



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: OUR LANDS OUR FUTURE

Recreation & Conservation  
Choices for Northern Colorado





# OUR LANDS OUR FUTURE

RECREATION & CONSERVATION CHOICES  
FOR NORTHERN COLORADO

This county-wide study of the region's needs and preferences related to land conservation, stewardship of locally-conserved lands, and outdoor recreation was led by the following partners:

- Larimer County
- City of Fort Collins
- City of Loveland
- Town of Berthoud
- Town of Estes Park
- Town of Johnstown
- Town of Timnath
- Town of Wellington
- Town of Windsor



Photo by Walt Hubis

With the recognition that change will inevitably occur and that open space is a diminishing resource in the urbanizing Front Range, Larimer County and all of the municipalities within joined together to analyze the challenges, opportunities, and possible gaps in their collective land conservation, stewardship, and outdoor recreation programs and portfolios.

Our Lands - Our Future is the result of residents identifying county-wide priorities for land conservation, stewardship, and outdoor recreation in the future. Working with willing landowners and conservation partners, public land managers can utilize the tools and opportunity maps to ensure that investments are strategic, cost-effective, and representative of community values. Local government master planning efforts – especially those occurring in 2013 and 2014 by Larimer County, Loveland, Fort Collins, and Berthoud – will save land managers time and effort by using this study's overall or jurisdiction-specific survey results, land management tools, financial analyses, and opportunity maps as a starting point.



The number and breadth of successful partnerships working to conserve and properly maintain natural areas in Larimer County is unprecedented in Colorado. Through comprehensive plans and programs, each jurisdiction proposes to work cooperatively to achieve four broad goals:

- Conserve working farms and ranches;
- Create regionally-significant natural open spaces to provide appropriate outdoor recreation and education opportunities;
- Protect and enhance natural resource and wildlife areas; and
- Create natural open spaces within the urban environment to provide appropriate outdoor recreation and education opportunities.

Together, these four goals mutually support a variety of environmental quality, education, recreation, physical health, community character, and heritage objectives that ultimately reinforce our region's quality of life and strategic economic position. Recognizing this interdependence, Our Lands - Our Future provides a series of tools and maps to identify and steward the county's most valuable land conservation and outdoor recreation opportunities and assets. Our Lands - Our Future focused on accomplishing the following specific actions:

- Create common tools for future master planning efforts that function both county-wide and locally, including
  - Inventory of existing open space and outdoor recreation resources
  - Assessment of levels of service and gaps in meeting public outdoor recreation needs
  - Online, interactive land conservation mapping website



- Two county-wide surveys with individual community results
- An assessment of financial realities and needs
- Funding scenarios for land conservation, recreation improvements, and ongoing management
- Quantify the economic benefits of land conservation and outdoor recreation.
- Build a shared vision, based on citizen input, of conservation and recreation priorities that supports regional collaboration and fosters partnerships.
- Strengthen partnerships, broaden community engagement, assess public satisfaction and support for existing land conservation and outdoor recreation programs, and identify future needs.
- Build awareness and understanding of the financial requirements and funding possibilities to support the vision.



# RECREATION AND CONSERVATION CHOICES

This report frames the most critical choices facing the region and providing the tools, research, and resources to assist local agencies and their citizens in implementing common goals more efficiently and effectively.

**Chapter 1. Our Purpose** celebrates the success of efforts by local governments and their partners to conserve approximately 125,000 acres or 195 square miles throughout Larimer County, the majority occurring during the last decade of the Help Preserve Open Spaces tax initiative. The chapter highlights the project’s goals and successful partnerships that must continue in the future. As Larimer County, the City of Loveland, the City of Fort Collins, and the Town of Berthoud embark on updating their respective master plans in 2013 and 2014, and in anticipation of the sunset of the county-wide Help Preserve Open Spaces 1/4 cent sales tax in 2018, the tools and resources of Our Lands – Our Future should greatly inform decision-making processes.

When asked to list “the top three to five things Larimer County should focus on in the future,” protection of open spaces was seen as the single most important concern.  
 - Larimer County Quality of Life Survey, 2013

**Chapter 2. Our Values** summarizes the results of public surveys, regional events, interactive online GIS scenarios, participation of all of the open space advisory boards across the county, and over 45 local presentations between June 2012 and June 2013.

Over 4,200 citizens were asked to offer feedback on key choices: *Which types of land and recreation should be provided? Where? What emphasis should be given to each type of open space? How should open space tax dollars be allocated? How should public funds be obtained for continued land conservation and recreation?*

## Our Lands, Our Future: Recreation & Conservation Choices for Northern Colorado



## Local Parks, Recreation, Open Space & Trails Master Plans



### Chapter 3. Our Accomplishments and Challenges

describes the policies, programs, and conserved properties of each local government. These programs, their portfolios, and their policies must change as Larimer County's demographics change: the population is growing, becoming older and more ethnically diverse, and these trends are expected to continue well into the future. For example, with a 2010 population of 305,525 and approximately 125,000 acres of land conserved by local governments, these conservation efforts have resulted in the provision of approximately 0.4 acre of open space for each resident. In order to maintain this same ratio in response to continuing growth, local government efforts would need to conserve more than 70,000 additional acres by the year 2040 when an additional 175,000 people are forecasted to reside within Larimer County and its communities. With profound land use change along the Front Range and recognition of the fact that the amount of state and federal land has remained relatively static for nearly a century, there is a strong need for local governments to innovatively respond to new land conservation and recreation demands.

Increasingly, land managers must make hard choices, such as: *How best to conserve regionally and locally significant resources? How should programs respond to rebounding property values and continued pressure for agricultural land and water conversion? How can programs adapt to new recreational trends, and the associated increasing costs to best address the needs of increasingly diverse age and ethnic audiences?*



Larimer County is losing 4,500 acres of agricultural land/year at a cost of \$1.2 million in agricultural output (sales).



Photo by Sandy Werkmeister





Visitor spending attributable to open space in Larimer County is \$4.2 to \$5.6 million annually.



Communities able to conserve open spaces enjoy a competitive economic advantage over those who cannot.

Red Mountain Open Space; photo by Rich Ernst

**Chapter 4. Our Economic Benefits** quantifies the monetary value of land conservation and recreational activities, namely from agriculture, business and employee retention, enhanced property values, and recreation and tourism spending. The study found that proximity to open space resulted in an increase of \$104 million in residential property values in Larimer County, which generated an additional \$750,000 in property taxes in 2012. As the nation's workforce evolves, workers have more flexibility in choosing where to live. Studies have shown that a quality of life defined by open spaces, recreation, and scenery has become a major factor in their choices of where to live and invest in new businesses. Tourism, agriculture, and a variety of outdoor recreational pursuits – from backcountry hiking to motor boating – support local employment; and the region's parks, open space, and trails support a high quality of life that attracts residents and businesses to the area. In light of these findings, a key question is: *How can the significant direct and indirect economic benefits provided by public land conservation and recreation programs support these same programs?*



**Chapter 5. Our Financial Choices** summarizes the current funding for land conservation and management, and the constraints facing the partners over the next 10 years. Open lands acquisition and management revenues have been derived from four primary sources: revenues from the county-wide Help Preserve Open Spaces sales tax which sunsets in 2018; the City of Fort Collins Open Space Yes! sales tax revenues; the State’s Colorado Lottery Conservation Trust Fund; and grants from Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) through a competitive application process. GOCO grants along with donations of land and private conservation easements remain a possibility for the future.

Survey results strongly support increasing outdoor recreation opportunities, yet the open space sales tax initiatives impose an expenditure allocation (for example, Open Space Yes! allocates 80% for land conservation and restoration and 20% for operations and maintenance), thereby constraining the partners’ abilities to provide public access and facility needs. As public use increases – a function of visitation, intensity of recreational activities, and proximity to urban areas – the long-term costs to manage a property also increase. Conversely, properties that generally do not allow public access, such as conservation easements, are cost-neutral and in some cases generate revenue (Figure ES.1).

Early open space conservation efforts focused on protecting high value landscapes and constructing visitor infrastructure. As public use and recreation increases, so does the need for visitor infrastructure development, which can further increase long-term management and stewardship costs. Over time the capital costs associated with site development and restoration and the long-term and ever increasing operation and maintenance costs and capital replacement costs require a greater proportion of a program’s funding. If the total available funding remains constant, a smaller portion of revenues are available for land conservation (Figure ES.2).

The chapter concludes with a discussion of two potential financial scenarios that were developed to estimate the costs associated with continued management of existing open lands plus the acquisition of additional land types identified through public input. The two scenarios were developed using a financial model which estimates costs to operate and maintain existing conserved land plus the costs to acquire, operate and maintain any future land acquisition. The model was built to analyze the partners’ collective ability on a county scale. The model can also be customized by adjusting certain inputs, such as revenue, acreage, and inflation to match each municipality’s specific situation.

Scenario #1 predicts what could happen over the next 10 years if the HPOS Sales Tax, which expires in 2018, is not extended by County voters. A conservative 6,500 acres of land could be conserved over the next four years using a combination of fee simple acquisition and the acquisition of conservation easements. After 2018, when the HPOS Sales Tax expires the, annual maintenance costs continue until the funds run out. By 2023 the accumulated reserves of each partner could be exhausted. Managing our conserved lands and the associated recreational activities could become financially unsustainable and most sites would have to be closed.

Scenario #2 predicts what can happen over the next 10 years if the HPOS sales tax is extended by County voters prior to 2018 at its current tax rate. Up to 20,000 acres of new lands could be conserved through a combination of fee simple acquisition and conservation easements and the extended HPOS sales tax revenues could be adequate for maintaining the existing land plus the newly acquired lands.

With the sunset of the Help Preserve Open Spaces sales tax less than 5 years away, the key choices are: *How should continuation of long-term land management be funded? What is the appropriate balance between conserving the four open space types, given the financial constraints facing local programs? What is the appropriate balance between conserving more expensive land in urban areas versus less expensive lands in rural parts of the county? What is the appropriate balance between the two protection methods – fee simple acquisition vs. conservation easements? What is the most appropriate allocation of resources between the needs for land conservation, development of new recreation and visitor facilities, and on-going management?*





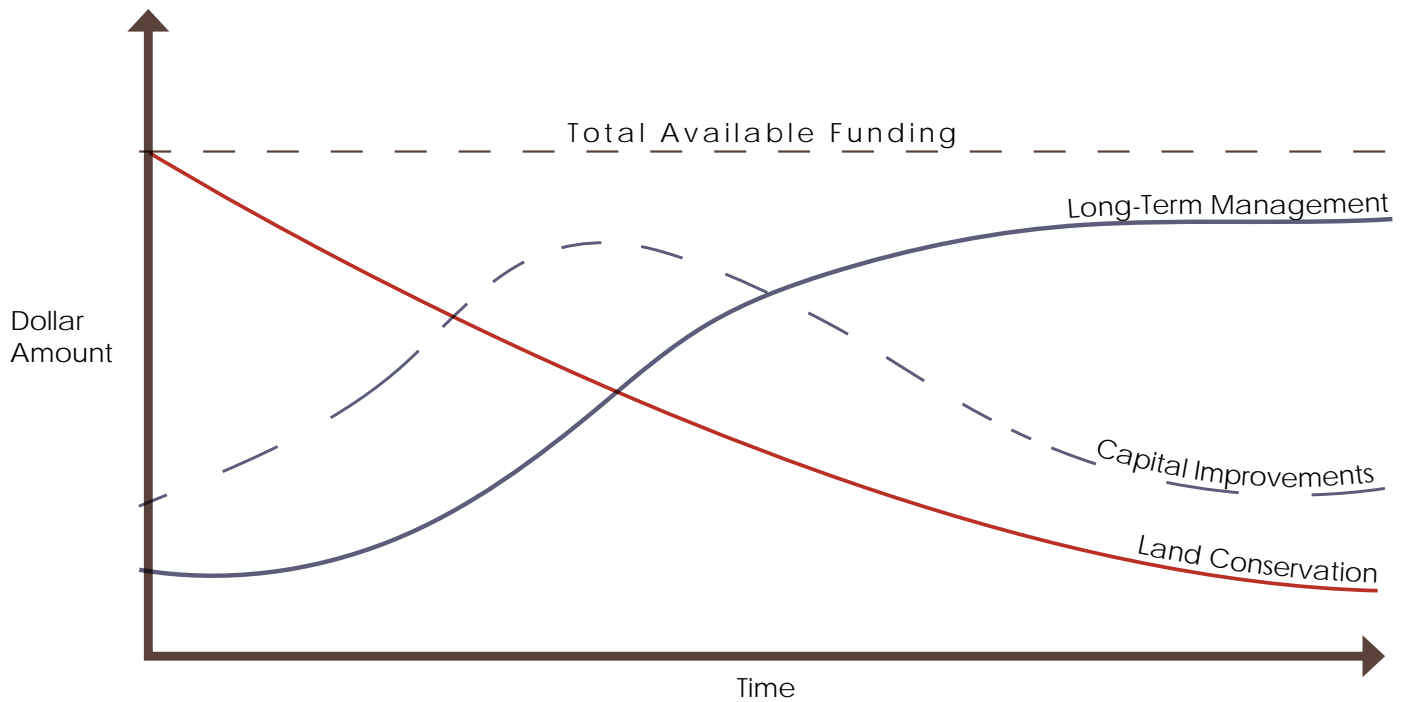


Figure ES.1 Financial Requirements Over Time



Source: Larimer County Open Lands Program, 2013.  
 Costs discussed in this graphic are long-term management costs and do not include initial startup costs and capital facility development.

Figure ES.2 Spectrum of Long-term Management Costs

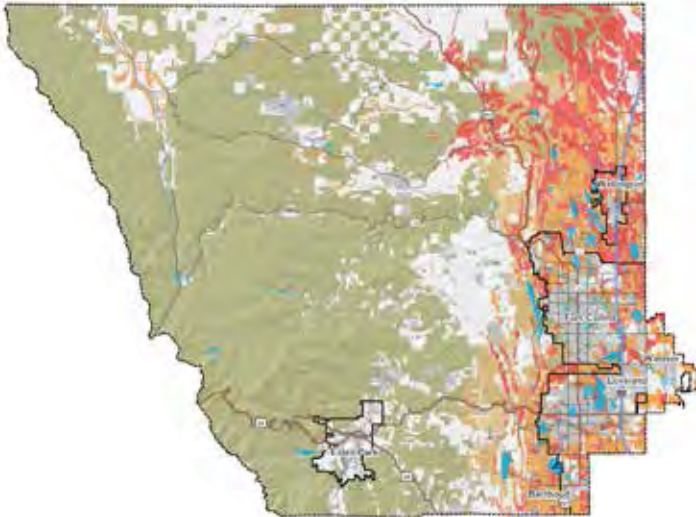


**Chapter 6. Creating Our Vision** illustrates four open space opportunity maps for each of the four common goals:

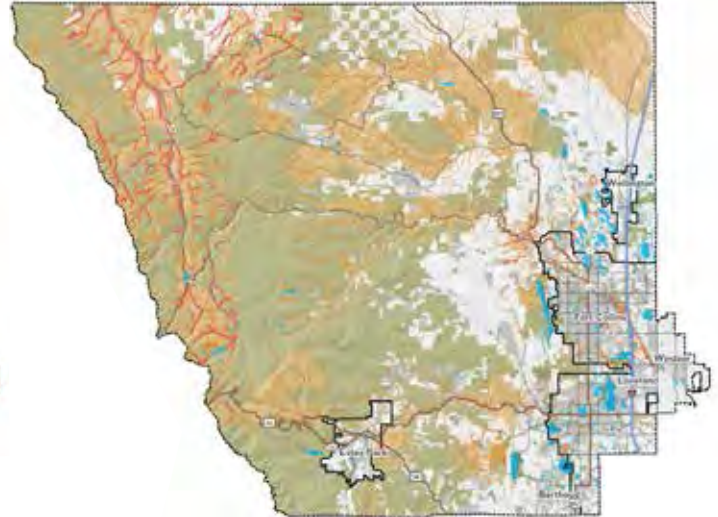
- Conserve working farms and ranches;
- Create regional conservation, recreation, and tourism opportunities;
- Conserve natural resources and wildlife habitats; and
- Enhance urban open space and trail systems.

The opportunity maps were developed by identifying our conservation and recreation values and goals and collecting the best available data related to each goal (ex. critical wildlife habitat, planned trails, etc.) and mapping those data across the county.

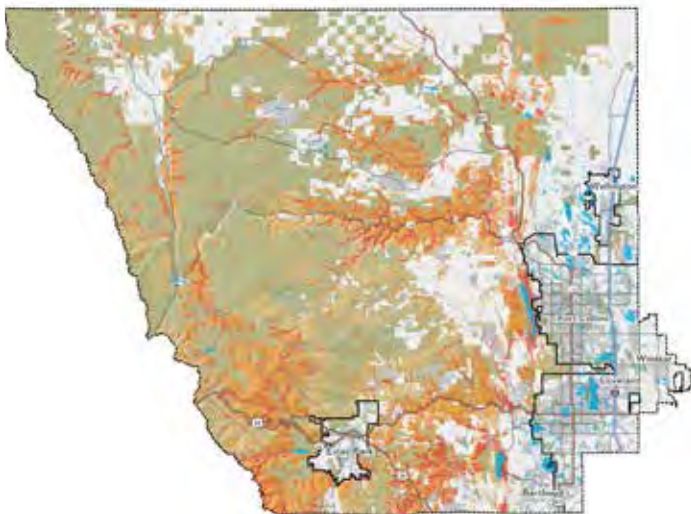
**Working Farm & Ranch Opportunities**



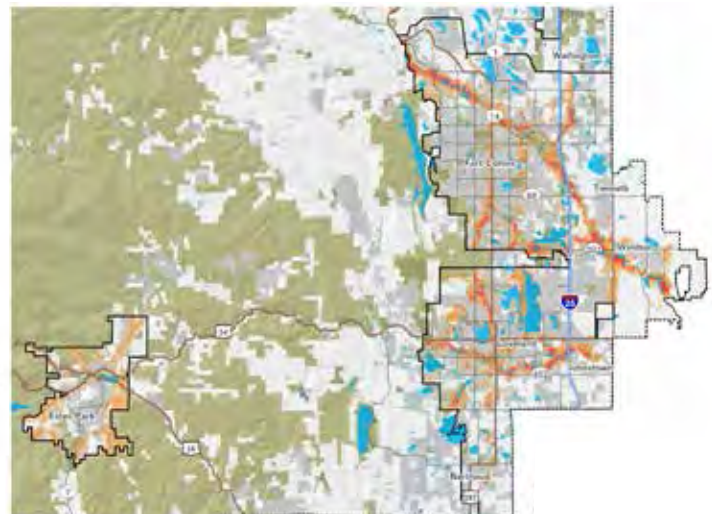
**Natural Resource & Wildlife Area Opportunities**



**Regional Open Space & Trail Opportunities**



**Urban Open Space & Trail Opportunities**



|   |                               |   |                        |
|---|-------------------------------|---|------------------------|
|  | Growth Management Area        |  | Moderate Value         |
|  | All Conserved Lands and Parks |  | Moderate to High Value |
|  | Developed Land                |  | High Value             |
|  | Water Bodies                  |   |                        |

Opportunity maps show where open space values occur for each goal. The maps are based on existing public information and are not intended for use in a regulatory context. Rather they identify opportunities for project partners to work with willing landowners on voluntary land conservation.

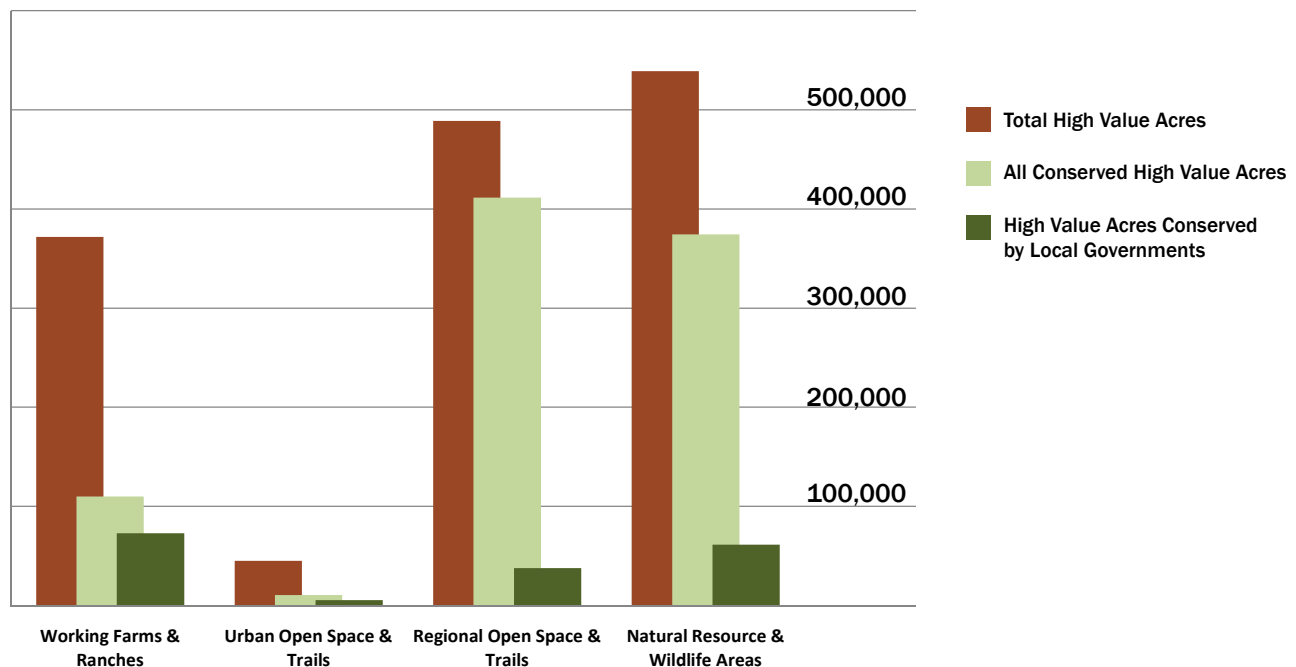


When combined on the interactive mapping website (<http://tplgis.org/OurLands-OurFuture>), the opportunity maps illustrate where the common goals can be achieved in the same location. Partners and community groups can use the composite maps to identify where best to allocate funding to achieve several conservation objectives and community values in a single transaction. While the balance between these goals varies across jurisdictions, the maps and the composite mapping tool provide opportunity for a flexible vision for local conservation, one that can be adapted to each jurisdiction's unique needs and preferences.

Advisory boards evaluated criteria for each goal and using the results of the county-wide public preference surveys, applied weights to each goal in order to display where the highest value areas for each open space goal occur.

Gaps in land protection were identified by comparing the moderate and high value areas against conserved properties. Past conservation efforts have effectively conserved 84% and 69% of the high value regional and natural resource areas, respectively. Conversely, only 30% of working farms and ranches and 24% of urban open spaces and trails high-value acres are currently under some form of protection.

**Conservation Gaps in High Value Lands (in acres) in Larimer County**



In summary, the county-wide and jurisdictional-specific needs assessment, opportunity maps, financial models, and citizen priorities in Our Lands - Our Future will help conservation partners and public land managers ensure that investments are strategic, cost-effective, and representative of community values. In updating their respective master plans, local governments will save taxpayers time and effort by using this study as a starting point.







## PROJECT PARTNERS



**Larimer County**



**City of Fort Collins**



**City of Loveland**



**Town of Berthoud**



**Town of Estes Park**



**Town of Johnstown**



**Town of Timnath**



**Town of Wellington**



**Town of Windsor**

