

NEWS

A Northern Colorado natural area is set to expand by 140 acres



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Published 5:02 a.m. MT June 28, 2024 | Updated 9:56 a.m. MT July 1, 2024

LOVELAND — Soon after the COVID-19 pandemic took off, Chris and LeAnn Ackerman decided to sell their belongings and travel in a 24-foot RV.

For three and a half years, they explored the country, visiting every state and all 63 national parks while documenting their journey.

When they decided to settle, they chose Colorado as their new home.

“You wake up in the morning and just say, ‘I can’t believe it’s so pretty,’” Chris said while sitting on a bench in Prairie Ridge Natural Area on a cloudless summer morning.

On June 21, Great Outdoors Colorado announced a \$1.1 million grant to the City of Loveland to add 140 acres to Prairie Ridge Natural Area.

“The more we can do to preserve the habitat, and keep native species, it really benefits everyone,” Debbie Eley, Loveland’s open lands and trails resource specialist, said while sitting on a different bench where Longs Peak creped in the background.

Eley said once you hike deeper into Prairie Ridge, the viewsheds are fantastic.

“It might not look like the most special place in the world when you’re at the parking lot, but if you go out and explore, it’s a really special place,” Eley said.

Current and future land use at Prairie Ridge Natural Area

Currently, Prairie Ridge space is made up of 785 acres; around two-thirds of the property on the east side is farmed for dryland wheat. The remainder is native prairie, Eley said.

That western side of the land includes “hogbacks, shale ridges, shortgrass prairie and foothills shrubland, providing habitat for a variety of wildlife such as raptors, songbirds, coyote, red fox, bobcat and mule deer,” according to the city’s website.

While much of the new 140 acres that will be acquired will be leased for agriculture, there will be a new trail from the current parking lot down to 57th Street, providing a place people can bike and hike safely from to then connect with the rest of the area.

“That's a big value for us ... and to be able to provide access to natural areas and open lands in all parts of the city,” Eley said.

This new trail is expected to be open around 2026.

Rising costs, development pressure

In 2000, Loveland along with Fort Collins and Larimer County (with funding from Great Outdoors Colorado) joined forces to get the original property for around \$3.1 million.

That is almost \$4,000 per acre.

But rising costs create a challenge for conservation with limited dollars. Eley said total funds for the new land are about undefined (which includes contributions from Fort Collins, Larimer County, a private donor and the High Plains Foundation), making that purchase more than \$48,000 per acre.

“Land values have increased that much over the last quarter century, so the development pressure is so much greater now,” Eley said.

Maintaining part of the property in agriculture not only protects that heritage, Eley said, but it also keeps that development at bay.

The other advantage is the land management that comes with it.

“So, whoever has the lease has to control the weeds and take good care of the property. They can't just let it go, they have to abide by that lease,” Eley said. “So that's a benefit to us, because then we don't have to spend the time and money to manage it.”

The purchase will be made through a fee-title acquisition, which means Loveland will own the space. On top of that, it will also be placed on a conservation easement. So if the city wants to build more houses there in the future, it wouldn't be able to.

‘Appreciating nature’

Chris Ackerman runs three times a week with his wife, who's the real runner, he said. But June 25 was his day off.

Instead, he went out to Prairie Ridge to read his Bible and soak up the little details — like “watch a beetle crawl across the road and wonder what his life’s all about.”

On my walk across the trail, bees visited showy milkweeds, prairie dogs peeked from their burrows, red-winged blackbirds and western meadowlarks tweeted, and crickets drowned out the background noise with their chirps.

Chris said he grew up on a wheat farm in Illinois and the views from the bench in Prairie Ridge remind him of those days.

“What a great environment to have this,” he said. “With all the heartache they talk about in the world, people need to come sit on this bench and enjoy a few moments just appreciating nature.”