

# Meeting set Monday to discuss Horsetooth Mountain Open Space changes

*Reporter-Herald Staff*

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Larimer County Open Space managers will hold a public meeting Monday to talk about improvements planned at Horsetooth Mountain Open Space.

Managers hope to provide additional parking for the popular area for hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding.

On busy summer days and weekends throughout the year, parking lots become full and Larimer County rangers turn visitors away, according to a press release.

Plans call for a new trail from the Horsetooth Mountain Open Space lower trailhead (Soderberg Trailhead) and reconfiguration of the Blue Sky Trailhead to help spread visitors across the open space and provide additional parking.

"The parking situation at Horsetooth is something we've been monitoring for years," Travis Rollins, Larimer County's Open Space Operations Manager, said. He said the area, like other open space areas near Fort Collins and Loveland, gets more popular each year.

This year Horsetooth Mountain Open Space has seen more than 80,000 visitors from Jan. 1 through Oct. 1. Managers expect another 20,000 to visit by the end of the year.

Park managers said the upper trailhead is a popular starting point for hikes to Horsetooth Falls and Horsetooth Rock, and when it is full visitors occasionally park in the County Road 38E right of way, which can be dangerous. There is no dedicated trail here and visitors either walk along the traffic lane or scramble up the hillside," Rollins said. "Public safety is our highest priority and the improvements proposed at Horsetooth are designed to expand access while improving safety and protecting sensitive natural and cultural resources."

In addition to the new trail and trailhead configuration, managers are considering a parking lot web cam and mobile phone applications.

County staff will present the proposed improvements and take public input at the meeting set at 6-8 p.m. Monday at the Fort Collins Harmony Library, 4616 S. Shields St., in the community room.

# Larimer County looks for ways to ease Horsetooth crowding

Parking lot reconfiguration and new connector trail could help ease hiker jams at popular Horsetooth Mountain Open Space

**By Jessica Benes** Reporter-Herald Staff Writer

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Horsetooth Mountain Open Space has proven popular with hikers. Now Larimer County open lands managers hope to find ways to expand parking and disperse users to other lots. (Reporter-Herald file photo/Christopher Stark)

Most weekends by 9 or 10 a.m., the Horsetooth Mountain Open Space trailhead parking lot is already at capacity. Sometimes up to 100 cars cruise through the lot, looking for spaces in the 64-space lot, according to Travis Rollins, open lands operations manager with Larimer County.

"Over the last two to three years, we've been dealing with some major capacity issues at our trailheads," Rollins said.

Larimer County Department of Natural Resources has two proposals to spread out the use of the trailheads in the area.

The Horsetooth Mountain Open Space's "upper lot," or main lot does not have the room to be expanded.

However, the nearby Blue Sky trailhead parking lot has 25 parking spaces, which Rollins said can be reconfigured to fit 51 spaces and four horse trailer spaces.

"What's important to tell the public is that our trailheads are busy... but our trails are not at capacity. By providing more spaces at the Blue Sky trailhead, it provides more opportunity for people to park and recreate," Rollins said.

The Blue Sky trailhead provides trails south into Devil's Backbone, or north to the Soderberg area, which connects to the Horsetooth Mountain Open Space.

"Currently, we are seeing people park along the private roads and in private neighborhoods," he said. "This way we can relieve problems with adjacent neighborhood or parking unsafely along county roads."

An additional proposal that the department is considering is adding a one-mile connector trail between Swan Johnson Trail and Stout Trail at the Soderberg trailhead, which would provide more direct access to Horsetooth Falls.

According to Rollins, the two most popular sites in the area are Horsetooth Falls and Horsetooth Rock. Currently from Soderberg, it's a long and roundabout route to Horsetooth Falls.

This way, hikers could traverse the not-as-well-used Soderberg trailhead, which has 30 parking spaces and 10 spaces for horse trailers, and still access favorite sites.

"The idea is to take the pressure off the main upper lot and disburse the use to these other two areas," Rollins said.

The department also plans to install a web cam of the parking lot at Horsetooth Mountain Open Space, so visitors can check the status of parking from smartphones or computers.

The budget to renovate the Blue Sky Trailhead parking area and install the webcam will be around \$12,000, Rollins said.

Numbers are not finalized for installing the connector trail at the Soderberg trailhead, but Rollins said it would probably cost \$6 per linear foot.

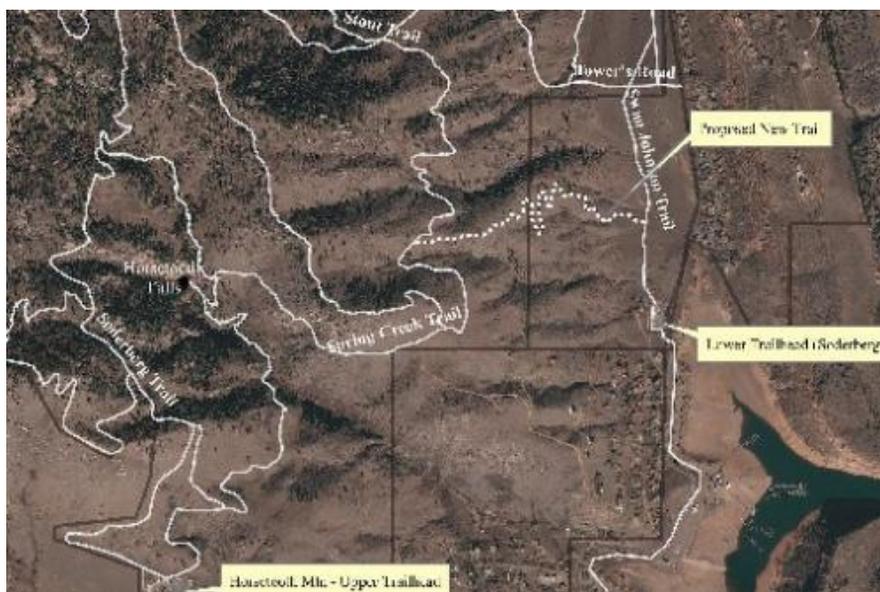
The trail will be just short of a mile (5,280 feet), so it might be about \$31,000 to install the trail. The renovations would be funded through a current "Help Preserve Open Spaces" sales tax in Larimer County.

Rollins said staff members are evaluating options and listening to concerns by neighbors in the Horsetooth Mountain Open Space area to decide how to proceed.

Residents are welcome to comment in the comments section of the online version of this story. Opinions in the comments section will be taken into consideration by the county.

"These trails are being loved to death and there are only so many parking spaces. People don't like to make plans and then be turned away. We're working with both visitors and local user groups to come up with the best possible solutions," Rollins said.

Jessica Benes can be reached at 669-5050, ext. 530, or [jbenes@reporter-herald.com](mailto:jbenes@reporter-herald.com). Follow her on Twitter: @JessicaBenes. Read her blog at [jessicabenes.com](http://jessicabenes.com).



A map shows the proposed one-mile connector trail between Swan Johnson Trail and Stout Trail at the Soderberg trailhead, which would provide more direct access to Horsetooth Falls. (Special to the Reporter-Herald/Larimer County)