

OPEN LANDS PROGRAM ANNUAL REPORT 1996

LARIMER COUNTY PARKS & OPEN LANDS



A letter from the chairman

Setting the Vision: Land Preservation in Larimer County

In 1995, Larimer County voters overwhelmingly passed a citizen's initiative to levy an 8-year 1/4 cent sales and use tax specifically to protect important pieces of our Western landscape. Thanks to that blessing from local residents, the Larimer County Open Lands Program has wasted no time in starting a major land-preservation effort.

During 1996, our first full year of operation, we made commitments to participate in \$12.5 million of purchases and special projects. Critical to this effort was forma-

tion of strategic partnerships. By working with the cities and towns of Larimer County, state agencies, Great Outdoors Colorado, private land trusts and others, we more than doubled our buying power.

During 1996 sales tax collections totaled approximately \$5.4 million. Of that, about \$3.2 million was distributed to cities and towns, with the county's share at \$2.2 million.

With partners, we identified critical projects and shared in the costs. Projects that could not have been financed by one entity were accomplished through cooperative efforts.

The best example is the Poudre/Big Thompson Rivers Legacy Project, in which over 8,000 acres of land, stretching from the foothills to Greeley, will be protected. Local partners will contribute about \$9.7 million for the project, and \$3.4 million will be provided by Great Outdoors Colorado. This long-term project would not have been possible without region-wide cooperation.

And not only are the partners sharing money, we are sharing a vision for the future of Northern Colorado. This region is blessed with a variety of landscapes, natural features and outdoor recreational amenities found in few places in the world, and we're working together to preserve them. To guide our preservation efforts, we have worked with resource professionals to identify major landscape systems and features in Larimer County.

Early in 1996, K-Lynn Cameron was appointed manager of Open Lands, a program within the Larimer County Parks and Open Lands Department. Also, the Open Lands Advisory Board was appointed by the County Commissioners.

The County Commissioners, advisory board and staff moved quickly to establish a framework to guide the program. We created and adopted a mission statement and guiding principles; developed and adopted an assessment process for properties; and developed and adopted an acquisition process that is fair and equitable for property owners. Staff also manages a database of potential acquisition properties and landowners interested in the program.

Our first year has been exciting and productive! The Larimer County Open Lands Program, thanks to the foresight of county voters, is making sure important portions of our incredible landscape are preserved for future generations.

Tom Keith,
Chairman, Larimer County Open Lands Advisory Board

A message from the director

Parks and Open Lands Department Growing

The Larimer County Parks and Open Lands Department manages some of the most important and beautiful parks in Northern Colorado. Our 14 park areas range from Glade Park – just two acres in size, to Horsetooth Mountain Park and Reservoir with over 6,000 acres. These parks accommodate a wide range of uses from picnicking to hiking, from boating to mountain biking, and more.

We also operate the Larimer County Fairgrounds in Loveland, a meeting place for all county residents and an important tradition for the agricultural community. A master plan for that facility is now under development.

In 1996 we added "Open Lands" to our name to more accurately reflect our work.

The Help Preserve Open Spaces tax provided extra financial resources we needed to fulfill our mission. The tax adds about \$2.2 million per year to our budget which now totals about \$5 million.

During 1996, we spent \$1.3 million on much-needed improvement projects at our existing regional parks. These included replacing restrooms, improving campgrounds, enhancing boat ramps and many other projects. We also are establishing an annual improvement and maintenance program to guarantee our recreational facilities remain in good condition.

Our goals will continue to be providing Larimer County residents with high quality recreational opportunities and to preserve our outstanding western landscape.

John MacFarlane,
Director, Parks and Open Lands Department

"Everyone living here today appreciates the Larimer County Open Lands Program. But the people of future generations will benefit the most. They'll look back and say, 'We're really glad that the people of Larimer County voted to preserve open space back in 1995.'"

*Jim Disney,
County Commissioner District 3*

Mission Statement and Guiding Principles

of the Larimer County Open Lands Program

The Mission of the Larimer County Open Lands Program is to preserve and provide significant open space, natural areas, wildlife habitat, parks and trails for present and future generations. These open lands provide opportunities for leisure, human renewal and protection of our natural and cultural diversity. Efforts to fulfill this mission will be guided by the following principles:

- Important open lands, natural areas, parks and trails are defined in the Help Preserve Open Spaces Initiative, the Larimer County Parks Master Plan, the Plan for the Region Between Loveland and Fort Collins and other adopted plans.
- Acquisition is fair to property owners, taxpayers and Larimer County citizens, and is from willing sellers only.
- An emphasis is focused on working with willing landowners to develop land-use alternatives and protection strategies that meet the landowner's financial needs and the County's goal to preserve significant open lands.
- Available resources are invested in a manner to achieve a balance between urgent, immediate demands and farsighted, long-range goals.
- Stewardship of our land acquisitions is very important. Larimer County develops wise management policies that fit within our fiscal resources. When development of trails and outdoor recreation facilities is determined appropriate, then development and management of these facilities minimizes conflicts with wildlife needs and is sensitive to the natural environment.
- Distribution of funds over time for open lands, parks and trails is balanced and fairly distributed throughout the county.
- Cooperation with partners is important to leverage available resources. Partners include municipalities, government agencies and programs, land trusts and private individuals.

Open Lands Board Provides Representation, Expertise

The Open Lands Advisory Board makes recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners regarding land acquisitions.

Board members include seven citizens appointed at large, one elected official or an appointee from Berthoud, Estes Park, Fort Collins and Loveland; one member from the Larimer County Planning Commission and one appointed alternate. The membership of the advisory board represents a balance in geography, population and interest.

The board members:

- Tom Keith, chairman of the board, is an environmental planner who lives in Fort Collins.
- John Heaton, formerly on the county parks board, lives in the corridor between Fort Collins and Loveland.
- Larry Kendall is chairman of The Group, a Fort Collins real estate company. He also lives in Fort Collins.
- Kathay Rennels, a rancher and Realtor, is a member of the 35-acre Task Force and lives in the Livermore area.
- Nancy Wallace, an attorney, lives in northern Larimer County.
- Wendell Amos, is a member of the 35-Acre Task Force, serves on the Larimer County Planning Commission, and lives in Estes Park.
- Pete Salg, owner of area Wendy's Restaurants Inc., is on the 35-acre Task Force and also serves on the Larimer County Planning Commission. He lives in Loveland.

- Milan Karspeck is an appointed member from the Berthoud Town Board.
- Gary Klaphake is an appointed member and Town Manager of Estes Park.
- Tom Shoemaker is an appointed member and Director of Natural Resources for the city of Fort Collins.
- Kathy Gilliland is an appointed member from the Loveland City Council.
- Linda Stanley is an appointed member from the Larimer County Planning Commission. She lives in Fort Collins.
- Merrill Kaufman, an alternate, is an ecologist for the U.S. Forest Service and lives in Fort Collins.

The board meets the fourth Thursday of every month, 5-8 p.m. The meetings are open to the public. For meeting location or more information, call 679-4570.



Open Lands Board and Staff Front row l. to r.: Tom Shoemaker, Kathay Rennels, Wendell Amos, Tom Keith, Daryl Burkhard. Back row l. to r.: Pete Salg, Gary Klaphake, John Heaton, K-Lynn Cameron, Milan Karspeck, Larry Kendall, Nancy Wallace, Merrill Kaufman, Jerry White, Deb Stillwell, John MacFarlane. Not pictured: Kathy Gilliland, Linda Stanley

Public Outreach and Environmental Planning

It is the role of the Open Lands Program to look into the future, study important issues and provide assistance to rural landowners. During 1996 and early this year, we participated in several special projects that will aid our planning efforts.

- A special outreach project was the Agricultural Land Protection Forum held in February. The half-day session was designed to provide landowners, attorneys and Realtors with information about land preservation and protecting the finances of agricultural families. More forums like this one are being planned.
- Studying important natural areas is a crucial part of the land preservation process. During 1996 the Open Lands Program participated in two important studies.

The Natural Heritage Inventory and the Wetland and Riparian Area Inventory. Cost of the studies, shared with Great Outdoors Colorado, totaled \$120,112. The Open Lands Program contributed \$29,350.

The primary goal of the studies was to identify areas in Larimer County with natural heritage significance. Researchers entered private land only with permission of the landowner.

The studies, which carry no regulatory authority, made several recommendations. These are a few of the recommendations: develop local plans to protect significant natural areas; develop a comprehensive county-wide program to protect wetlands; encourage cooperation between landowners and agencies; help increase public awareness of the importance of natural areas; use incentives to promote conservation efforts by private landowners; and prohibit introduction of non-native species that adversely affect natural areas, wetlands and riparian areas.

- From Fort Collins to Colorado Springs, the Hogbacks, foothills and mountains provide an important backdrop for the urban Front Range. Along with El Paso, Douglas, Jefferson and Boulder counties and Great Outdoors Colorado, we participated in the Mountain Backdrop Project to examine development and preservation issues in the foothills areas. Our share was \$5,000 of the \$75,000 study.

All of these studies provide important information, and the Open Lands Program will participate in more of these in the future.



Nesting Great Blue Herons

1996 Acquisition Highlights

Here are the acquisitions for which commitments have been made during the first year of the Larimer County Open Lands Program. All dollar figures used are approximate.

Franz Farm: This 160-acre parcel is being purchased over six years in cooperation with the Larimer County Natural Resources Department and Fort Collins. Located in the Fort Collins/Loveland corridor, this property preserves a scenic buffer for our urban areas.

Total cost: \$480,000

Larimer County share: \$120,000

Steppel Ridge: This 80-acre property connects to Coyote Ridge on the south and provides protection to an important scenic viewshed west of Fort Collins and Loveland. It also removes this ridgeline parcel from development. Partners in the project include nearby landowners and the city of Fort Collins.

Total cost: \$278,500

Larimer County share: \$92,833

Coyote Ridge Addition: In partnership with Fort Collins, we purchased 315 acres in the corridor area. The land is located at the base of the Hogback and adjacent to 400 acres owned by Fort Collins.

Total cost: \$693,000

Larimer County share: \$346,500

Ute/Snowy Ridge: This 478-acre agricultural property is being purchased over four years. It provides critical open space in the Fort Collins/Loveland corridor. Bordering Highway 287 for 1 mile on the west, this land will continue to be used for dryland wheat farming. It is being purchased in cooperation with Loveland and Fort Collins. This property is pictured in a November 1996 article in National Geographic describing growth along the Front Range.

Total cost: \$2,465,000

Larimer County share: \$1,232,500

"What we're doing now will make a big impact in what this area looks like when my kids and grandkids are my age. The Ute/Snowy Ridge property is the best example. For a full mile between Loveland and Fort Collins on Highway 287, all you are ever going to see is a wheat field, the mountains and blue sky."

*John Clarke,
County Commissioner District 1*

Heinricy:

This property preserves a buffer between Boyd Lake State Park and Heinricy Lake. A paved trail which serves the region crosses the property. This property was purchased in partnership with Loveland, Colorado State Parks, the Loveland Wildlife Association and Great Outdoors Colorado.

Total cost: \$405,000

Larimer County share: \$90,000

Meadowdale Ranch: This acquisition contributes to preservation efforts in the Estes Valley. The conservation easement limits development and preserves the 1,128-acre Meadowdale Ranch, east of Estes Park along U.S. Highway 36. The acquisition was a cooperative effort with the Estes Valley Land Trust, Estes Park and Great Outdoors Colorado.

Total cost: \$325,000

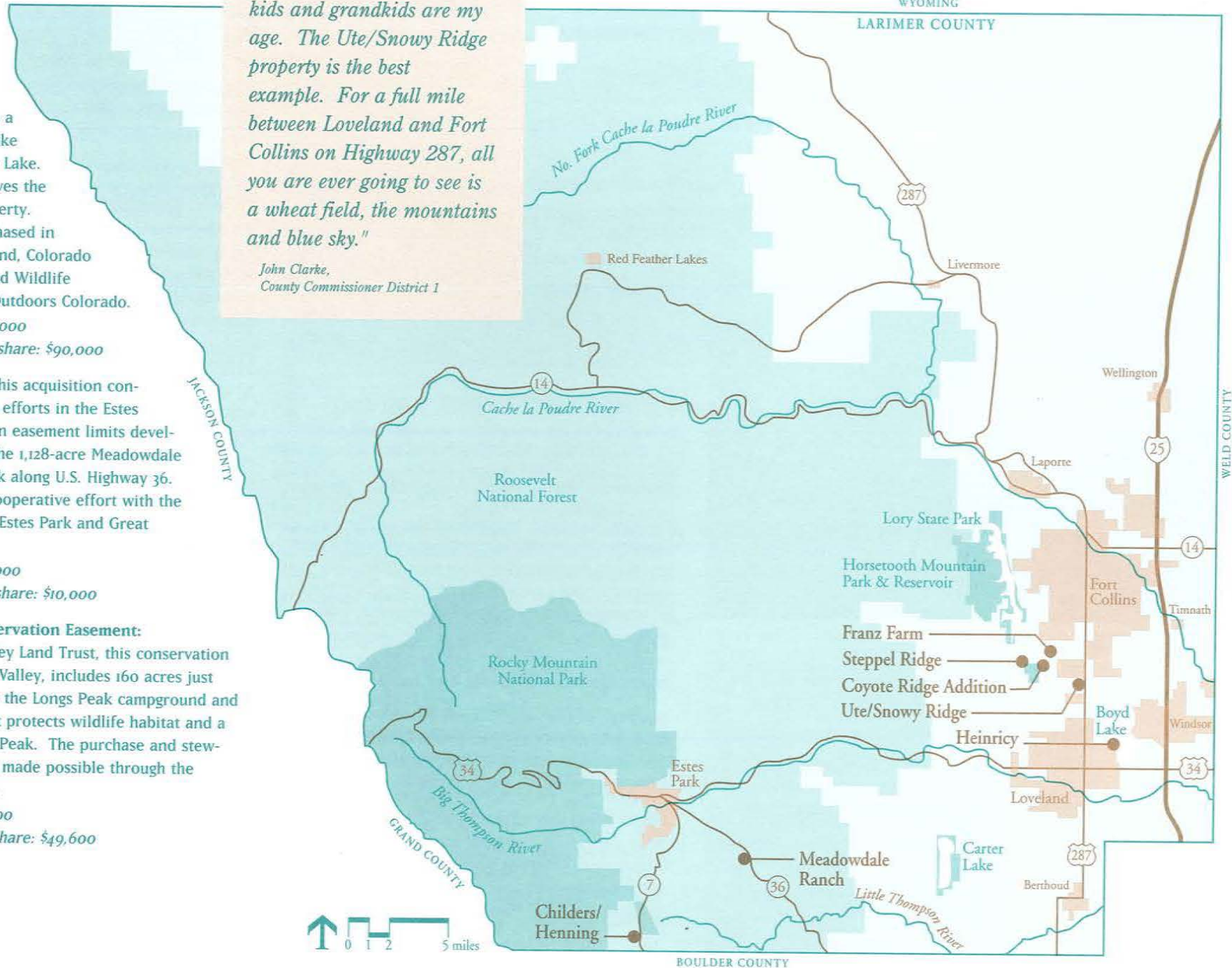
Larimer County share: \$10,000

Childers/Henning Conservation Easement:

Crafted by the Estes Valley Land Trust, this conservation easement in the Tahosa Valley, includes 160 acres just north of the entrance to the Longs Peak campground and trailhead. The easement protects wildlife habitat and a visual corridor to Longs Peak. The purchase and stewardship endowment was made possible through the Martha Steinbach Estate.

Total cost: \$49,600

Larimer County share: \$49,600



Working Cooperatively with Landowners

The Open Lands Program works only with willing sellers. That is a condition stipulated in the Help Preserve Open Spaces initiative. We consider landowners to be partners in this program and all partnership relationships must be cooperative. The Larimer County Open Lands Program strives to achieve "win-win" solutions. Purchases must be fair for the landowner and fair for the Larimer County taxpayers.

The Open Lands staff also can provide information about estate planning, tax incentives and legal issues that owners of large parcels of land often need to consider.

Identifying goals

The acquisition process usually starts in one of two ways: Open Lands staff members contact landowners; or landowners contact us directly.

We start by discussing goals the owner might have for the property. Some owners may want to sell outright, others might want to continue agriculture production or limit future development.

Landowner options

Many programs are available to suit the needs of property owners. This section describes four major options.

- **Traditional sale:** Property sold outright to the Open Lands Program.
- **Conservation easement:** Larimer County purchases or accepts donation of development rights. The owner maintains ownership of the parcel and future development may be limited or prohibited. Public access may or may not be part of the easement agreement. The conservation easement is structured to meet the needs of the landowner and the county.
- **Reserved life estate:** Property is purchased by the Larimer County Open Lands Program and the landowner continues to live on the property for life.
- **Alternative large-parcel development:** With the help of the county's Rural Land Use Center, development plans can be designed to provide an owner incentives to subdivide property while retaining significant open space values to maintain the rural character.

Step-by-Step: Our Acquisition Process

The Larimer County Open Lands Program has an established evaluation and acquisition process. Following is a basic explanation of how it works and the steps involved:

Project initiation

If a landowner is interested in the program, he or she fills out a property fact sheet describing land characteristics and goals for the property. The staff views and evaluates the property, and identifies potential partners and funding sources.

Project review

When the Open Lands Manager and Parks Director recommend that a project should be pursued, information is passed to the Open Lands Team, which includes various county departments and potential partners. Next comes preliminary reviews by the Open Lands Advisory Board and the County Commissioners.

Negotiations

County staff begins negotiations with the landowner and prepares a draft agreement. Survey, environmental audit, appraisal and title work begin. If negotiations are successful, the staff makes a final recommendation to the Open Lands Advisory Board, which in turn makes recommendations to the County Commissioners. The commissioners review the agreement, view the property and vote on the agreement.

The length of time to accomplish transactions varies widely. A fast-track process is available for special cases.

To discuss the Open Lands Program, call 679-4570. We will be happy to meet with you at your convenience.



Hogbacks accentuate the transition from the high plains to the foothills

"Our Open Lands Program is providing creative solutions for rural land owners. We can help farmers and ranchers realize a return on their investments and at the same time maintain the rural character of Larimer County"

Cheryl Olson,
County Commissioner District 2

Evaluating Property for the Open Lands Program

The focus of the Open Lands Program is guided by our mission statement, the Larimer County Parks Master Plan and other land-use documents.

The program's mission is "to preserve and provide significant open space, natural areas, wildlife habitat, regional parks and trails for present and future generations."

The parks master plan and various land-use documents identify areas desirable for preservation, conservation, trails and regional park development.

When considering an acquisition, staff evaluates factors including, but not limited to: ecological and wildlife values, outdoor recreation potential, historical/archeological/geological features, scenic/aesthetic values, informational/educational potential, specific location, potential for partnerships, development concerns, price, and significance in context with land-use planning documents.

Seeking Creative Solutions

Finding innovative ways to promote land preservation is an important part of our mission. Here's an example of how we used the generosity of one property owner to benefit the entire county.

Martha Steinbach, a longtime and well-known Estes Park resident, wanted to provide land for wildlife conservation. In her will, she granted several building lots above the Big Thompson Canyon to the Open Lands Program. The lots were not appropriate for parks or open space. However, the estate allowed us to sell the lots and use the proceeds to obtain an important conservation easement in the Tahosa Valley near Rocky Mountain National Park.

We are open to discussing any ideas you might have to promote land preservation.

Tax Revenues Benefit Entire County

Money to fund the Open Lands Program comes from a 1/4 cent sales and use tax. The tax is not imposed on food purchased in grocery stores. Consumers pay 25¢ for every \$100 of purchases.

The tax continues through 2003, and it is estimated collections will total more than \$54 million. Projections are based on a 6% annual growth rate in revenues.

Distribution to incorporated areas is based on the highest yield of either population or sales tax generation.

Annual Revenue Projections and Distribution of Open Space Tax (in millions \$)* 1996

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	Total	%
Larimer County	2.2	2.4	2.5	2.7	2.8	3.0	3.2	3.3	22.6	41.6
Berthoud	.071	.075	.079	.084	.089	.095	.100	.106	.715	1.3
Estes Park	.161	.171	.181	.192	.204	.216	.229	.229	1.70	3
Fort Collins	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.5	2.6	2.8	2.9	3.1	21.13	38.9
Loveland	.847	.898	.951	1.0	1.06	1.13	1.20	1.27	8.36	15
Timnath	.004	.004	.047	.005	.005	.005	.006	.006	.043	.08
Wellington	.029	.031	.033	.035	.037	.040	.042	.044	.302	.5
Totals	5.4	5.8	6.1	6.5	6.9	7.3	7.7	8.2	54.25	100

* These figures are unaudited. Audit to be completed in mid 1997. Figures in this chart have been rounded up when appropriate and percents are approximate.

Cities and Towns are Making Their Own Plans

Money collected from the Help Preserve Open Spaces sales tax is shared by Larimer County and the six cities and towns in the county.

Revenue sharing was specified in the ballot initiative to assure that funds would benefit all county residents. Money is distributed based on population or sales tax generation, whichever is most beneficial to that community. Each town is free to establish its own program. However, the money must be used for open space, natural areas, wildlife habitat, parks and trails.

Berthoud: \$71,154

Berthoud is studying its needs for parks, open space, agricultural land preservation, buffer zones and trails. A master plan will be completed in the fall of 1997.

Estes Park: \$161,905

Estes Park's share will be used for purchasing open space and building trails. The money will help the town complete the trail around Lake Estes. This year the town purchased 10 acres of open space in an important wetland area just north of the town hall.

Fort Collins: \$2.1 million

Fort Collins will use 70 percent of its share for the purchase of open lands. The remainder will go towards maintenance, reclamation and other stewardship projects. Priorities include purchase of land in the corridor between Loveland and Fort Collins, and the Poudre/Big Thompson Legacy Project.

Loveland: \$847,210

During 1996 Loveland completed its Open Lands Plan and the Open Lands Commission was formed. Plan priorities include land along the Big Thompson River, the hogbacks, lakes, agricultural land and the corridor.

Timnath: \$4,221

Timnath will save its money and use it in the future to participate in partnership projects.

Wellington: \$29,848

Wellington will save its share and purchase a park site sometime in 1998.

Poudre/Big T Legacy Project: A Major Cooperative Effort

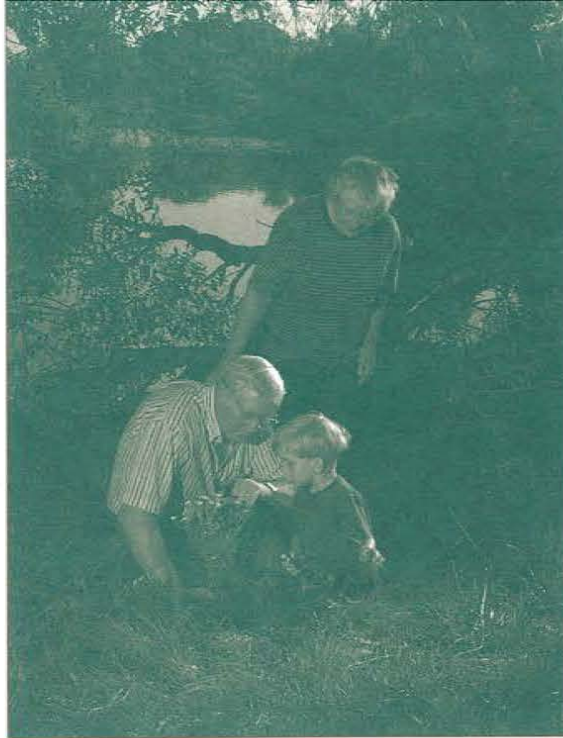
Larimer County is blessed with two of the most spectacular rivers in Colorado. The Poudre River and the Big Thompson River provide critical water resources, open space, wildlife habitat and outstanding recreational opportunities.

Through a major partnership effort by regional governmental entities, the Poudre/Big Thompson Rivers Legacy Project will protect, preserve and enhance over 8,000 acres of land, riparian areas and wetlands from the mouth of the canyons all the way to Greeley.

This is a long-term vision that will evolve over the next 20 years. The first phase is starting and will cost about \$13 million. Of that, \$3.4 million was awarded in a grant from Great Outdoors Colorado which recognized the importance and significance of this project. The grant also was awarded because of the extraordinary partnership created in Northern Colorado.

Partners in the legacy project include: Larimer County, Fort Collins, Greeley, Loveland, Estes Park, Windsor, Estes Valley Recreation and Park District, Colorado State Parks, Colorado Division of Wildlife, The Nature Conservancy, Friends of the Poudre, Weld County and Colorado State University.

- Preservation efforts: Protection of up to 7,000 acres of the Laramie Foothills in northern Larimer County; and protection of about 1,300 acres of sensitive riparian areas along the rivers.



Open lands are enjoyed by everyone

Photo: David Clark

- Recreational aspects: A 28-mile trail along the Poudre River from LaPorte to Greeley; completion of the 4.25 mile Lake Estes Trail; providing public access to the 377-acre Gateway Park in the lower Poudre Canyon.
- Educational opportunities: Two environmental learning centers are being built near the Poudre River — CSU's Environmental Learning Center in Fort Collins, and the Poudre Learning Center in Greeley.

The Legacy Project is one of the most important conservation programs in the state and will lead the way for many more cooperative efforts in Northern Colorado.

Rural Land Use Center Helps Landowners

Owners of large parcels in Larimer County who wish to develop their land for housing, while at the same time preserving open space, can now receive assistance from the Rural Land Use Center. Initiated late in 1996 by the Larimer County Commissioners, the center's job is to help property owners creatively plan large-lot development.

The center grew from the work of the 35-acre Task Force which was appointed to find alternatives for landowners with large parcels (70 acres or larger) considering breaking their property into 35-acre tracts. By state law, landowners are allowed to divide large parcels into 35-acre lots without any county review.

To preserve more open space in the large tracts and to lessen the impact of roads and other infrastructure, the Task Force wrote guidelines that encourage property owners to cluster development, allow more housing units and leaves more land open to preserve rural character and agricultural viability.

The Rural Land Use Center provides preliminary technical assistance, consulting services and land-planning information. The center can also provide basic information concerning estate planning.

For more information, call the center at 498-7683. Jim Reidhead is the director.



Parks & Open Lands Department

1800 S. County Road 31
Loveland, Colorado 80537
970 679-4570