

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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The Adams County Parks, Open Space and Trails (POST) Master Plan is designed to help guide the County in future park, open space and trail management and development to better serve the community while sustaining and conserving natural environments. This plan reflects the mission and goals of the Adams County Parks, Open Space and Cultural Arts Department. It is an update to the 2012 Open Space, Parks and Trails Master Plan, and has been developed concurrently with the County's Comprehensive Plan and Transportation Master Plan.

The planning process is divided into two phases. The first phase is the analysis of existing conditions and opportunities, and the second phase is where the findings from the earlier phase, along with public input and projections, are used to produce the vision for the master plan. This report documents the first phase existing conditions and opportunities.

ESTABLISHING A VISION

The primary goals of this master plan update are to:

- Ensure the County's parks, trails and open space lands meet the needs of a growing and diverse population;
- Enhance the quality of life for residents and visitors;
- Ensure that important natural resources and unique county characteristics are protected.

The master plan is guided by a vision statement: "Cultivate an integrated system that ensures access for all residents to parks, trails and open space properties; identifies areas for future growth; preserves and enhances important wildlife habitats and corridors, natural and scenic resources, and agricultural lands; expands trail connections; and broadens recreational opportunities." It also sets five key themes throughout:

1. **Natural resource, agricultural land and wildlife habitat protection and riparian enhancement**
2. **Diverse outdoor recreation and creative gathering places**
3. **Partnerships, regional coordination and stewardship**
4. **Dynamic trail connections**
5. **Equitable park offerings**

The County has identified five concentration areas for this plan:

- Clear Creek and the South Platte River corridors
- Riverdale Regional Park
- Existing parks and urban/unincorporated areas
- Recreation opportunities
- 5 Strategic Corridors

Adams County residents enjoy public access to 772 properties classified as parks, open space and trailheads (dedicated access points to trails). Thirty-one of these properties are owned and managed by the County, including four community parks, one regional park, 15 open spaces, and 11 trails/trailheads. Several major parks and open spaces are owned and managed by other federal, state and

jurisdictional entities. These include the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge, Barr Lake State Park, Heron Pond/Heller Open Space, and Westerly Creek Park. Municipalities and townships within Adams County also have their significant share of park and open space acreage. The existing trails in the county stretch out to 559 miles with the most notable being the South Platte River Trail and the Clear Creek Trail. Adams County manages 40.75 miles of these trails. Visitation numbers to parks, open space and trails were over half a million in 2019, up 40 percent since 2017.

The county has had steady population growth mostly occurring in the urbanized southwest portion. The County currently provides about 54 acres of existing publicly accessible parks, open space, and trails per 1,000 residents. To maintain this ratio compared with projected population growth, the County will need to provide an additional 500 acres by 2030, and combined other entities within the County an additional 6,500 acres will be needed. Approximately 32 percent of Adams County's residents are not currently within a 5-minute walk of a neighborhood park or a 10-minute walk from a community or regional park. Most of the underserved areas are unincorporated Adams County:

- Northwest and northcentral Adams County, west of Highway 85 (Todd Creek) and east of I-76

- Confluence Area / southwest Adams County around Washington Street south of I-270
- The Highway 85 corridor features a gap in parks and open space, however, these areas are primarily industrial uses
- The area between Highway 85 and I-76 along E-470
- Aurora, south of Denver International Airport

Most residents are, however, within a 15-minute drive from a regional park and almost two-thirds of Adams County's ethnic/racial minority groups and at-risk populations are located in areas that are within walking distance to parks, a number similar to that of the county's general population. This service analysis does not take into account access to active recreation facilities such as recreation centers, swimming pools and athletic fields. Not all residents have access to these types of facilities.

MASTER PLAN ELEMENTS

Funding Sources

In 2020, voters in Adams County overwhelmingly supported making the 0.25 percent sales tax for open space permanent. Proceeds from this tax, which have funded more than 538 projects with more than \$212 million over its first 20 years, will also support many of the goals and objectives of this master plan. These funds are distributed in three ways. Sixty-eight percent is awarded through a competitive grant program, 30 percent is distributed back to the jurisdiction where the

tax was generated, and two percent is allocated to administration costs. Other funding sources are available through the lottery-funded Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) program, which has allocated nearly \$30 million to Adams County through 126 grants since 1992.

Evaluation of Lands

The master plan includes a section dedicated for the evaluation of lands for future parks and open space consideration. This section of the plan outlines four different criteria used to perform a weighted Geographic Information System (GIS) suitability assessment: Agricultural Conservation, Wildlife Habitat/Natural Lands/Riparian Conservation, Needs/Suitability for Recreation, and Scenic Views. This analysis shows high values for environmental/wildlife habitat conservation along key waterways. High value for agriculture conservation is shown in a variety of locations such as the Historic Splendid Valley, South Platte River Greenway, and central and eastern areas of the County. Some incorporated areas that have populations more densely located within/surrounding them are identified as desirable filling existing recreation gaps in provision. This analysis will be used in a future phase of the project to identify with public input priority areas for land conservation or acquisitions.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND INFLUENCES FOR PARKS, OPEN SPACE AND TRAILS

The existing conditions evaluated within this report point to a range of opportunities for more exploration in the second phase of the master plan process along with identification of strategies and actions.

Equity

SOCIAL INCLUSION

Equity is just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. Equitable park offerings means "ensuring everyone receives the appropriate investment for where they are", understanding that "some communities need more investment because they have historically been underserved" (NRPA 2020 equity definition). The opportunity exists throughout this master plan to establish diverse spaces for outdoor recreation, community gathering, connectivity, and experiences in nature, thereby striving for vast social inclusion across the county.

HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness is a societal issue that can only be mitigated when involving a range of stakeholders, which oftentimes includes park and recreation agencies. Adams County has several organizations, initiatives, and resources in place that assist homeless individuals and those who are at risk of becoming homeless.

The Parks, Open Space, and Trails Master Plan along with supporting management plans, regulations, site plans and policies can address questions such as:

What can be done to increase visitation to park, open space and trail assets by everyone to build civic trust?

How can the departments support inclusion and create opportunities for social connections among diverse groups?

How can parks departments link unsheltered populations to services and avoid the type of enforcement mitigation of displacement and loss of possessions that has proven to complicate and exacerbate poverty and health conditions?

How to reduce discomfort some people feel from viewing the circumstances of unhoused individuals that may cause them to be dissatisfied with a space or not visit it? What physical characteristics would reduce association with high-risk environments?

What actions can be taken to discourage and respond to behavior that is anti-social unsafe, or a criminal act? How maintenance standards can be upheld?

It is critical that parks and recreation providers take a problem-solving approach to homelessness and work as part of a collaborative response to this issue. Parks and recreation providers need to focus on community

education, training, design of their assets and working with service providers.

Sustainability

SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

Adams County has the opportunity to lead in environmentally sustainable practices through its operations and maintenance approaches to parks, open spaces and trail resources. The County is currently undertaking a sustainability audit and plan creation for their internal operations. Areas to address environmental sustainability for parks, open space, and trails include water conservation, green infrastructure and energy conservation. The County has adopted philosophies towards sustainability, placing equal value and importance on environmental protection, social responsibility, and fiscal management. This will be reflected in the master plan.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Understanding the extent and potential magnitude of climate change impacts provides the County with future-thinking opportunities to plan for and make reasonable decisions in both adapting to and mitigating these climate impacts. Anticipating the coming climate changes will allow the County to prioritize applicable adaptation strategies to ensure community members are able to continue to enjoy a high quality of life as environmental challenges are magnified. At the

same time, by recognizing the impacts of high versus low emissions scenarios, Adams County can take steps to reduce the future impacts by focusing on greenhouse gas emissions reduction mitigation strategies and other practical measures to minimize negative impacts proactively.

WATER RESOURCE PROTECTION

Water resource protection is important in Adams County for providing critical wildlife habitats, maintaining a balanced stormwater runoff system at a regional scale, buffering development impacts, and protecting floodplains for flood control.

Waterways provide opportunities for public use and experiences. This plan will outline ways to protect water resources, limit excessive water use, and implement low-water landscaping opportunities.

Livability

ARTS, CULTURE, EVENTS AND PROGRAMS

Adams County is dedicated to the growth and evolution of the arts, with a vision to be an inclusive community where everyone can enjoy a rich diversity of arts and cultural experiences. The opportunity exists to integrate arts and culture into all aspects of parks, open space and trail-planning through intentional public art installations and cultural events. In doing so, citizens feel connected and included in public spaces, a sense of place is defined, amenities are visually attractive, and

experiences are diverse and build community -- all contributing to overall quality of life.

DIVERSE RECREATION NEEDS

Special opportunities and challenges exist within the county for outdoor recreation. The county is culturally and linguistically diverse, and residents are enthusiastic about outdoor recreation in many forms. The senior population desires outdoor experiences that go beyond walking, while youth are looking for specialized play experiences including connecting with nature and inclusive and accessible environments. Self-directed recreation is increasing in popularity. Nature based activities such as birdwatching, fishing, and nature exploration are seeing an increase in participation. Trails and regional connections are critical to the population for both recreation and transportation. This plan identifies a goal to ensure all residents have close-to-home access to places for recreation in order to connect the population to fitness and nature experiences.

FOOD ACCESS AND AGRICULTURAL SUPPORT

Agriculture has historically been an economic staple for the County and provides the rural atmosphere character that residents associate with. Utilizing open space funds to preserve working farms, ranches

and agrarian lands is critical in both preserving this rural character and traditions of the county, but it is also important in filling gaps in food access that may exist for some populations. The Historic Splendid Valley planning work has set up a framework for highlighting some of the county's agricultural resources. The County endeavors to promote and support the local food economy through strengthening the public's awareness of the local food system, educating youth, and celebrating the county's rich heritage and resources.

REGIONALISM

Collaboration across the regional landscape that Adams County sits within is important to furthering objectives within this master plan. Working with local agencies, adjacent counties, and regional entities creates a cooperative setting for which to support big visions, programming and budgetary efficiencies, environmental stewardship, and connect trail corridors. Existing efforts include the South Platte River Coalition, Clear Creek Coalition, E-470 Trail connection planning, and considerations for connecting Riverdale Regional Park to the National Western with a multi-purpose trail that supports equestrian use.