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Northern Colorado connects with shared-use paths

JEFFREY BORING

IF YOU'RE INTO RIDING or walking on paved recreation trails, northern Colorado is the place to be. Many of the cities and towns in both Larimer and Weld Counties have built miles of detached paved trails, known as shared-use paths, that connect housing and retail areas to schools, parks, open spaces and other civic areas. As both counties continue to grow, shared-use paths will become a staple of the recreation and transportation matrix.

A NEW ORGANIZATION IS BORN

To facilitate the connectivity of shared-use paths between communities and ensure the trails take bicyclists and pedestrians where they want to go, a new organization was developed in 2014. The Northern Colorado Bike and Pedestrian Collaborative (NoCo Bike & Ped) was formed to facilitate communication between municipal, county and state staff, transportation agencies, cyclists and pedestrians. The organization is composed of planners, engineers and public health employees from Greeley, Fort Collins, Windsor, Loveland, Larimer and Weld Counties, Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) and the MPO.

"One of the primary purposes of NoCo Bike & Ped is to help implement the MPO's 2013 Regional Bicycle Plan, a plan that includes 12 bike corridors and more than 200 miles of shared-use path," says Sarah Boyd, Greeley Park Planner and NoCo Bike & Ped co-founder. "We can't expect a single entity to fulfill a regional vision."

Wade Willis, NoCo Bike & Ped's other co-founder and Windsor Parks and Open Space manager, adds, "We intend to coordinate bike and pedestrian infrastructure throughout the region, promote investments in bike and pedestrian infrastructure, and share information that leads to greater bike and pedestrian connectivity." Look for NoCo Bike & Ped's fall conference in November 2015.

COLLABORATION ALREADY PAYING DIVIDENDS

It didn't take long for this new organization to make a real difference in northern Colorado, with two new shared-use paths funded with its help. "The members of NoCo Bike & Ped played a critical role by participating in the MPO's Regional Bicycle Plan and the MPO's Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP)," says Terri Blackmore, MPO director. The MPO asked NoCo Bike & Ped to recommend projects for funding. "They came up with two very strong recommendations, both of which were approved. NoCo Bike & Ped made selecting shared-use path projects easy...they're an asset to the regional transportation planning and funding culture of northern Colorado."

NEW TRAILS FUNDED

More than six miles of regional trail will be built, thanks to the MPO's $1 million TAP award: the Great Western Trail and the Front Range Trail, Loveland to Fort Collins Segment. Where train cars once chugged down the tracks carrying sugar beets, the Great Western Trail will go. A four-mile section of this rails-to-trails project will connect Severance and Eaton with a trail. The Front Range Trail is about a two-mile shared-use path that will connect Loveland's 17-mile paved recreation trail with Fort Collins' paved Fossil Creek Trail.

"If you live or ride in Loveland or Fort Collins, you'll now be able to enjoy more than 60 miles of paved trail without having to cycle on high-speed arterials, such as Lemay Avenue or State Highway 287. The shared-use path will connect the two communities between Boyd Lake State Park and Carpenter Road," says Janet Meisel-Burns, City of Loveland Senior Park Planner. Both the Great Western Trail and Front Range Trail, Loveland to Fort Collins Segment are scheduled for construction in 2016.

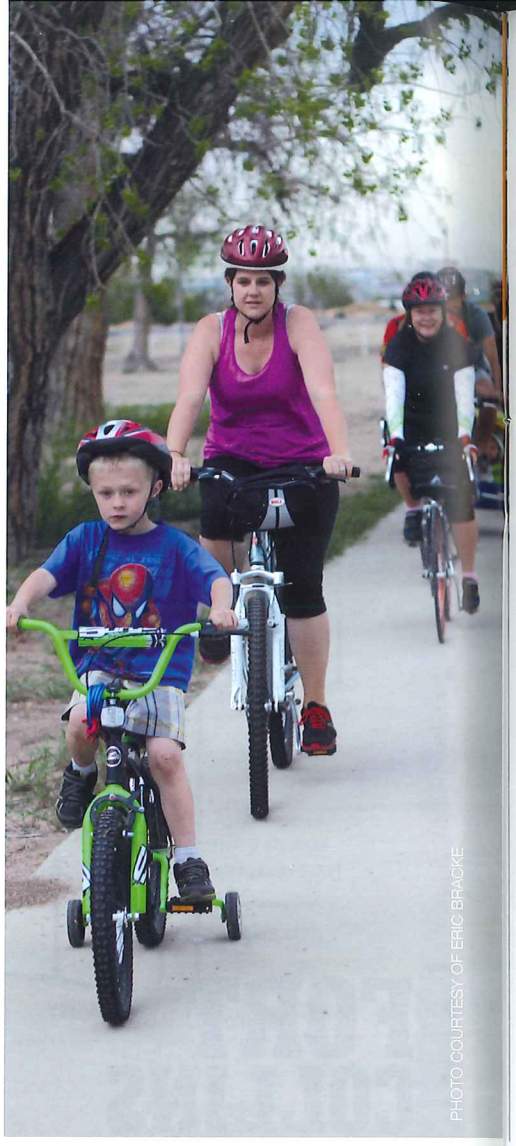

PHOTO COURTESY OF ERIC BRACKE

WHAT ABOUT THE POUDRE RIVER TRAIL?

The Poudre River Trail continues to be a high priority for the entire region because it will connect Greeley, Windsor, Timnath and Fort Collins with a single detached trail. Larimer County and the Town of Timnath will construct one-half mile of new trail east of Interstate 25 in 2015 and enhance an existing trailhead. Negotiations continue on the remaining five and a half miles of trail that are needed, including the I-25 crossing.

Is Colorado Primed To Become The Silicon Valley Of Agriculture?

MARCH 26, 2015 3:29 PM ET

from
LUKE RUNYON

A drone built by Agribotix, a Boulder startup, flies over a farm in Weld County, Colo. The drone has a camera that snaps a high-resolution photo every two seconds. From there, Agribotix stitches the images together, helping the farmer see what's happening in a field.
Luke Runyon/Harvest Public Media/KUNC

Colorado is famous for its beer and its beef. But what about its farm drones?
In the last several years, Boulder and Denver have become hubs for tech startups, and companies in the state's Front Range are on a tear, patenting new technologies in irrigation, food science and plant genetics. Public scientists are keeping pace, publishing research articles in agricultural science in record numbers.
That's prompted local economists to make some bold predictions.

"We're poised, if we play our cards right, both as a state government, as a land grant institution [Colorado State University], as an industry, to become the Silicon Valley for agriculture in the 21st century," says Greg Graff of Colorado State University.
But at the first Colorado State University Agricultural Innovation Summit, held Mar. 18-20, Governor John Hickenlooper didn't start by trumpeting the state's farmers or scientists or entrepreneurs. He started instead by touting the accomplishments of a European country six times smaller than Colorado.

Jimmy Underhill, drone technician with Agribotix, prepares the drone's control module at a farm in rural Weld County.
Luke Runyon/Harvest Public Media/KUNC

"The Netherlands isn't very big. And they don't have a whole lot of people," Hickenlooper said. But, he noted, the Dutch economy has become a powerhouse in growing vegetables, producing dairy products and processing poultry.

What they lack in manpower, they make up for in science and cooperation. Dutch universities pass research on to farmers. Food processing companies have staked headquarters there. Small tech start-ups pop up to solve nagging problems. They do it all as neighbors, in a tightly knit area called the Dutch Food Valley.

"What's interesting is we're doing that exact same kind of innovation right here in Colorado," Hickenlooper said. That's why Hickenlooper and economists are increasingly talking about Colorado's potential to become the Silicon Valley of agriculture.

The equation for the growth sounds something like: universities plus entrepreneurs minus regulation multiplied by high quality of life equals innovation. That's according to *The Emergence of an Innovation Cluster in the Agricultural Value Chain along Colorado's Front Range*, a report by Graff published in November.
"To borrow a phrase from real estate, the three most important factors in driving innovation in any industry are: talent, talent and talent. And we have a quality of life here in the Colorado Front Range that attracts and retains world class management and scientific talent," Graff says.

All that scientific research and talent is concentrated along the northern Front Range, leading to new ideas and new businesses, he says. Colorado's food and ag industries have been growing two to four times faster than the state's economy overall, the report notes. The state's plains may be where the corn is grown and cattle are raised, but Graff said it's Denver where agriculture is being transformed.

Tom Trout studies irrigation technology, one area where Colorado is innovating, for the USDA. Here, he examines a sunflower test plot in rural Weld County, Colo.

Luke Runyon/Harvest Public Media/KUNC

"The urban core is in fact the heart of agricultural innovation in the state of Colorado," Graff said.

New neighborhoods in Denver and other Northern Colorado cities are being structured around gardens, small farms and food hubs, taking the local food movement to a scale where it's actually having a measurable effect on the city's economy.
"We're seeing this industry grow exponentially in Denver," said the city's mayor Michael Hancock. "Small businesses are going into incubators and they're coming out as stronger businesses ready to contribute to the marketplace."

Denver's also home to some of the biggest players in food processing, hosting headquarters for the largest maker of mozzarella cheese in the world, Leprino Foods, and the country's biggest flour milling company, Ardent Mills. Greeley is home to JBS USA, the North American arm of the largest meat packing company in the world. Boulder has become a hub for the production and processing of organic and natural foods with companies like Celestial Seasonings and Justin's Nut Butter.

Governor Hickenlooper said unlike other sectors in the state, the food industry seems to be stable.

"[Agricultural] innovation is going to create high-paying jobs that are long-lived. It's not going to be some of this boom and bust stuff that we've seen in the past," Hickenlooper said, in a not-so-subtle dig at the energy industry and their history ofboom-and-bust cycles in the state.
All this movement within the state's agricultural economy came as a bit of surprise to former Larimer County commissioner Kathay Rennels. She's now with CSU and said no single person or organization can take credit for Colorado's burgeoning ag innovation hub.

"We have a research corridor here that grew organically," Rennels said. "It grew by itself and it probably grew because nobody saw it, so they couldn't screw it up."

But screwing it up is still a possibility. The same report that identified the ag innovation cluster said it'll take a concerted effort to nurture the fledgling sector, and that Colorado's movement to corner the market on ag innovation likely won't be realized for more than a decade.

Luke Runyon reports from Colorado for KUNC and Harvest Public Media*, a public radio reporting collaboration that focuses on agriculture and food production issues.*

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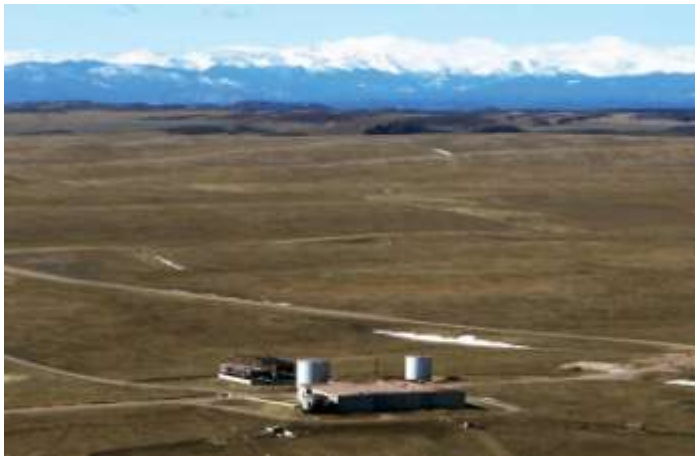
No progress at Belvoir Ranch



The Atlas missile site west of Cheyenne is shown from above on March 27. Blaine McCartney/Wyoming Tribune Eagle

CHEYENNE - Located 16 miles west of Cheyenne, the Belvoir Ranch is a scene of bucolic beauty, with vast prairies, red rock canyons and pristine open spaces. Even the name, "Belvoir," meaning "beautiful view" in French, is appropriate. At 18,800 acres, the Belvoir provides unique opportunities for hikers, mountain bikers, hunters, equestrians and other outdoor recreationists. Or at least it could provide those unique opportunities at some point. But inertia has proven a powerful counter to the city of Cheyenne's plans for the Belvoir Ranch. And while many projects and ideas have been drawn up to transform the area into an outdoorsman's paradise, very little progress has been made to date. So what could be a shining jewel of the community has remained, thus far, a diamond in the rough.

An ambitious plan

The city of Cheyenne bought the Belvoir Ranch in 2003 for $5.9 million. Two years later, it spent another $525,000 to buy the Big Hole, 1,800 acres of open space just south of the Belvoir that runs all the way to the Colorado border and the adjacent Red Mountain Open Space in Larimer County. The reasons for buying the Belvoir were practical ones, at least to begin with. The city saw two major opportunities there - a chance to add more supply to the city's municipal water system, and a place to one day establish a new city landfill. But the more the city looked at the property, the more opportunities it saw. That culminated in 2008 in the publication of a grand master plan for the Belvoir and the Big Hole. The plan, a 281-page behemoth, called for a slew of improvements to the Belvoir, all with the aim of attracting talent, tourism and recreationists to the area. These improvements would be made over a 15-year period and would include such amenities as walking and mountain bike trail systems, a tent campground, establishment of equestrian and picnic areas, a maintenance facility and RV campground, a playground, and a links golf course. Eventually, the plan called for the construction of a visitor center, reservoirs and fishing docks. Other areas of the ranch would sport wind farms, while the city would manage both a new landfill and various water wells. Yet today, seven years after the master plan was first published, virtually none of what was envisioned has come to pass.

Recession concessions

So what happened? According to Cheyenne Planning Director Matt Ashby, the answer, as it so often does, comes down to money. Initially, Ashby said, the city did begin to pursue some grants to get the Belvoir ball rolling. "Shortly after the plan was adopted, we did submit a grant to the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust for some trail development," Ashby said. "At the time, it wasn't necessarily in

their wheelhouse, as far as what kinds of projects they were funding at that point in time." And then the recession hit. While the 2008 recession didn't impact Wyoming as badly as some other states, Ashby said it still required Cheyenne to employ some cost-cutting measures, which effectively shoved the Belvoir onto the back burner with the heat turned to "low." "We lost a person in this office who focused on historic preservation and was our key person for managing Belvoir Ranch initiatives," Ashby said. "City staff losses, budget cuts, things like that, really hampered our ability to even focus time on the Belvoir." The cuts impacted both the recreational and the practical aspects of Belvoir development. For example, Ashby said, the city has effectively scrapped its plans to build a new landfill on the Belvoir, turning instead to an expansion of its existing landfill off of Happy Jack Road. Cheyenne assistant public works director Craig LaVoy said initial cost estimates for a Belvoir landfill were in the $50 million range, which he said was a big factor in the decision to shift back to Happy Jack. "We did some design on it before my time, but in the end, it was a pretty expensive option," LaVoy said. "Back 10 years ago, it was an $8 million road just to get to the site." Comparatively, he said, expanding the Happy Jack landfill would cost the city about $30 million, and it would provide the city with several decades' worth of landfill space. Meanwhile, the Belvoir Ranch would still be there if the city ever needed it for a future landfill. "You could still extend the Happy Jack, and 30 years from now, we'd still have a site (on the Belvoir)," LaVoy said.

Saving for a non-rainy day

The situation is much the same on the water side. When the city bought the Belvoir in 2003, it was coming off one of the worst droughts in years. The concern then was that the Belvoir might provide much-needed groundwater supply to the rest of Cheyenne's water system. So why hasn't that happened? According to Board of Public Utilities Director Tim Wilson, in the years since the 2003 drought, the city imposed a number of water conservation policies, including recycling wastewater for irrigation and imposing water-use restrictions in drier years. As a result, he said, the city has managed to curb its water use significantly, to the point where it's difficult to justify the immense cost of building a pipeline out to the Belvoir and drilling wells to supply it. "Obviously a lot would need to be put into place in order to bring that water to Cheyenne and deliver it," Wilson said. "But there's not as much pressure now as there was in 2003. With the water conservation program we implemented back then, that's certainly helped." That's not to say the city hasn't done anything with the Belvoir water supply, however. Since the land was purchased, the city has done plenty of studies to determine how much water lies beneath the rolling plains. Current estimates predict that Cheyenne could draw between 1,000 and 1,500 acre-feet of water per year from the Belvoir, which is close to 10 percent of the city's current annual water usage. The city also has been working with the Army Corps of Engineers and the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality on removing trichloroethylene discovered in one of the Belvoir's aquifers. The Corps has already built a groundwater treatment plant to remove the contaminant - a byproduct of a decommissioned Atlas nuclear missile facility on the ranch - and remediation efforts are underway to cleanse the rest of the aquifer long before the first drop is ever pumped for municipal use. BOPU spokesman Clint Bassett said that while it may be more than a decade before the city finally decides to tap the Belvoir's water supply, it remains a valuable "reserve account" for the city. "Even though it hasn't resulted in water in the pipes yet, there's been a lot of preparatory work out there," Bassett said. "We're maintaining those water rights and making sure it stays available."

Looking for a leader

But while the water and landfill concerns have moved on to greener pastures, so to speak, the Belvoir Ranch still has plenty of potential for outdoor recreation. Yet the questions remain: where to begin, and how to pay for it? Ashby said many amenities included in the original master plan were never intended to materialize overnight. For example, the Gateway Village, with its visitors center, specialty retail and "Mountains to Plains" museum, was always going to follow the more simple development of hiking trails. Yet today, the city hasn't built even basic public access to the ranch or the Big Hole. Currently, the only people who do use the Belvoir are a few hunters and some ranchers who use the ranch for grazing. Even so, Ashby said his office has identified some of the "low-hanging fruit" the city could pursue at relatively little cost. "Certainly establishment of a trailhead to get to the Big Hole is at the top of most people's radars who are thinking about the Belvoir," Ashby said. "That connection would provide us with miles and miles of access to (Colorado's) open space and trails, and there's certainly an argument to be made about access from Wyoming to the Big Hole." Newly elected City Councilman Scott Roybal agrees. Roybal has made no secret his desire to see some progress on the Belvoir, and he believes public access should be priority No. 1. "Hiking and bike trails, I think that's going to be where we start," Roybal said. "Once we get more interest out there, the want, need and desire to use it will be more." Roybal said what Cheyenne needs is someone to take an active role in advocating for the Belvoir. And if he's that someone, so be it. "I've looked at this thing for the last 10 years thinking, 'Why can't we play on that?'" he said. "And now that I'm in this position, I'm going to make it so that we can." Roybal said that while some of the more ambitious parts of the Belvoir master plan remain financially unfeasible, that's no reason the city can't revisit the basics and begin putting out feelers for grants and other resources. "We haven't even looked at things like grants and federal government funding for helping us develop that lately," he said. "We're coming up on a budget, too, and I would like to see what excess we have going back into reserves and earmark some of that money to the Belvoir."

Wind power and manpower

But Cheyenne Mayor Rick Kaysen is less bullish on developing the Belvoir in the near term, arguing that the financial resources necessary to simply provide public access to the land remain out of reach. "We have to deal with reality, and dollars are going to make that thing develop," Kaysen said. "But there is nothing planned (for the Belvoir) in the Fiscal Year 2016 budget. This is a couple years down the road." Kaysen said the quickest path he sees to development of the Belvoir will depend on when and whether a lease agreement for the construction of a wind farm on the property ends up bearing fruit. The city approved a lease agreement with Cheyenne Wind LLC in August 2012, giving the company five years to go through the necessary study and permitting processes to build a wind farm on 12,000 acres of the ranch. Kaysen said if the wind farm does come online, it could begin generating revenue the city could use to further develop the Belvoir. But any such development is still a long way off."If (the wind farm) can be materialized and we see revenues, we're still two years out from that project at best," Kaysen said. There also would be additional costs, not only in developing the Belvoir, but also in putting together a staff capable of managing it. Ashby noted that unlike Larimer County, Colorado, Cheyenne does not have any staff or departments dedicated to the unique challenges of open space management. "Normally, other communities that have open space programs have staffing and human resources dedicated toward administering this type of amenity," Ashby said. "It's more the fact that it's a leap into something brand new that's kind of been slowing us down." So just how many people does it take to manage an open space like the Belvoir and the Big Hole? For the answer, one needs look no farther than our neighbors to the south. Meegan Flenniken is the resource program manager for Larimer County Natural Resources, which

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oversees management of the Red Mountain Open Space, located just across the state line from the Big Hole. Flenniken said her staff covers about 25,000 acres of open space all together, 13,000 of it within the Red Mountain. "We have a staff of 40 people, everything from rangers to weed control to maintenance folks that maintain our bathrooms and a trail staff that maintains 83 miles of trails," Flenniken said. "That's just our full-time staff. We also have seasonal staff, so our trail crew has two full-time people, but anywhere from six to 10 seasonal staff." All those staff positions add up, and Larimer County has had to find its own funding mechanisms, namely sales taxes. "We have a countywide open space quarter-cent sales tax, which is shared between the county and all the incorporated cities," Flenniken said. "That tax is what we use to acquire land and manage lands. The city of Fort Collins gets a portion of that tax, but the city also has a city-specific open space tax." Larimer County also gets help at the state level, thanks to Great Outdoors Colorado, which uses a portion of state lottery proceeds to fund a grant program for open spaces."There's an $11 million grant we received for Red Mountain and the Soapstone Prairie Natural Area," Flenniken said. "Some other big partner opportunities really help us stretch our dollars, mostly for acquisitions, but also the cost to develop trailheads, put in restrooms, things like that." Of course, with more than five times Cheyenne's population, one could argue that Larimer County is starting with a much broader revenue base with which to develop and maintain its open spaces. If nothing else, though, it highlights just how much work lies before Cheyenne if it wants to see the Belvoir reach its full potential.

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REPORTER-HERALD

Weather delays opening of Trail Ridge Road

By Pamela Johnson

Reporter-Herald Staff Writer

POSTED: 05/20/2015 02:14:44 PM MDT

The Rock Cut area on Trail Ridge Road is shown here on Wednesday, May 20, 2015. Recent wintry weather has slowed plowing operations and delayed the opening of the road through Rocky Mountain National Park. The part typically opens the road on Memorial Day weekend, but this year the opening date is unknown. (*Special to the Reporter-Herald/ Rocky Mountain National Park*)

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK — Snow and wet weather has delayed the opening of Trail Ridge Road, which historically opens by Memorial Day weekend.

Plow operators have been working from both the east and the west to clear the road, however, an early Memorial Day weekend and weather have hampered their efforts.

"As is typical, plow operators have dealt with days of low to no visibility, wind, drifting snow and icy road conditions," said Vaughn Baker, superintendent of the park. "This May, freezing temperatures above 10,000 feet, the lack of sunshine and the fact that Memorial Day is earlier have added to the challenges."

Crews are working to get the road that connects Estes Park to Grand Lake and stretches from the lower elevations of the park above treeline open as soon as possible. But with continued winter conditions in the forecast, officials do not know when that will be.

Last year, Trail Ridge Road opened on May 24. The earliest the road has opened was on May 7, 2002, while the latest was on June 26, 1943.

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REPORTER-HERALD

Natural Resources adds staff

Ecologist to help restore damaged land

By Pamela Johnson

Reporter-Herald Staff Writer

POSTED: 05/19/2015 12:30:56 PM MDT

FORT COLLINS — A new position within the Larimer County's Department of Natural Resources will help the county heal public lands affected by fires and floods.

The county commissioners on Tuesday agreed to let the department spend an additional $90,000 to hire a full-time restoration ecologist and a part-time graphic artist.

The restoration ecologist will lead efforts to restore damage on public lands managed by the open lands department as well as private lands that are protected by conservation easements, according to information from the department.

"This person will be doing restoration on our properties, like at Lions Park," said Meegan Flenniken, program manager. "We're seeing a need for more of that, especially after the fires and flood."

The restoration ecologist, too, will work on projects in the Big Thompson Canyon, which is facing a need for major habitat restoration after the 2013 flood.

"The Big Thompson Canyon is complicated with long-term projects," Flenniken said. "We don't have the capacity to do that with our existing staff."

Other open lands properties also have varying restoration needs even if they were not damaged by natural disaster, she explained.

One resource specialist, Jeffrey Boring, has been working on restoration as has a seasonal employee, according to Natural Resources staff. That season position is being morphed into this new full-time position, noted director Gary Buffington

The second position, a part-time graphic artist to work on Natural Resources publications is expected to actually save the department money because it will cost less than the current practice of hiring a consultant, according to information from the department.

The additional $90,000 will come from the open space sales tax as well as a fund made up of parks user fees.

REPORTER-HERALD

Inspired by illness: Fort Collins boy creates local bluebird project

By Pamela Johnson

Reporter-Herald Staff Writer

POSTED: 05/13/2015 01:17:44 PM MDT

Noah Spagnuolo, 11, of Fort Collins, came up with the idea to place bluebird boxes in Larimer County to boost habitat for the mosquito-eating birds after his aunt, who launched a similar project in Castle Rock eight years ago, fell sick from a mosquito-borne disease. Here, he displays a box in place at Soderberg Open Space west of Fort Collins earlier this month. (*Pamela Johnson / Loveland Reporter-Herald*)

Barbara Spagnuolo compares bluebird boxes to "Field of Dreams."

"You know that old sports saying, 'If you build it, they will come,'" said Spagnuolo, the inspiration for a bluebird project recently launched in Larimer County by her 11-year-old nephew, Noah Spagnuolo.

"With bluebirds, if the boxes are built in the right way and they're placed in the right habitat, they will come."

REPORTER-HERALD

Noah was inspired to create a local bluebird project after his aunt nearly died from viral meningitis. He knew the disease was spread by mosquitoes, and that bluebirds eat mosquitoes, so he wanted to do his part.

"I really like nature, and she likes nature too," said Noah, who lives in Fort Collins. "When she got sick, it inspired me to do something to help less people get sick."

Noah Spagnuolo looks through a packet of information earlier this month about bluebirds that will help volunteers monitor the nest boxes places at Horsetooth Mountain and Soderberg Open Spaces. The project is paid for by a $1,990 Small Grant for Community Partnering from Larimer County Open Lands Program and will be administered by the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory. (*Pamela Johnson/ Loveland Reporter-Herald*)

And to help the bluebirds, too.

Bluebirds nest in old trees and wooden fence posts — a habitat that is disappearing and causing populations of the western bluebird to suffer.

So one way to ensure the birds will thrive in an area is to put up bluebird boxes, specially designed places for the birds to nest.

The concept was born decades ago in eastern states then spread west to Montana, Wyoming and Colorado, according to Spagnuolo. The Audubon Society of Denver now coordinates similar efforts across the state.

Spagnuolo, a natural resources specialist with Castle Rock, launched bluebird program, there in 2007. She talked about her love of birds, her love of nature and her bluebird project many times with her nephew, Noah.

But she never expected he would want to start one in Larimer County in her honor after she battled and beat a round of viral meningitis.

Spagnuolo fell sick, really sick, in 2013. Doctors still do not know exactly what form of viral meningitis she had, but she doesn't dwell on that fact.

"I beat the odds," said Spagnuolo. "Just the fact that I'm alive is good enough."

She is on the mend and back at work in Castle Rock's natural areas, where her bluebird project has spread from 18 boxes at two locations to 162 boxes at 26 sites. A network of volunteers check the boxes for nests and report information into a national database.

Noah's project, which is being coordinated by the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, will work the same way.

Teams of volunteers, including Noah and his parents, Chris and Karen, are signed up to monitor the 17 boxes that are currently placed at Soderberg and Horsetooth Mountain Open Spaces, explained Laura Quattrini, stewardship program manager for the bird observatory.

She was connected with Noah about a year ago as he worked on his bluebird program as a project for his then fifth-grade class.

She helped him apply for, and successfully receive, a $1,990 grant through the Larimer County Open Lands Program and plans to continue to coordinate the program and expand the number of boxes throughout Larimer County.

The first bluebird boxes are in place as is a network of volunteers who have already been checking the boxes and will do so through September. It could take two years for bluebirds to begin nesting in the boxes, but once they do, they and their offspring return and populations will grow.

"It perpetuates every year," said Spagnuolo.

She is proud of what Noah accomplished and excited to see the program flourish.

"It helps the birds, but you know what, it also helps us," Spagnuolo said. "It gets us outside enjoying nature. It's family time. It gets you closer to all the creatures that live on this planet with us."

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REPORTER-HERALD

Nature grants benefit gardens, education

Larimer County Open Lands department gives out $17,656 in small grants this year

By Pamela Johnson

Reporter-Herald Staff Writer

POSTED: 04/27/2015 07:13:26 PM MDT

Taryn Lesser, right, an instructor in training, rides Blanca into the entrance of the Trail of Discovery April 21 at Hearts and Horses west of Loveland. The sensory trail has been funded by grants and donations and will be added on to with a new grant. (*Jenny Sparks / Loveland Reporter-Herald*)

Every day, the sensory experiences along Hearts and Horses Trail of Discovery help children and adults in the therapeutic riding program.

"It's incredibly beneficial," said Tamara Merritt, director of special programs. "It just stimulates their senses in different ways."

The trail is the culmination of five years work and $25,000 in grants and donated goods and time.

This year, an interactive kiosk and more native planting will be added to the sensory garden along the trail thanks to $2,000 from the Larimer County Open Lands Small Grants for Community Partnering program. The project has received the small grant several years in a row and was among 10 recipients for 2015 that were honored Thursday.

REPORTER-HERALD

Larimer County Open Lands Small Grants

Award winners are:

• Dean Acres Homeowners Association, $2,000, for an aeration system at Lee Lake in Northwest Fort Collins.

• Estes Valley Community Garden, $2,000 for a new garden as part of the Stanley Park project.

• The Growing Project, $2,000 for an education program in Fort Collins.

• Hearts and Horses, $2,000 to add to a sensory garden and trail west of Loveland.

• Rocky Mountain Cat Conservancy, $2,000, for motion sensor cameras at Chimney Hollow and Red Mountain Open Spaces to collect data on wildlife.

• Colorado State University Environmental Learning Center, $1,940 for a middle school camp.

• Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, $1,990.66 to monitor bluebirds at Larimer County open spaces.

• Red Feather Lions Club, $1,864.72 for trail, native vegetation and other improvements at the Red Feather Lakes Community Park.

• Andrew Creekmore, $954, archaeological geophysics study at Fossil Creek Reservoir Regional Open Space.

• Soaring Eagle Ecology Center, $907.60 to install motion sensor cameras at Red Feather Lakes.

REPORTER-HERALD

Larimer County awards these grants to community-based projects each year.

Instructor in training Kara Sullivan rides Keno on the Trail of Discovery, a sensory trail, Tuesday, directing him around tire obstacles at Hearts and Horses west of Loveland. (*Jenny Sparks / Loveland Reporter-Herald*)

The program was established in 1996, the same year voters approved the first county sales tax for open space, to support community projects that deal with research, conservation and education, said County Commissioner Tom Donnelly.

"The program has a long history, nearly 20 years, of making these awards," he said.

This year, the county gave out a total of $17,656.98 to 10 different projects that benefit education, community gardens, research parks and wildlife studies.

Among this year's recipients, the Rocky Mountain Cat Conservancy will expand the number of motion sensor cameras it has to collect data on mountain lions and other wildlife, including placing cameras at Chimney Hollow Open Space.

Soaring Eagle Ecology Center, a community-based environmental education project at Red Feather Lakes, also will install wildlife cameras with its grant.

And yet another grant will pay for an archaeological survey in which experts will use radar and other tools to gauge archaeological sites beneath the surface at Fossil Creek Regional Open Space. Andrew Creekmore, who received the grant, explained that his work will aim to find long-term seasonal camps beneath areas where surface artifacts have been located and could lead to excavation and preservation of sites.

At Hearts and Horses, the Trail of Discovery has 10 different sensory stations including a garden with native vegetation. That is where the interactive kiosk will go and new native grasses and plants will be sown to offer the riders another tool to learn and stimulate their senses.

Merritt added, "We're trying to get our riders connected with nature."

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REPORTER-HERALD

Off-road truck damages new Pinewood campground

Larimer County rangers seeking information on damage

By Pamela Johnson

Reporter-Herald Staff Writer

POSTED: 04/23/2015 08:39:36 PM MDT

A truck left deep ruts through newly mulched and seeded terrain at Pinewood Lake west of Loveland. The driver caused about $2,000 damage to the campground that is currently closed during a massive remodel.

An off-road joyride through newly mulched and seeded terrain at Pinewood Reservoir caused about $2,000 damage to the campground that is undergoing a $1 million renovation.

Rangers believe someone on Sunday night drove his or her truck off the road, down a hill from the upper campground to the lower campground, then through another newly mulched picnic area. The deep ruts were discovered Monday morning in an area that crews had just finished mulching and seeding as part of the project.

"We were pretty proud of how it was shaping up," said Chris Fleming, operations manager for Larimer County Department of Natural Resources.

"It'll still be great, and we'll fix the damage because that's what we do."

A volunteer team was scheduled to work on the new campground this weekend, so part of that team will work on manually raking and repairing the damaged area. However, Fleming believes that the county will have to bring in heavy equipment to fix most of the damage.

The renovation at Pinewood is expected to be complete by Memorial Day and includes new restrooms and campsites, a larger boat ramp, road improvements, a natural

playscape and a day use area. The lake, picnic area and campgrounds are closed during the project, which is expected to cost about $1 million.

About $8,000 was spent to hire a contractor to reseed and mulch several areas in the campground to get native grasses and forbes growing to improve the view and prevent erosion. A portion of that area was damaged, Fleming said.

"They certainly left their mark on a swath, but it's not the entire area," she said.

Anyone with information on who was involved is asked to call Ranger Will Talbot at 619-4454.

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REPORTER-HERALD

County officials work on canyon recreation plan

Resident input shows fishing access, followed by restrooms, parking and bicycle trail as priorities

By Pamela Johnson

POSTED: 04/22/2015 06:00:19 PM MDT

A sign on a gate on informs visitors to Glade Park, west of Loveland, that the park is closed until further notice, but temporary fishing access to the Big Thompson River is permitted. (*Steve Stoner / Loveland Reporter-Herald*)

Some residents want Larimer County to replace the parks and fishing access that the 2013 flood wiped out in the Big Thompson Canyon and potentially add a few new amenities such as a bike trail and more restrooms.

"The overall theme is that people, at the very least, want us to build back what was there," said Zac Wiebe of the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources. "A lot of recreational facilities got wiped out."

Among the areas that were destroyed and remain a high priority are Glade Park, areas along the North Fork outside Glen Haven, the Narrows Park and a handicapped fishing area near Waltonia.

A new area of interest is around Cedar Cove, where nearly an entire neighborhood was destroyed near Loveland's Viestenz-Smith Mountain Park.

Wiebe recently updated the Larimer County Commissioners and Parks Advisory Board, in separate meetings, on a study to determine the future of recreation in the canyon. His department is working with many partners including Loveland, U.S. Forest Service, Colorado Parks and Wildlife and other agencies on the plan, which should be finished by summer.

Part of the process was seeking input from residents — an effort that officials said was very successful with a wide array of input from various stakeholder groups. Residents said what they wanted the most is fishing access, followed by restrooms, parking and a bicycle trail.

"We've been hearing from the beginning that people want a trail all the way up the canyon," Wiebe said. "They want to road bike, and they want to do it safely."

REPORTER-HERALD

Editorial: The public can guide shooting plan

POSTED: 04/20/2015 10:33:10 PM MDT

The project to receive ideas from the public to help identify areas in Boulder, Larimer, Gilpin and Clear Creek counties where recreational shooting may be allowed appears to be a well-planned effort that may lead to worthwhile recommendations.

The U.S. Forest Service and Colorado Parks and Wildlife are participating in the project.

The Northern Front Range Sport Shooting Management Partnership wants to identify potential target shooting sites on public lands.

The project is challenging because of potential safety and environmental concerns. Recreational shooting has a long history in Colorado and the West, and it is considered by many people to be a part of their lives.

About the partnership

More information can be found at the Sport Shooting Management Partnership's website atSportShootingPartners.org. The public can sign up to receive e- mail updates. Or contact Garry Sanfaçon, the project coordinator, atinfo@sportshootingpartners.org or call 720 564-2642.

Officials want to preserve the opportunity for recreational shooting, but one of the goals is to minimize any problems for nearby residential and recreational areas, or with cyclists, hikers and other recreational users of public lands.

Preliminary criteria for identifying possible recreational shooting areas on public lands include:

• a one mile distance from municipalities

• one-half mile distance from subdivisions or townsites

• one-quarter mile distance from single homes

• one-quarter mile distance from recreational developments including trails, recreational areas and campgrounds

Other preliminary criteria include allowed slope of land and the type, condition and proximity of roads

A well-thought-out and fair process will have the best chance of reaching reasonable results for recreational shooters, residents and those engaging in other types recreation in the area.

People interested in recreational shooting on public lands should follow the project and stay in touch with the county government where they live or appropriate federal offices.

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Forest Service eyes limiting sport shooting

Stephen Meyers, The Coloradoan4:14 p.m. MDT May 5, 2015

(Photo: Coloradoan library)

2CONNECT 7TWEETLINKEDINCOMMENTEMAILMORE

Increased participation and the associated safety issues in sport shooting have prompted the U.S. Forest Service to look at amending its policies of the sport on property in Larimer County.

The Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests is seeking public comment on the proposal to amend its 1997 Forest Plan for the sport on lands in Boulder, Clear Creek, Gilpin, Grand, Jefferson, Park and Larimer counties.

Public comments can be submitted to comments-rm-arapaho-roosevelt@fs.fed.us by June 3. For more information, visit www.fs.usda.gov/goto/arp/recshootingmgt.

Management direction may include:

•Developing Forest Plan goals, objectives or desired conditions for recreational sport shooting

•Identifying areas that are appropriate for dispersed recreational sport shooting

•Identifying areas suitable as designated shooting areas

•Identifying areas where recreational sport shooting would be prohibited for health and safety reasons.

Proposed management direction does not include any change in management for lawful hunting activities.

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Where to hike when trails are closed

Stephen Meyers, The Coloradoan10:54 a.m. MDT May 19, 2015

(Photo: Stephen Meyers/The Coloradoan)

72CONNECT 13TWEETLINKEDIN 2COMMENTEMAIL MORE

All the trail closures in Fort Collins got you down?

Yeah, me too.

Rain is in the forecast for the next 10 days in Fort Collins, so get used to seeing your favorite trails closed this week.

Fort Collins Natural Areas and Larimer County Parks often close trails during the wet spring to prevent trail damage and help preserve the surrounding habitat.

When muddy, Lory State Park closes its trails to mountain bikers and horseback riders, but keeps them open to hikers. The park is currently open to hiking.

While some of the most popular natural areas are closed, there are many others worth visiting. Take advantage during this soggy time and find a new favorite trail.

5 places to check out

Towers Road

Where: Soderberg Open Space. Take Larimer County Road 38E around the south end of Horsetooth Reservoir to Shoreline Drive, which is on the west side of the reservoir. Take a right on Shoreline Drive and go 1.2 miles to the parking lot for Soderberg Open Space.

Fee: $6 for daily permit or $75 for annual Larimer County parks pass

Distance: 3.4 miles one way

Difficulty: Difficult run (1,700 feet of elevation gain)

Pets: Allowed, on leash

Why go: Part of Horsetooth Mountain Open Space, Towers Road — a service road — remains open even during muddy conditions. Challenge yourself on the beastly hill that features 1,700 feet of elevation gain. Every other Thursday, the Fort Collins Trail Runners group meets in the evening at Towers Road for a time trial. The group run has staggered starts, so don't worry if you think you're a slowpoke; the goal of the run is for everyone to reach the summit at the same time. Your quads and lungs will hurt.

Information:www.co.larimer.co.us/parks/htmp.cfm or 970-619-4570

Cathy Fromme Prairie

Where: There are parking lots at Shields Street, south of Harmony, 5381 S. Shields St.; or Fromme Prairie Way (from Harmony Road, take Seneca south to Fromme Prairie Way), 1999 Fromme Prairie Way.

Fee: Free

Distance: 2.4 miles one way

Pets: Allowed, on a leash

Why go: Nestled in south Fort Collins between Shields Street and Taft Hill Road, this expanse of rolling prairie land is a haven for wildflower viewing this spring and summer. The best wildflower viewing is just along the 2.4-mile concrete handicap-accessible trail. You'll see milkvetch, blue flax, evening primrose, penstemon, wild rose, sulphur flower, western wallflower, cowboy's delight and more. Check out the trailhead bulletin board, which provides detailed wildflower identification sheets.

Information: 970-416-2815 or www.fcgov.com/naturalareas/finder/cathyfromme

Arapaho Bend Natural Area

Where: 4109 E. Horsetooth Road. Because of intermittent construction on Horsetooth Road, you'll have to take Harmony Road just past Hewlett-Packard Co. to Strauss Cabin Road. Go north on Strauss Cabin Road. There are parking lots just after the first pond and farther north at the road's intersection with Horsetooth Road, which was closed this week. A third parking lot with access to the property is located at the Harmony Transfer parking lot just west of Interstate 25.

Pets: Allowed, on a leash

Fee: Free

Why go: These former gravel pits have been turned into ponds that offer great fishing holes for anglers. Bass, bluegill, yellow perch and sunfish all can be caught in the ponds. The riparian area is also a haven for more than 80 species of birds, including American white pelicans, prairie falcons and cormorants. For history buffs, check out

the ruins of the old Strauss Cabin, one of the earliest log cabins in Fort Collins. The cabin was restored in 1997 and burned by arsonists in 1999, forcing its closure to the public until 2012. The open space also provides a wide-open view of Longs Peak, making it a great place to watch the sun set over the mountains.

Information: 970-416-2815 or www.fcgov.com/naturalareas/finder/arapaho

Coyote Ridge Natural Area

Where: Take Taft Hill Road south of the Larimer County Landfill for 1 mile. The Coyote Ridge Natural Area parking lot is on your right.

Distance: Easy to moderate, 2.3 miles of trails

Fees: Free

Pets: Not allowed

Why go: One of my favorite Fort Collins areas, Coyote Ridge is popular with trail runners and mountain bikers. The trail gets hot in the summer, so now is a prime time to visit Coyote Ridge, which winds through the prairie and switchbacks and up the foothills. Check out the 1/4-mile Hidden Clues Trail, an interpretive loop about 1 mile into the open space. The interpretive loop is wheelchair accessible. Look for wildlife, such as mule deer, especially in the morning or evening, as well as prairie dogs, rabbits and hawks. You might even catch a glimpse of a coyote.

Information: 970-416-2815 or www.fcgov.com/naturalareas/finder/coyote.

Running Deer Natural Area

Where: East Prospect Road, about 1 mile west of Interstate 25. Can also be reached via the Prospect Road underpass from Riverbend Ponds Natural Area.

Fees: Free

Pets: Not allowed

Why go: Bordered on the west by Cottonwood Hollow Natural Area, and the Colorado State University Environmental Learning Center to the southwest across the Poudre River, Running Deer Natural Area is easily accessible for southeast Fort Collins folks. Because of this convenient location, Running Deer makes an ideal place to stop after work for a quick trail run or to bring the kids on the weekend for a fun outdoor activity. The area's easy, flat, natural-surface trails weave through open fields, around ponds and between cottonwoods along the Poudre River. As the name suggests, look for mule deer and whitetail deer bedded down or running through the fields. Enjoy the fall foliage.

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Information: Fort Collins Natural Areas Department, 970-416-2815 orwww.fcgov.com/naturalareas

Xplore reporter Stephen Meyers covers the outdoors and recreation for the Coloradoan. Follow him on Twitter @stemeyer or Facebook.com/meyersreports.

Fort Collins prairie dog colony faces uncertain future

Kevin Duggan, **Coloradoan** *11:21 a.m. MDT May 4, 2015*

(Photo: Erin Hull/The Coloradoan)

430CONNECT 13TWEETLINKEDIN 3COMMENTEMAILMORE

Receiving site sought for colony at Buckingham and Lemay

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A Fort Collins woman is launching an effort to save a prairie dog colony before it is wiped out by development.

Helen Taylor knows she faces long odds in finding a site to relocate prairie dogs living in an open field at the southwest corner of Lemay Avenue and Buckingham Street. But she's willing to work to get it done and hopes the community will take up her cause.

Prairie dogs should no longer be considered "disposable," Taylor said. The animals play an important role in the prairie ecosystem and natural areas so many city residents love, she said.

"I know that it can be problematic for these urban colonies of prairie dogs that are difficult to manage," she said. "But I think it's our responsibility to look at alternatives to fumigation and eradication, especially for colonies that have been here as long as this one has."

Taylor has seen prairie dogs running around the property for many years. Prairies dogs and entries to their underground burrows can be seen on open land to the north and east of the site.

The 6.5-acre property was purchased in February by Stan Scott, under the name Fort Collins Self Storage LLC, with the intention of building an 80,000- to 100,000-square-foot storage facility and brewery on the site.

Scott said he is still working on the plans for the property and construction is expected to start by early next year.

Scott and Taylor have talked about the prairie dogs and agree they want to find a place to relocate the animals. But finding a property owner willing to receive the animals will be challenging.

"I understand where Helen is coming from and we will do what we can," Scott said.

The city of Fort Collins and Larimer County manage natural areas with prairie dog colonies on them. But neither is interested in accepting more prairie dogs at this time.

Land managers are concerned about introducing disease to colonies by importing animals, said Meegan Flenniken, resource program manager with the Larimer County Natural Resources Department.

Keeping prairie dog numbers under control is another issue, she said. Colonies that see their numbers diminish because of plague and other diseases tend to recover on their own, she said.

Relocating prairie dogs can be difficult and expensive, state Rick Bachand, environmental program manager for the city's Natural Areas Department, in an email to Taylor.

The relocation process is stressful for animals and can result in a mortality rate of 40 percent or higher, Bachand stated.

A colony at Cathy Fromme Prairie on the west side of the city suffered a significant plague event three years ago. Land managers followed up by launching a grassland to restoration project.

"Until the grassland has been re-established, management of the site is designed to exclude prairie dogs," Bachand stated.

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While prairie dogs have fans, they also have critics who consider them pests. In the past, residents living near city natural areas with prairie dog populations have had problems with animals getting in their yards and destroying vegetation.

Taylor said she would like to find a 20- to 40-acre site in Larimer County to locate the prairie dog colony. She plans to work with the Prairie Dog Coalition, a Boulder-based group associated with the Humane Society of the United States, to find a proper site and get assistance with the move.

A Kickstarter or GoFundMe campaign might be used to raise money for the project, she said.

"I'd love to see the community get involved with this," Taylor said.

Cars and trucks noisily swooshed by the property during a recent afternoon. Prairie dogs wandered around the site to feed on grass and yip warnings about the presence of people.

A hawk soaring overhead sent the animals ducking into their holes only to emerge a few minutes later.

Taylor said she is not alone is searching for humane management solutions for urban prairie dogs.

"There are quite a number of people in this town who think like I do: That prairie dogs contribute a lot to the ecosystem and are part of our community and need to be treated as such," she said. "We need to take care of them."

Those interested in helping with the effort to relocate the prairie dogs at Buckingham and Lemay may contact Helen Taylor by email at helentaylor3@comcast.net or call 970-556-3994.

Kevin Duggan is a Coloradoan senior reporter covering local government. Follow him on Twitter, @coloradoan_dugg.

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New Pinewood Reservoir campground damaged by vehicle

Stephen Meyers, The Coloradoan8:57 p.m. MDT April 23, 2015

(Photo: Courtesy of Larimer County Natural Resources)

4CONNECT 13TWEETLINKEDIN 1COMMENTEMAILMORE

A new, yet-to-be-open campground at Pinewood Reservoir was damaged Sunday, apparently by a motorist on a late night drive, leaving deep tire marks on the newly-seeded grass and landscaped areas.

Larimer County Ranger W. Talbott said he suspects the event happened Sunday evening, with a 4X4 of some sort. The area is closed to the public, orange cones lining the entrance, as construction of Windy Pines Campground is completed. Talbott estimated the monetary damage could be a "few hundred" to "several thousand" dollars.

"Someone went in there and tore it up. It's going to have to be re-seeded. The tire marks are going to have to be smoothed out," said Talbott, who wasn't sure if the repairs could be done by hand, or if machinery will be needed.

Located southwest of Loveland near Carter Lake, Windy Pines Campground at Pinewood Reservoir is set to open for Memorial Day weekend.

The campground includes 15 new electrical campsites, a playscape, outdoor classroom and new vault restrooms. The project is an implementation of the 2007 master plan.

Construction began last September, which also included road improvements, day-use areas and an expanded boat ramp.

Talbott anticipates the campground will still open for Memorial Day.

If anyone has information regarding the damage to campground at Pinewood Reservoir, contact Ranger W. Talbott at 970-619-4454.

Xplore reporter Stephen Meyers covers the outdoors and recreation for the Coloradoan. Follow him on Twitter @stemeyer or Facebook.com/meyersreports.