



Public Amenities Committee Summary

June 10, 2009

10:30 a.m.

Conference Room 391

Committee Members Present: Lehmann, Madison, Johnson

Other Council Present: None

Agenda: Overview of Denver's Natural Areas Program

Overview of Denver's Natural Areas Program Managed by the Department of Parks & Recreation

Kevin Patterson, Manager of Parks & Recreation; Scott Robson, Deputy Manager for Parks & Planning; Jude O'Conner, Director of Natural Resources/City Forester; Gayle Weinstein, City Naturalist; Susan Baird, Natural Resources Planner; and Jill Wuertz, Water Conservation Specialist, and the Committee discussed the Natural Areas Program.

Denver Revised Municipal Code Chapter 39 Article VIII, Natural Areas, provides the following definition of "natural area":

A geographical area of land of either geologic or biologic significance which retains, has been reestablished, or has the potential to reestablish many aspects of its natural character. Such an area could now or in the future support native vegetation, associated biological and geological features, or provide habitat for indigenous wildlife or plant species. Such an area could host geological, scenic or other natural features of scientific, aesthetic, or educational value.

- Denver's Natural Areas Program (NAP) began in 1997, but it is behind other large cities across the country. The Dept. is renewing its efforts.
- Within the urban park system, 1800 acres (30%) are maintained as natural areas.
- The goal is to return suitable land to as near its natural condition as possible.
- A common misconception is that "natural area" means "no maintenance, no water".
- NAP is important for environmental and economic sustainability:
 - No fertilizer: protects ground water and waterways; saves money.
 - Less frequent or no mowing: protects air quality & uses less fuel; saves money.
 - Less water required: promotes water conservation; saves money.
 - Reduction or removal of non-native invasion and noxious weeds: protects native vegetation & utilizes goats, a highly sustainable method.
- One NAP goal is to remove/suppress non-native plant material. Many of these species are "noxious weeds", as legally defined in Colorado State law. Lack of natural predators

allows these species to crowd out native vegetation. State law requires the removal of many varieties of noxious weeds.

- Methods of controlling or removing them include steam, controlled burns or other high heat; grazing goats in impacted areas; introducing their natural enemies, such as insects; and application of herbicide in severe cases.
- Developing the Game Plan, the guiding document for Parks & Recreation, involved surveys of both park visitors and randomly identified residents, which tested the idea of protection of or re-establishment of natural areas. Forty-nine percent of respondents supported the idea. Water conservation ranked as highly important as well, and these two themes are complements of each other.
- Conversion to a stable natural area takes at least 3 years.
- Examples of conversions or restoration of natural prairie include portions of Babi Yar, Hensel, Bible, Parkfield Lake, Ruby Hill, and Southmoor parks.
- Examples of new parks largely designed as natural areas include Westerly Creek at Stapleton, Crescent Park at Lowry, City of Chennai, and portions of Commons Park.
- Natural areas need irrigation, just a different type on a different schedule, especially if trees are present.
- Many natural areas were identified as such because they are places difficult to mow and water – very steep areas, uneven or rocky surfaces, and under large evergreen trees.

Natural Area Program initiatives of Parks & Recreation:

- Incorporation in NAP of several remnant and orphan parcels, which are generally small, vacant parcels owned by the City (or other entities that do not maintain them) and were constant maintenance problems.
- Merged the Dept's Natural Areas District with the River & Trails District, which includes many acres of natural areas along waterways, creating efficiencies.
- Prepared a Natural Areas Master Plan identifying potential areas and parcels, which exist across the City.
- Prepared maintenance maps which highlight areas to be mowed once a week, once a month or never, making it easier for maintenance crews to know where to mow when.
- Prepared hydro zone maps based on plant types; different zones have different watering systems and schedules.
- Working on public information & education campaign; hold public meetings when a Natural Area designation is proposed; schedule nature talks and walks.

Comments from Committee:

- In order to be successful, education about the importance of natural areas has to start with the school children who can then explain why some pretty flowers are noxious.
- Several people converting yards to xeric plantings, and this helps the neighbors understand that the first year or so it will be kind of bleak but then it can be gorgeous.
- Natural Areas need interpretive signage explaining what is happening and why. Especially need to identify the "before" and "after" portions.
- Perhaps RTD could be tapped for signage funds for Lakewood Gulch as that light rail corridor is constructed.
- Take the Council Members on a short tour of the Natural Areas in their districts.