

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Steamboat Springs Area Open Space and Trails Master Plan (OSTMP) provides a detailed inventory of the City's existing open space and trails resources, as well as direction for the future improvement, expansion, and management of those resources. This includes development of a classification system to define the various types of open space that make up the system and a determination of how existing City-owned properties fit within this system. In addition, the Plan identifies additional conservation opportunities based on a consideration of habitat values and other resource considerations identified by the community.

Similarly, the Plan defines a more definitive classification system for trails. The OSTMP classifies each type of trail and identifies future trail opportunities, emphasizing working to further interconnect the network, and expanding the on-street bike lane system.

Implementation issues are also addressed. A key recommendation in this area is adoption of a dedicated funding source. Although a variety of funding tools were considered, a dedicated sales tax is likely the best available choice. Sales tax revenue is clearly the most commonly used funding tool for open space programs in Colorado. One of the most obvious advantages of this funding strategy in a community like Steamboat Springs is the fact that a large percentage of the revenue would be generated by visitors to the community, many of whom are drawn to Steamboat Springs by the quality of its setting and the open spaces that surround it. Long term maintenance and management costs should be recognized from the beginning and built into the funding strategy.

The remainder of this Executive Summary further outlines the OSTMP's key elements and recommendations.



## PLAN PURPOSE

Open space plays a major role in the identity of the Steamboat Springs area, as well as the area's economy and quality of life. Residents and visitors here prize open space resources, as indicated in recent community surveys and in the 2004 Community Plan. With continued growth and development pressure here, open space protection will be a powerful tool for keeping the character and environmental health of the Yampa Valley intact.

The City and other organizations in the Yampa Valley have long been active in open space conservation and have many notable achievements, such as the Yampa River Legacy Project and the Routt County Purchase of Development Rights Program. The Steamboat Springs Area Open Space and Trails Master Plan (OSTMP) was initiated in the summer of 2006 in recognition of the importance community residents place on open space, as well as new challenges that have emerged.

## PROCESS/PARTICIPANTS

The 18-month planning process involved two public workshops and numerous Technical Advisory Committee meetings. Stakeholder groups were also involved throughout the process.

The Technical Advisory Committee was comprised of:

- Routt County Planning Department
- Steamboat Springs Parks, Open Space, and Recreational Services
- Steamboat Springs Department of Planning and Community Development
- Steamboat Springs Internal Services (GIS)
- Yampa Valley Land Trust
- Colorado Division of Wildlife

Stakeholder groups included:

- Routt County Extension Office
- Routt County Riders
- Adjacent Emerald Mountain Land Owners

- Steamboat II Metro District
- Yampa Valley Fly Fishers
- U.S. Bureau of Land Management
- Routt County Purchase of Development Rights Citizens Advisory Board
- Friends of the Yampa

## EXISTING RESOURCES

The OSTMP includes a detailed inventory of the existing resources found in the Steamboat Springs area. The area is rich in natural resources, home to a wealth of biodiversity, unique geomorphology, and stunning viewsheds. These amenities signify the Yampa Valley and Steamboat Springs as one of Colorado's most unspoiled and authentic mountain communities.

The City currently has approximately 1946 acres of open space properties, varying in size from approximately 13.5 acres (Fournier Property) to over 800 acres (Spring Creek Mountain Preserve). These properties are used for limited recreation, wildlife habitat protection, neighborhood/wildland buffers, and agriculture.

City-owned open space properties are bolstered by thousands of additional acres of open space in the surrounding area. These include public lands owned by the US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Colorado Division of Wildlife, and Colorado State Parks, and thousands of acres of private lands protected in perpetuity under conservation easements.

The City has also begun to connect the area through an extensive multi-user trail network. To date, the City has approximately 43 miles of trail, consisting mostly of unpaved trails. The Yampa River Core Trail currently extends over 6 miles north to south. Secondary trails include portions of the Spring Creek Trail (~5 miles), the Walton Creek Trail (~1 mile), and various neighborhood trails. The Howelsen Hill Trail System comprises

the majority of the backcountry trail network, with over 11 miles of natural surface trails.

### PLAN VISION

Public input, as well as guidance from the Technical Advisory Committee and other plan participants led to the following OSTMP Vision:

“The community will develop a well financed and well maintained open lands program to protect the physical beauty, the open spaces, the special places, and the healthy ecosystem of the valley in perpetuity. Our open land program will not only seek to protect our open space resources, but also to educate our citizens on the open space treasures in their community.

Our community will take a comprehensive and regional approach to development of a trail system, linking existing trails, giving neighborhoods access to trails, and connecting urban and rural trails to public lands.”

### OPEN SPACE OPPORTUNITY AREAS

To achieve the Plan Vision, the OSTMP provides general opportunity areas for future open space acquisition. These areas, which are not prioritized, are intended to stimulate discussion about what open space means to the community and the types of places people treasure most. Their protection would be accomplished in partnership with landowners. It is not expected that all of the land within an opportunity area would be protected. Protection mechanisms for lands included within an opportunity area include acquisition, conservation easements, inclusion within a Land Preservation Subdivisions, and more. These protected lands may or may not have public access.

Lands protected as open space can continue to be used for a variety of purposes, including agriculture and other historic uses. Recreational opportunities, such as trails and environmental education, could

be integrated, depending on the property’s intended use and other agreements.

### TRAIL RECOMMENDATIONS

The OSTMP provides a City-wide off-street trail classification system that will guide the City’s decision process in creating a functional, interconnected trail system as new development and infrastructure improvements occur. The Plan also recommends that the expansion of the trail network be focused on:

- Completing key links within the existing trail system;
- Providing connections to and creating an internal framework for new developments; and
- Expanding upon the existing system to provide regional connections.

### IMPLEMENTATION/NEXT STEPS

Successful implementation of the OSTMP will rely on the use of funding strategies, voluntary efforts, and regulatory tools.

#### Funding Strategies

Public funding for open space is widely supported by the Steamboat Springs community; however, the City is one of the few mountain communities without a dedicated sales tax at the municipal level for this purpose. Some level of on-going, local funding is essential to building a full-scale program, one that has a reliable and predictable revenue stream, including funds needed for operations, long-term management and maintenance.

Dedicated sales tax is the tool of choice for open space protection in Colorado, and likely the preferred strategy for Steamboat Springs. Based on current sales tax data, a dedicated sales tax rate of 1/4 cent would yield approximately \$1.125 million, while a lower rate of 1/8 cent would produce annual revenue of \$563,000. Sales tax receipts are healthy in Steamboat Springs; for example, proceeds increased 12% between 2005 and 2006.

Other funding strategies include property tax, which has been an instrumental tool in the Routt County Purchase of Development Rights Program, a lodging tax to capitalize on the tourism market, and a variety of grants, such as Great Outdoors Colorado. Each of these strategies presents challenges that are discussed in more depth in the Plan.

#### Voluntary Efforts

Both Federal and Colorado tax law provides powerful incentives for landowners to donate conservation easements. This has and will continue to be instrumental in the protection of open space in the Steamboat Springs area.

#### Regulatory Tools

Regulatory tools are a third mechanism for open space protection. Many of these potential tools were previously identified in the 2004 Steamboat Springs Area Community Plan and are still relevant as methods for natural resource protection. For those regulatory tools that City Council and the Board of County Commissioners support, next steps should be taken to revise the appropriate codes as necessary to accomplish these goals.