

Date: Wednesday, May 15, 2024
Time: 6:00 PM
Location: Hybrid: In-Person, Hearing Room, 1st Floor, 200 West Oak Street, Fort Collins or Virtual, Zoom link -

PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES

The Larimer County Planning Commission met in the Hearing Room as well as virtually by Zoom video at 6:00 p.m., on Wednesday, May 15, 2024, at which time the following business was transacted.

Board Members Present: Bob Choate, Patrick Rowe, Conor Duffy, Jon Slutsky, and Shelby King.

Staff Present: Jenny Axmacher, Planning Manager; Justin Currie, Planner II; Steven Rothwell, Civil Engineer II; Lea Schnieder, Environmental Health Planner; Christine Luckasen, Assistant County Attorney I; and Christina Scrutchins, Recording Secretary.

AMENDMENTS TO THE AGENDA

None.

Jenny Axmacher addressed a notice issue regarding the discussion agenda item for the City of Loveland Skyline Trailhead & Trail Location and Extent. File No. 24-ZONE3633. A typo in the neighborhood notices incorrectly stated the location as Laporte instead of Loveland. Despite the typo, the newspaper notice, website linked in the original notice had the correct information. The item was re-noticed to the neighbors with the correct location.

COMMENTS BY THE PUBLIC REGARDING THE COUNTY LAND USE CODE OR REGARDING OTHER RELEVANT LAND USE MATTERS NOT ON THE AGENDA OR FUTURE PROPOSALS

None.

APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES

Commissioner Rowe moved that the Planning Commission adopt the following Resolution: BE IT RESOLVED that the Planning Commission approve the April 10, 2024, minutes of the Larimer County Planning Commission. Commissioner Duffy seconded the motion. Motion carried (5-0).

Commissioner Duffy moved that the Planning Commission adopt the following Resolution: BE IT RESOLVED that the Planning Commission approve the April 17, 2024, minutes of the Larimer County Planning Commission. Commissioner King seconded the motion. Motion carried (5-0).

CONSENT ITEMS

ITEM #1 – LARIMER COUNTY CENTRAL DIVERSION CAMPUS LOCATION AND EXTENT, FILE NO. 24-ZONE3629

Applicants: Larimer County Solid Waste Department Alex Studee, Business Project Manager 5887 S. Taft Hill Rd. Fort Collins, CO 80526

Owners: Larimer County

Request: Location and Extent review for Larimer County Solid Waste to construct a Location and Extent for the Larimer County Central Diversion Campus on a 651-acre parcel. Previously approved under the title "Larimer County Central Transfer Station" in File No. 20-ZONE2682.

MOTION

Commissioner Rowe moved that the Planning Commission adopt the following Resolution: *BE IT RESOLVED* that the Planning Commission approve of the consent agenda. Commissioner Duffy seconded the motion. Motion carried (5-0).

DISCUSSION ITEMS

ITEM NO. 1 – CITY OF LOVELAND SKYLINE TRAILHEAD & TRAIL LOCATION AND EXTENT, FILE NO. 24-ZONE3633

The purpose of Location and Extent review is to determine if a public use, structure, or utility proposed in unincorporated Larimer County conforms with the adopted Comprehensive Plan. Location and Extent review is required for the Colorado Department of Transportation, County, municipal or school shops and yards, public schools, public roads, public parks, trails and trailheads, public ways, grounds and spaces, public buildings and structures and utilities, whether public or privately owned. In this case, a Location and Extent review is required because the proposed project is developing a new parking lot and access, trailhead and trail system. The proposed multi-use trail system may accommodate a variety of passive recreation uses such as hiking, wildlife viewing, trail running and mountain biking. The Skyline trail network is also proposed to connect to the Dakota Ridge property (separate project located within City of Loveland limits) and is proposed to include interpretive signage and stations throughout the natural area to convey information about the history, geology and natural features of the property. The new parking lot access onto Highway 34 will be aligned with the existing alignment of Rossum Drive and Highway 34 and will serve both the Skyline and Dakota Ridge properties. The parking lot may include 20-30 parking spaces, a vault restroom facility and seating amenities. This is one of two proposed parking areas that will serve the Skyline/Dakota Ridge Trail system with the other proposed parking area approximately 2 miles north with access from 43rd Street, located within City of Loveland jurisdiction. The long-range vision includes a regional recreational trail network connecting north to Prairie Ridge Natural Area and beyond. In addition to access and parking area improvements proposed by the City, per the applicant, the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) is requiring a small median along the Highway 34 right-of-way at the property access to provide a safe and controlled access into the trailhead site and neighboring properties. No public utilities are expected to serve this site. Fire protection services shall be provided by the City of Loveland Fire Department. The City of Loveland is committed to consistency with Larimer County's comprehensive plan, placing extra priority on rural development, natural resources, recreation, and watershed protection and enhancement. This project specifically will provide recreation opportunities for the community and adhere to regulations regarding the river corridor and its associated floodplain and floodway.

The applicant has provided information with respect to this proposal, which does not reveal any significant issues or conflicts. As long as the proposed parking lot and new access is constructed in a way that meets requirements of any State, County and local regulations, Staff finds that this proposal is consistent with the intent and purpose of the Larimer County Comprehensive Plan. The Development Services Team finds that this proposal, which includes a new parking lot, new access point off Highway 34, and trail network is consistent with the Larimer County Comprehensive Plan as noted above. The Development Services Team recommends Approval of the City of Loveland Skyline Trailhead Location and Extent, File #24-ZONE3633.

APPLICANTS PRESENTATION

Marika Kopp, Parks planner for the city of Loveland, discussed the Skyline National Area project. The project is located east of Devil's Backbone Open Space and north of Oxbow Natural Area. The plan includes a trailhead behind Jamoka Joe's coffee with shared access from Highway 34. The 170-acre property will have a paved parking area with 20-30 spaces, automatic gated access from dawn to dusk, a vault restroom, and 2.25 miles of

soft surface trails for hiking, trail running, and mountain biking. The project aims for future connectivity to Dakota Ridge Natural Area and will include a median installation along Highway 34 as per CDOT's access control plan. The project involves a shared access easement with Jamoka Joe's and Manassa property, with improvements funded by the city. Public engagement began in 2019, including open houses and online comments. Marika emphasized the importance of neighbor relations and provided contact information for further queries. The project's goals align with the Larimer County comprehensive plan, emphasizing inclusive opportunities, community health, environmental stewardship, land conservation, and biodiversity. Specific policies focus on sustaining high ecological value lands, prioritizing land conservation, and accommodating recreational uses. The Skyline property serves as a community separator between urban Loveland and rural county development. The project supports healthy ecosystems, safe recreation opportunities, and connectivity to natural areas, addressing the growing demand due to nearby residential developments.

Contact Information: Marika Kopp, email: Marika.kopp@cityofloveland.org, phone: 970-962-2478.

PLANNING COMMISSION, STAFF, AND APPLICANT COMMENTS

Commissioner Duffy expressed concerns about the adequacy of the proposed 20-30 space parking lot for the Skyline National Area project, given the expected growth and potential for high usage, especially on crowded weekends. He questioned if the size was sufficient and inquired about the necessity of a traffic study. Steven Rothwell confirmed that a traffic impact study would be required during the Technical Review phase. Marika Kopp explained that the parking trailhead area is specifically designed to support the Skyline Natural Area and emphasized efforts to prevent traffic and parking issues in nearby neighborhoods by installing fencing, gates, and signs to discourage parking in residential areas. She mentioned that future connections to Dakota Ridge will have separate parking areas to alleviate pressure. Brian Harding, Planning Manager with Loveland Parks and Rec, elaborated that the Skyline property is part of a larger plan, with another parking area at the northern terminus (Dakota Ridge). He noted that the public engagement process revealed neighborhood concerns about additional parking in Namaqua Hills, leading to the decision to limit parking areas to the north and south. This strategy aims to prevent overwhelming the site by not providing excessively large parking facilities, thereby maintaining an appropriate scale and scope for the property, which is smaller compared to nearby areas like Devil's Backbone. Harding emphasized that the site's design is intended to offer a unique hiking and mountain biking experience while keeping visitor numbers manageable to preserve the natural environment and neighborhood tranquility.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Robert Ashley, John Lee, Shari Vines, Michael Lang, and Lisa Lee

Comments

- Parking facilities would provide access to popular trails and recreational areas, enhancing outdoor activities for the community.
- Potential for increased connectivity between trails, creating a more integrated trail system.
- Automatic gates could help manage and monitor entry and exit, potentially reducing unauthorized access and misuse.
- Reduced Urban Development:
- Preference for a parking lot over residential development, which could be more disruptive to the existing community.
- Opportunity for residents to provide input and feedback on the project, fostering community engagement.
- The plan includes viewing areas, enhancing the recreational experience for visitors.
- Increased traffic in the area, particularly near residential neighborhoods, could lead to congestion and safety issues, including accidents.

- Concerns about the impact on existing traffic patterns, especially with proposed changes to access routes.
- The history of crime in nearby parks raises concerns about the potential for similar issues in the new parking area.
- Questions about whether local enforcement agencies have the resources to manage increased activity and potential criminal elements.
- Proximity of trails and viewing areas to residential properties could infringe on residents' privacy and potentially lower property values.
- Trails coming close to private properties might lead to residents feeling uncomfortable with the lack of seclusion.
- Potential negative effects on local wildlife, including disruption of deer birthing areas and other animal habitats.
- Concerns about litter and interaction between the public and wildlife, which could lead to harm to animals and ecological imbalances.
- Residents feel that their previous feedback was not adequately addressed or incorporated into the planning process.
- Desire for more opportunities for public input before final implementation of the project.
- Need for effective signage and infrastructure to manage the increased foot and vehicular traffic.
- Maintenance of the area, including managing trash and ensuring the safety and cleanliness of the environment, particularly concerning wildlife interaction.

APPLICANT'S REBUTTLE

Brian Harding began the meeting by introducing himself along with Marika Kop and Marilyn Hilgenberg, the Open Lands and Trails Manager for the city of Loveland. He explained their roles and the purpose of the discussion, emphasizing the core mission of the Open Lands and Trails division: conservation of properties, habitats, and wildlife. He acknowledged the need to balance public access with conservation, highlighting that public access and taxpayer funding are essential for the conservation efforts. Harding then discussed the specific property in question, located north of Dakota Ridge. This property was initially slated for private development with five-acre lots. The city of Loveland had the opportunity to pull this property out of private development to conserve it in perpetuity. The management plan for this property includes detailed environmental and habitat studies to protect wildlife and breeding areas. The trail system has been significantly reduced from the original plan to avoid critical habitat areas. Some areas of the property are designated as no-touch zones to ensure their conservation. Marilyn Hilgenberg took over to explain the patrolling and management of the property. Since the property is in Larimer County, the sheriff's office has primary jurisdiction, with Loveland PD serving as a secondary responder, especially concerning homeless encampments. Over the past five years, the city of Loveland has developed a robust system to address homeless encampments, reducing the number from about 100 camps to one or two per week. These are promptly reported and cleaned up. Brian Harding resumed the discussion, touching on the challenges of managing properties not yet open to the public. These properties are difficult to patrol without developed trail systems and parking areas. However, the Skyline property will have regular patrols by Larimer County Rangers and staff from the Open Lands division. Public engagement and feedback play a crucial role in the development process, which includes several phases such as acquisition, planning, and the creation of a management plan. The public engagement process for this property began in 2019-2020, including meetings and site walks to gather input and address concerns from neighbors. The trail access and usage were also discussed. Harding highlighted that the trail layout has been adjusted based on public feedback to minimize impact on nearby residences. The plan includes walk-in access points to encourage neighbors to use the trails without driving, promoting health and community engagement. The management plan is designed to balance maintenance, conservation, and neighborhood relations. Marika Kop emphasized the importance of wildlife and habitat preservation in the management plan. Detailed studies were conducted to understand the habitat needs of species like mule deer and to ensure minimal fragmentation. The trail locations were chosen based on considerations of maintenance, constructability, resource conservation, and neighborhood impact. Communication with the public was a key point addressed by Kop. She acknowledged that online information

might not be sufficient and stressed the importance of getting the word out to neighbors. She encouraged neighborhood representatives to help disseminate information and directed everyone to the city's website for detailed information about the management plan and public feedback. Harding also addressed potential future plans and challenges. He mentioned the possibility of connecting the Loud Ditch Road to Devil's Backbone Open Space but noted the concerns from nearby residents and the management differences between properties. Ensuring that the Skyline property is not overwhelmed by traffic and maintaining cooperation with the Loud Ditch Company are ongoing challenges. In conclusion, Marilyn Hilgenberg and Marika Kop expressed their gratitude for the neighbors' engagement and emphasized that local residents would be the primary users and beneficiaries of these open lands. They reiterated their commitment to continued conversations and feedback, aiming to create a balanced and well-managed open space that conserves wildlife and habitats while providing recreational opportunities for the community.

PLANNING COMMISSION AND APPLICANT COMMENTS:

Commissioner Duffy raised a question regarding the automatic gate and security measures for ensuring visitor compliance and safety at the property. Marilyn Hilgenberg provided details on the security protocols in place. The automatic gates, similar to those used at State wildlife areas, close at a designated time (e.g., 8 o'clock) to restrict nighttime traffic. Importantly, these gates can still be opened from the inside to allow visitors to exit if they are inside the property after closing. Additionally, Marilyn mentioned the installation of solar-powered cameras across most of their open lands' properties. These cameras are monitored by a service throughout the night, providing real-time alerts if any unauthorized activity is detected, such as someone entering after hours. The monitoring service can even use the cameras to communicate verbally with intruders, informing them that they are not permitted on the property and that law enforcement is being notified, effectively deterring trespassing. To further ensure safety and compliance, Marilyn highlighted the presence of rangers who regularly patrol the area. Combined with security fencing and other measures, these efforts aim to protect both the wildlife and the neighboring community, addressing concerns about unauthorized access and nighttime disturbances effectively.

PLANNING COMMISSION DISCUSSION

Commissioner Chair Choate expressed support for the project, emphasizing that their role is to assess whether it aligns with the comprehensive plan rather than specific land use criteria. They noted their involvement in developing the comprehensive plan and affirmed that the project aligns with its intent, as described by the applicant and Mr. Currie. Choate mentioned living nearby and personally experiencing wildlife concerns, including their dog surviving a bear encounter, which underscored the importance of addressing legitimate community concerns. Choate encouraged continued engagement with Marika, who provided her direct contact information for further discussions. They mentioned the upcoming technical review by county professional staff to ensure the project's quality, highlighting previous successful projects by the city of Loveland. Based on the information presented and the project's alignment with the comprehensive plan, Choate confirmed their intention to vote in favor of approving the Location and Extent.

Commissioner Rowe echoed Choate's sentiments, appreciating the community participation and the productive dialogue during the meeting. They also indicated their support for the project based on its compliance with the Location and Extent evaluation criteria. Both commissioners expressed confidence in the project and its positive impact on the community, reflecting a consensus among the commission members towards approving the proposal.

MOTION

Commissioner Duffy moved that the Planning Commission adopt the following Resolution: BE IT RESOLVED that the Planning Commission approve the City of Loveland Skyline Trailhead & Trail Location and Extent, File No. 24-ZONE3633, subject to the conditions of approval outlined in the staff report. Commissioner Slutsky seconded the motion. Motion carried (5-0).

REPORT FROM STAFF

Jenny Axmacher announced two important updates: Firstly, the June Planning Commission (PC) meeting is canceled in observance of the Juneteenth holiday. Discussions are ongoing regarding the possibility of scheduling a special meeting to replace it, with further updates to follow. Secondly, there will be a joint work session in June involving both the Planning Commission and the Board of County Commissioners (BCC). This session aims to foster collaboration and facilitate discussions between the two bodies. Axmacher's announcements provided clarity on scheduling changes and highlighted upcoming opportunities for coordinated efforts between the PC and the BCC.

ADJOURN

With there being no further business, the hearing adjourned at 7:34 p.m.

These minutes constitute the Resolution of the Larimer County Planning Commission for the recommendations contained herein which are hereby certified to the Larimer County Board of Commissioners.