

Adopted June 29, 2010



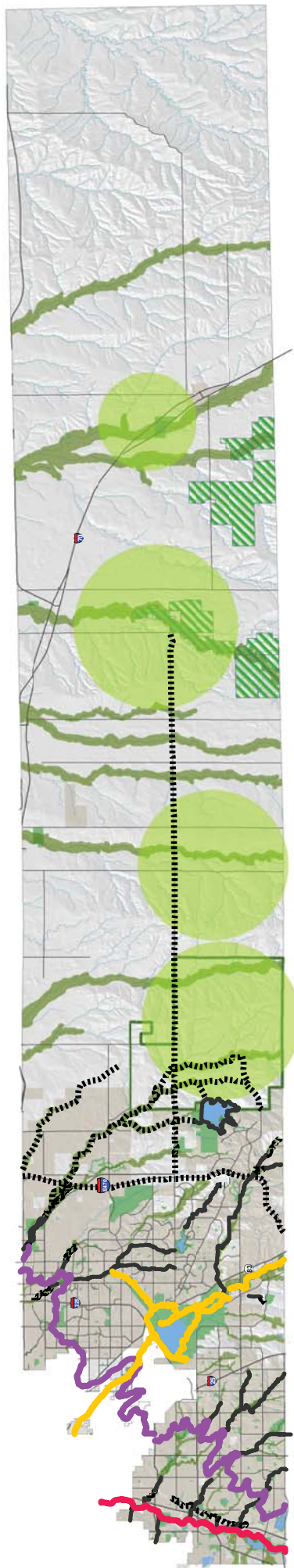
# ARAPAHOE COUNTY OPEN SPACE MASTER PLAN

*Executive Summary of Final Master Plan Report*



Prepared by Greenways Incorporated

# Arapahoe County: Open Space System



*Close the Gaps*

*Plan for the Future*

*Conserve our Heritage*

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— Cherry Creek Trail

— High Line Canal Trail

— S. Platte River Greenway

..... Priority Regional Trails -Proposed

— Priority Regional Trails-Existing

■ Open Space Focus Areas

■ Open Space Opportunity Corridors

□ Lowry Range

▨ Easements and Protected Areas

■ Parks and Open Space



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## OVERVIEW

Open space is natural infrastructure which provides vital aesthetic, recreational, and wildlife habitat benefits; facilitates the critical functions of watershed and water quality protection, flood hazard reduction and food production; and contributes to the livability of the community. The Arapahoe County Open Space program began in November 2003 with the passage of Question 1A: Water, Wildlife, Open Space, Trails and Neighborhood Park measure, which established a quarter of a penny sales tax (for every dollar spent countywide on taxable sales) to fund the Program. The purpose of the Program is to *“preserve urban and rural open space and natural lands; protect the land that preserves water quality in rivers, lakes and streams; provide, maintain and improve neighborhood parks, open space, sports fields, picnic facilities, and biking, walking and multiuse trails; protect wildlife habitat and corridors; protect views, vistas and ridgelines; preserve agricultural and ranch lands; and enhance and maintain designated heritage areas.”*

This Master Plan builds upon the successful accomplishments of the Arapahoe County Open Space Program since passage of the November 2003 ballot initiative. This Plan documents these accomplishments, recommends balanced investments in both natural resource protection and public access, and defines a program of action that will enable Arapahoe County and its partners to meet the open space, park and trail needs of residents in the coming years and to build a foundation for generations to come.

## VISION

This Open Space Master Plan provides a 100-year vision, 25-year master plan and 5-year action plan for implementing the purpose and goals of the Program. The 100-year vision for Arapahoe County’s open space program is simple yet encompassing. It states that the County will be forward thinking, understand and embrace the open space, park and trail needs of current residents, and define a harmonious relationship between people and nature in the County for future generations. The vision for the Program is summarized as: **Healthy Lands, Healthy Communities, Healthy People.**

**Healthy Lands** – the open space system protects and maintains diverse, highly valued natural and heritage landscapes through an array of conservation strategies and is supported by sustainable land management practices designed to protect the natural functions and health of these lands.

**Healthy Communities** – the open space system supports a vibrant economy, improves the County’s distinctive quality of life, property values and ensures that Arapahoe County remains “The County of Choice” for businesses, families and retirees by providing an interconnected network of open space, parks and trails.

**Healthy People** – the open space system strives to provide high quality and safe access to passive and active recreation lands and waters for regular physical activity that promotes public health, sense of place, and fitness through a high level of citizen participation and a sense of “ownership” of these amenities.

## MISSION

The mission of the Arapahoe County Open Space program is to “*protect Arapahoe County’s treasured parks, trails and open space for residents to enjoy today and forever.*” To accomplish the program’s mission, the County will acquire, conserve, protect and steward strategic land and water resources necessary to establish an interconnected network of open space, parks and trails. The County and its municipal, state, federal, non-profit, private sector, and park and recreation district partners will continue to work together to accomplish the vision and mission of the program. This partnership protects the vast natural resources found within Arapahoe County while meeting the open space needs of its citizens in both incorporated and unincorporated areas.

## NEED FOR OPEN SPACE THROUGHOUT ARAPAHOE COUNTY

Arapahoe County has experienced sustained and sometimes rapid growth and land development during the past three decades and is poised to grow steadily during the next twenty-five years. Conservative estimates project a doubling of the population by 2035. In order to meet the demands that accompany increased population and the consumption of land for the built environment, this Open Space Plan recommends the County take proactive steps to conserve and protect vital open space resources – defined as “*green infrastructure*” – that will ensure an adequate supply of natural landscapes, parks and trails to meet future needs, shape new development patterns and define a quality living environment for future generations.

Residents of Arapahoe County have consistently voiced both their concern and their need for protected and conserved open space. During the master planning process, a statistically valid survey was conducted to determine open space needs of county residents. The needs identified by respondents as most important, in terms of open space facilities, are more trails and an interconnected network of trails. Residents also identified as important the need to protect water quality, to preserve urban and rural open space, to protect wildlife corridors and to preserve farm and ranch lands and the practice of agriculture in the rural eastern plains of Arapahoe County. These needs and values are consistent with those that were part of the ballot initiative passed in November 2003.

In addition to the survey, public open house workshops were conducted, an on-line comment form was made available to residents, electronic newsletters describing the planning process were distributed, one-on-one stakeholder meetings were completed, and a specially constituted master plan steering committee was convened to assist in the preparation of this Plan. The input, data and responses gathered from this extensive public participation process helped to reach informed conclusions that are defined within this Plan, and verified the substantial need for, and benefit of, the Arapahoe County Open Space Program.

## FRAMEWORK FOR THE ARAPAHOE COUNTY OPEN SPACE

Arapahoe County is not uniformly one landscape from east to west. County residents refer to an “east and west” culture, with the west being predominantly more developed and urban, and the east being rural and less populated. For the purpose of this Open Space Master Plan, the framework for implementing the Program vision and mission recognizes three distinct districts of the County: western, middle and eastern.

The focus for the western third of the County is placed on “closing gaps” in the existing open space, parks and trails system to meet current and future needs of residents. For the middle third of the County, where future land development is now occurring, the goal is to establish a “greenprint” comprised of conserved land and water resources, as well as an interconnected network of parks, designated heritage areas and trails, in order to define a framework for accommodating growth. The eastern third will remain predominantly rural during the next twenty-five years, and as such, the County will work with rural landowners and communities to conserve land and water resources to ensure a viable rural lifestyle and enable landowners who wish to continue farm and ranching activities.

## OPEN SPACE SYSTEM

Arapahoe County's open space consists of a diverse set of landscapes that encompass the resource conservation needs and desires of county residents. These landscapes include: the scenic backdrop of the mountains and high plains, beyond the boundaries of Arapahoe County, and the riparian corridors, native grasslands, farm and ranch lands, parks, and heritage landscapes within Arapahoe County. This system, when taken as a whole, defines a "greenprint" for the County and provides a natural resource framework to meet the outdoor recreation needs of residents, to guide future growth and development, and to ensure that important native lands and water are conserved and protected.

- Open space facilities, owned and managed by Arapahoe County and its partners, are linked together through "hubs and spokes" that connect open space, parks and trails to landscapes where County residents live and work.
- A system of interconnected open space and trails is envisioned as a major outcome of this master plan effort.

In the unincorporated areas, the role of Arapahoe County is to serve as leader and champion of the Open Space Program and to identify suitable lands and waterways for conservation, protection, acquisition, and where applicable, provide facility development.

There are four major components of Arapahoe County's owned and managed open space system:

- Open space parks
- Open space corridors
- Heritage landscapes
- Regional trails

The County's role is also to provide stewardship for open space parks, open space corridors, heritage landscapes and regional trails throughout these unincorporated areas.

In the populated and incorporated portions of the County, the role of the Open Space Program is to implement a shared vision for open space, parks and trails in cooperation with municipalities, park and recreation districts, as well as state, federal, non-profit and private sector partners. The Open Space Program will balance investments across the entire County.

## STEWARDSHIP OF OPEN SPACE

As Arapahoe County moves forward with a purposeful and progressive open space program, it will be necessary for County government to assume a leadership position with respect to stewardship of open space resources and to work in collaboration with local, state and federal agencies and non-governmental organizations to implement this program. As new lands are acquired, the County will prepare management plans that define the type and level of management, public access objectives, infrastructure and costs necessary to provide a high level of stewardship to open space resources.

## IMPLEMENTATION

Implementing the recommendations within this Open Space Master Plan will require continued leadership on the part of Arapahoe County, a dedication to responsible preservation of important natural resources, and strengthening of partnerships between the County and other public and private sector stakeholders.

The County Open Space Program will make efficient use of funding and other resources to achieve balanced investments in the Open Space Program, as defined within this Master Plan. The County firmly believes that an investment in open space yields multiple benefits for county residents in the form of improved access to the outdoors, clean air, clean water, an efficient transportation system, a healthy ecosystem, and a vibrant economy. Indeed, experience locally and throughout the nation confirms that for every \$1 invested in open space conservation and protection, there will be \$3 in benefit to the community in the form of infrastructure savings (such as water supply and flood hazard reduction), economic development and other tangible results – making the Open Space Program one of the best investments that the County will make in determining a sustainable future.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1) *Plan, design, develop and steward an integrated system of open space, parks and trails.*

Goals for the Unincorporated Arapahoe County (County is leader and champion with help of partners)

- **Acquire, Conserve and Protect Open Space:** The County should continue to work with willing landowners, municipal, and park and recreation district partners, the State of Colorado, federal agencies and non-profit organizations to acquire, conserve and protect open spaces in accordance with the recommendations of this plan.
- **Build County Open Space Parks and Trails:** As the County assembles land for new open space parks, open space corridors, regional trails and heritage landscapes, planning, design and improvements should be completed to bring these parks and trails on-line so that they serve the needs of residents.
- **Update the County's Regulatory Framework:** In order to implement the recommended "greenprint" for the middle and eastern portions of the County, a comprehensive review of existing land use development regulations, policies and incentives should be completed. Based on this review, the County should consider revisions and changes to its land use development codes that will support greenprint implementation.
- **Plan Countywide Trails Network:** The County should work with stakeholders and partners to prepare a detailed countywide trails and greenways network master plan that identifies corridors for an interconnected greenway system.

Goals for the Incorporated Arapahoe County (Partnering with municipalities and others)

- **Cooperative Partnership Work:** The County will work with municipal, state, federal, non-profit, private sector, and park and recreation district partners to identify, conserve, design and improve open spaces, parks and trails that return maximum benefit to county residents. Opportunities for partnership work are included in shareback funds and competitive grants. The County will also work with partners to identify, develop and implement regionally significant joint projects.
- **Leverage Funding for Open Space, Parks and Trails:** The County will work with its partners to efficiently use sales tax funds, and to leverage these funds, to achieve maximum public benefit.
- **Plan Countywide Trails Network:** The County should work with stakeholders and partners to prepare a detailed countywide trails network master plan that identifies corridors for an interconnected greenway system.

2) **Implement a Communications Plan:** Arapahoe County should build on efforts already underway to communicate the results of the open space program to County residents, partners and stakeholders.

3) **Reauthorize the Sales and Use Tax:** The County should work with its municipal and park and recreation district partners and residents to reauthorize the sales and use tax to fund open space program activities.

4) **Formalize Open Space Program:** Arapahoe County should formalize the Open Space Program, through the implementation of an organizational framework and assignment of duties and responsibilities for program management and implementation, subject to further consideration and approval by the Board of County Commissioners.

## ACTION STEPS

The following steps should be completed by Arapahoe County to implement the key recommendations of this Plan.

### Phase 1: FY 2010-2012

- Arapahoe County and its partners should adopt this master plan.
- Arapahoe County should also:
  - Formalize the Arapahoe County Open Space Program.
  - Complete data collection and mapping of shareback allocations.
  - Optimize investment of current revenues to implement timely open space, park and trail projects.
  - Balance funding priorities and investments across the County.
  - Implement the communications program recommendations.
  - Reauthorize the sales tax that funds the Open Space Program, subject to further review and approval by the Board of County Commissioners.
  - Build parks and trails on lands owned by the County.
  - Prepare countywide trails master plan.
  - Work with partners to identify, develop and implement regionally significant joint projects.
  - Work with the State Land Board to implement a conservation based strategy for the Lowry Range.
  - Update regulatory tools and codes.
  - Acquire, conserve and protect open space, park and trail lands and prepare management plans for newly acquired lands and parks.
  - Implement the “greenprint” for middle Arapahoe County.
  - Implement appropriate enhancements to Arapahoe County Fairgrounds & Regional Park and 17 Mile House Farm Park as identified in their respective site master plans.
  - Establish and implement a cost effective operations and management strategy.
  - Explore direction for improve cost effectiveness and efficiencies including cost center accounting for Open Space Program activities and facilities.
  - Prepare “Economic Benefits of Arapahoe County Open Space Program” report.
  - Publish annual reports.

### Phase 2: FY 2013-2017

- Implement the Countywide Trails Master Plan.
- Build parks and trails on lands owned by County.
- Acquire, conserve and protect open space, park and trail lands and prepare management plans for newly acquired lands and parks.
- Implement “greenprint” for eastern Arapahoe County.
- Update this master plan in FY 2015.
- Balance funding priorities and investments across the County.
- Implement appropriate Fairground enhancements as identified in the Fairgrounds master plan.
- Publish annual reports.

### Phase 3: FY 2018-2035

- Build parks and trails on lands owned by County.
- Acquire, conserve and protect open space, park and trail lands and prepare management plans for newly acquired lands and parks.
- Implement “greenprint” for eastern Arapahoe County.
- Update this master plan in FY 2020, 2025, 2030.
- Publish annual reports.

## CONCLUSION

This open space master plan provides Arapahoe County with the direction and tools necessary to conserve and protect valued and critically important native landscapes and natural resources. This plan enables the County to satisfy the intent of the November 2003 ballot initiative - to conserve and protect these resources in perpetuity and to establish a program of interconnected open space, parks and trails that serves the outdoor needs of County residents today and in the years to come. Finally, this plan provides a framework for implementing a progressive, proactive, balanced and functional Open Space Program. In carrying out the objectives of this plan, Arapahoe County will remain "The County of Choice," supporting a diverse system of open space, parks and trails, a vibrant economy, livable communities and sustainable growth and development.

