A revitalized natural open-space system stretches from the mountain parks west of Denver to the prairies in the east. This results from extensive cooperation among governments throughout the region. Trails along waterways and gulches connect the entire system. Natural and cultural areas and facilities are preserved, restored, and celebrated.

This chapter presents a discussion and recommendations for a regional approach that encompasses Denver’s mountain parks and prairie landscapes.
FRONT RANGE CONNECTIONS

Denver’s urban natural areas are an important part of our parks and recreation system, but they also form the center of a regional system that extends from mountains to plains. Denver’s parks and natural areas embrace many kinds of landscapes and sites, from Summit Lake near the top of Mount Evans to remnant sand hills at the former Stapleton Airport. Prairies and mountain parks are the “bookends” of Denver’s park system, embracing five ecosystems across 100 miles.

These mostly natural landscapes also contain rich cultural features, such as the historic buildings and sites in the mountain parks. This dramatic range of resources extends the City in a Park well beyond city limits.

As the Front Range population nears 3 million, Denver’s role as the hub in a regional system of trails, natural areas, and mountain parks becomes more complex and important. The Game Plan poses three broad ideas to link resources into a regional system: regional connections, a regional approach to natural areas and wildlife, and a contemporary vision for Denver mountain parks.

REGIONAL CONNECTIONS

Green Streets guide people from their front door to the neighborhood park. Regional trails, often paralleling waterways in a way that protects wildlife habitat, can connect people to the rest of the Front Range. The potential exists for hundreds of miles of regional trails. If developed as a regional parkway, even E-470 could become part of an open space system.

Regional Connection Recommendations

1. Strengthen regional planning and preservation efforts in the following ways:
   - Refine criteria for protection and use of regional open space.
   - Develop management guidelines to minimize the impacts of public access.
GAME PLAN — creating a strategy for our future

CHAPTER 5 — Regional context: from mountains to plains

Existing and Proposed Regional Trail Systems
• Identify priority corridors and areas needing protection or preservation, including:
  ▶ the Cherry Creek Corridor
  ▶ First, Second and Third Creeks
  ▶ Westerly Creek
  ▶ Eastern drainage ways connecting Aurora Reservoir with Rocky Mountain Arsenal
  ▶ Additional open-space lands that connect mountain open spaces, creating a cohesive system and opportunities for regional trails.

2. Develop a comprehensive regional trail system.
• Complete the Clear Creek segment connection through Northwest Denver.

• Identify potential regional trail corridors that could be developed collaboratively with Jefferson, Douglas, Adams, Boulder, and Arapaho counties.
• Create a prairie hiking/cycling loop, linking the eastern edge of High Line Canal to Aurora Reservoir and the Plains Conservation Center, eventually connecting to Sand Creek Regional Greenway.
• Work with other counties to complete Bear Creek Trail, linking Jefferson County Open Space parks (Bear Creek, Mt. Falcon, Lair O’the Bear) to Denver Mountain Parks (Little, O’Fallon) and west to Echo Lake.

## REGIONAL NATURAL SYSTEMS AND WILDLIFE

Denver residents want more “bits of wilderness” close to home, expanding the current remnants of the “original” Denver—the existing 2,500 plus acres of high plains, rivers, creeks, willows, sage, and prairie meadows within the city. Like people in other cities, Denverites are beginning to define public “parks” differently, no longer regarding remnant natural areas as left-behind, cast off lands, but as important enriching places for people and wildlife.

As Denver becomes a City in a Park, the lush green of formal spaces with street trees and bluegrass lawns should be complemented by the sage greens of the high plains.

Thriving restored native areas benefit our parks and opens spaces and:
are valued by people of Denver as wildlife habitat, for wildlife viewing, and as a quiet place for retreat.
- help conserve precious resources, requiring less water, for example.
- support long-term environmental and human health (native landscapes require little or no pesticides or herbicides, and help clean pollutants from stormwater runoff).
- promote a richer variety of urban wildlife, including birds and butterflies.
- give people an opportunity to experience the region’s original high plains and foothills landscapes.
- help support a sustainable park and recreation system through cost savings.
- increase adjacent land values.

In the 2001 Game Plan Survey, 46 percent of respondents rated the city’s provision of habitat areas for wildlife as fair or poor. Yet when asked how important it was for the city to acquire land for more conservation areas and wildlife habitat, more respondents (53 percent) chose this over 12 other choices. (Improving maintenance of existing parks and facilities in the city and in the mountains headed the list. Nearly 90 percent of all respondents consider that a major or moderate priority.)

Almost 80 percent of respondents considered acquiring natural areas either a major or moderate priority. And when asked to develop priorities for DPR’s budget, survey respondents said a top priority was acquiring land for conservation areas.

The Front Range’s trails and other natural resources continue past city limits. Flood control, water-quality protection, and water supplies are all managed at a watershed level, and Denver communities are connected by drainage ways and constructed ditches. Noxious weeds, diseases of forest trees, and wildfires recognize no boundaries. The metropolitan area’s natural resources function as a nonpolitical regional system. Urban natural areas, mountain parks, drainage systems (and the amenities associated with them, such as trails) consequently are a logical place to begin regional planning.

Future growth projections suggest that residents increasingly will use and value these connected urban natural areas. Surveys conducted in 2001 in Denver Mountain Parks and Jefferson County Open Space Parks indicate that the heavily used mountain parks within Jefferson County serve the whole metropolitan area, and may be as close as many people get to the mountains in the future.
Recommendations for Regional Natural Systems and Wildlife

1. Support DPR’s Natural Areas Program and metrowide efforts to develop a regional model for planning, funding, and managing the Front Range’s natural areas and trails.
   - Strengthen DPR’s organizational capacity, and develop staff and public respect for natural areas and wildlife through the following actions:
     - Elevate the new Natural Resource Unit to senior staff level.
     - Add staff to the Natural Areas Program.
     - Build partnerships with other city agencies to leverage resources, create programs, and monitor successes.
     - Provide staff training in management and benefits of natural areas.
     - Develop public and city staff understanding and appreciation for open-space natural areas and wildlife in their natural habitats.
     - Promote youth programs and access to natural areas.
     - Create guidelines for citywide and DPR decisions that reinforce the value of natural preserves, wildlife habitat, and environmental quality.
     - Require the city naturalist to approve plans for new parks and private developments that include natural areas.

2. Implement the strategic plan for the Natural Areas Program encompassing all natural open-space lands.
   - Complete a master plan for natural areas as an ecological whole, including mountain parks and naturalized areas within traditional parks.
   - Identify potential natural areas and buffers, and initiate a phased program of land acquisition, easements, and partnerships.
   - Establish a relationship with a land trust to assist in quickly acquiring critical land threatened by development.
   - Support efforts of DPR and other regional jurisdictions and agencies to identify potential buffer and expansion areas in the mountains.
   - Establish natural areas in new developments, such as Lowry, Stapleton, and Northeast Denver.
   - Restore degraded sites and monitor impacts.
   - Bring public parklands in Denver County into compliance with the Colorado Noxious Weed Act.
   - Develop conservation areas in each quadrant of the city.
   - Create management guidelines for each classification of natural area to balance impacts of recreation and public access.
   - Tie stormwater quality and storage goals into natural areas.
3. Provide a richer environment for wildlife.
- Improve the balance and variety of ecosystems for healthy wildlife populations.
- Inventory and monitor wildlife within the city and the mountain parks.
- Chart increases in quantity and diversity.
- Develop a hierarchy of areas that provides a range of human access and interaction with wildlife.

4. Strengthen inter-jurisdictional relationships and joint ventures.
- Develop stronger partnerships and encourage more regional cooperation by working with the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG), Urban Drainage and Flood Control District (UDFCD), CDW, the Colorado Lottery, and Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), public land-management agencies, land trusts, other municipalities, and regional agencies.
- Support efforts to develop a regional mechanism for planning, funding, and managing regional natural open space.
- Pursue grants and funding ventures for inter-jurisdictional projects.
- Work toward reducing regional hazards such as wildfires, noxious weeds, and other mandated standards.
- Pursue acquisition and easement opportunities for expansions that benefit Denver and other jurisdictions, such as along the Cherry Creek Corridor.
- Support regional efforts to reduce light pollution and darken Denver’s skies.

A NEW VISION FOR MOUNTAIN PARKS

One of the Denver parks system’s unique elements is our mountain parks and scenic drives in Jefferson, Douglas, and Clear Creek Counties. Denver also owns Winter Park Ski Area in Grand County. In addition to spectacular scenery, the system features many historic sites, such as Red Rocks Amphitheatre and Trading Post, Chief Hosa Lodge and Campground, Pahaska Teepee, Buffalo Bill Grave, and Echo Lake Lodge.

Many striking stone structures, designed by the National Park Service as well as by prominent Denver architects, are located throughout the parks. In the 1970s, Denver
built a museum on Lookout Mountain to interpret the Buffalo Bill legacy.

In the early 1900s, business and civic leaders envisioned creating the loop of parks and scenic drives in Jefferson County as a mountain retreat for the people of Denver. In 1914, the renowned landscape architecture firm of Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., completed a plan for an extensive system of looped roads and parks. Inaccessible parcels were to be preserved for their views or for watershed or wildlife protection.

Of the original 40,000 acres the Olmsted firm identified for acquisition, Denver purchased 8,100 acres in Jefferson County. [The remainder of Denver Mountain Park acreage is in parks located in Douglas, Clear Creek, and Grand Counties (Winter Park).] Decades later, Jefferson County purchased another 30,200 acres for its open space.

The Mountain Parks system was well designed, constructed, and maintained until the 1950s, when the loss of its dedicated mill levy sent the system into a spiral of deferred capital maintenance and decline. Funding for Mountain Parks remains a critical issue.

Neighboring mountain-open-space systems have dedicated funding sources that ensure a higher level of care, as shown in the Open Space sidebar box on this page. In 2001-2002, the financial future of Winter Park also became the topic of scrutiny. Denver assured its future with a new public/private partnership.

The small Mountain Park’s staff has worked hard and creatively to maintain a high level of daily maintenance for this extensive system, which includes two bison and elk herds. However, long-deferred capital repairs like upgrades for roads, buildings, and utility systems have outpaced the budget, creating a crisis for some of the system’s larger structures.

A 2001 architectural assessment revealed $1.5 million needed in immediate repairs to prevent serious code violations or public danger, and another $2.5 million to restore the key structures. This situation has compromised the ability of concessionaires to provide high-quality services and realize profits. It also suggests the degree of degradation to of these historic resources.

The system’s natural resources have been stressed by eight decades of hard use and inadequate funding. Some recreation areas along creeks, for example, are so compacted by foot traffic that no understory exists and trees are threatened. Funding is needed to protect the health of these natural resources. Without adequate funding, fire danger,
noxious weeds, and diseased timber can threaten adjacent lands.

The *Game Plan* process posed hard questions about the future of Mountain Parks. Given financial need, degraded conditions, growth, and changing leisure patterns of Denver residents, what is the role of our mountain parks today and in the future? Are they still vital to the parks and recreation system and our quality of life? Do Denver residents value and use them? How can the city balance the need to restore and protect natural, cultural, and historic resources with increasing public demand?

To study these issues and provide recommendations, at least for most of the system located in Jefferson County, DPR and Jefferson County staff recently completed a joint Mountain Park Recreation Management Plan, primarily funded by a Colorado Department of Local Affairs Smart Growth Grant. (An interpretive plan for the “Lariat Loop” was produced collaboratively at the same time.) Research, coupled with the extensive feedback from the *Game Plan* public process, strongly reaffirms of the importance of preserving natural open space and the mountain parks for Denver and the metropolitan area.

The 2001 Game Plan Survey showed 71 percent of Denverites visited one of the traditional mountain parks (excluding Red Rocks) at least once during the past year. One in five residents (20 percent) visited more than 10 times. Another 92 percent identified mountain parks as contributing to the quality of Denver’s park and recreation system, with 66 percent saying it was a major contribution.

At the June 2001 open houses, citizens ranked Denver’s regional mountain parks, natural areas, and trails a close second priority to green neighborhoods. Denverites also said they lacked the time or ability to get to the parks, the parks lacked good restrooms and drinking water, and the parks needed more capital maintenance.

The summer-intercept surveys of Jefferson County and Denver park visitors showed that people were using parks mainly for hiking and passive enjoyment. Cultural features continue to draw thousands of local and regional visitors as well as tourists.

The overall objective for the Denver mountain parks is to keep and restore the historic system of scenic drives and parks. The City needs to keep working closely and innovatively with the concessionaires who provide services and maintain the historic buildings. At the same
time, DPR needs to support regional efforts and partnerships to provide funding, planning, and the ability to acquire future open space.

Recommendations for Denver Mountain Parks

1. Strengthen DPR’s organizational capacity by:
   - increasing skills in dealing with complex regional planning issues.
   - incorporating mountain parks into a new Natural Resource Unit (see Chapter 6) to manage the range of natural areas cohesively.

2. Build better relationships with the staff, policy makers, and residents of other counties and recreation districts impacted by DPR. Develop strategies for long-range natural resource protection, recreation planning, land acquisitions, easements, and other regional issues by:
   - developing work teams with each jurisdiction.
   - strengthening working relationships by completing management guidelines for each site, criteria for responding to requests, and a prompt staff response system.
   - as a matter of policy, including people who are not Denver County residents in the public processes affecting the Denver parks in their communities.

3. Protect significant cultural resources and enhance the Olmsted Legacy by:
   - continuing to inventory and assess cultural resources.
   - rehabilitating, restoring, and protecting significant cultural resources through site guidelines, preventative capital repair programs and maintenance schedules.
   - strengthening concessionaire partnerships
   - additional historic landmark designations.
   - protecting scenic mountain drives through special road classifications, design guidelines, and acquired easements.
   - increasing awareness of the metrowide community regarding the distinction, value, and history of Denver’s mountain parks and other mountain parks.
   - working closely with historic site concessionaires.

4. Improve recreational experiences by:
   - minimizing use conflicts through evaluations to determine appropriate uses, provision of additional facilities, more hiking trails, closure of sensitive areas, compliance with State of Colorado standards, and temporary closures of parking lots and sites.

- implementing cost efficiencies wherever possible in operations and planning.
- working together to distinguish the different characters of parks and park systems, to maintain historic integrity and provide an array of visitor experiences.
completing master site and management plans for all major mountain sites.
creating more hiking-only trails and picnic areas.
providing clean, high-quality restrooms and drinking water.
supplying more information and interpretation through rangers and materials such as brochures and signs.
providing greater security through rangers, volunteer programs, and increased site visibility.
evaluating gaps in recreation services, such as the need for more outdoor education opportunities for youth, stronger trail links for road-bike use, and facilities to accommodate new uses.
creating a site for dogs off leash.

5. **Ensure economic sustainability for the system** (see Chapter 9 for more details) by:
improving concessionaire relationships and contracts to ensure high-quality visitor experiences, a mutually beneficial business partnership, and protection of significant natural and cultural features.
working collaboratively with other government agencies towards more cost-effective operations.
pursuing regional planning and funding models for the Front Range’s entire natural open space system.

For more information on strategies specific to Denver Mountain Parks and Jefferson County Open Space Parks, please check www.denvergov.org.
From mountains to river valleys to eastern plain prairie