Lee Granau, Colorado Natural Heritage
- Jesse Gray, Audubon Society
- Kassandra Lindsey, Colorado Geological Society
- Robert Malone, Fort Collins Running Club
- Brenda McDowell, Adaptive Recreation Opportunities
- Dr. David Rojas, College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences (CSU)
- Katy Schneider, Visit Fort Collins

- Linda Smith, Colorado Native Plant Society
- Ty Smith, Native American Cultural Center (CSU)
- Jeremy White, National Park Service

CITY COUNCIL:

- Jeni Arndt, Mayor
- Susan Gutowsky, District 1
- Julie Pignataro, District 2
- Tricia Canonico, District 3
- Melanie Potyondy, District 4
- Kelly Ohlson, District 5
- Emily Francis, District 6

LAND CONSERVATION AND STEWARDSHIP BOARD:

- Ross Cunniff, Board Chair
- Scott Mason, Vice Chair
- Denise Culver
- Andrea Elson
- Jennifer Gooden
- Holger Kley
- Elena Lopez
- River Mizell
- Joe Piesman
- Mark Sears
- Tom Shoemaker

Special thanks to focus group participants, City Staff, and the Fort Collins community members and visitors who shaped this plan.

Planning process and document supported by Logan Simpson and the Institute for the Built Environment.

CONTACT US:

www.fcgov.com/naturalareas

naturalareas@fcgov.com

970.416.2815

