

\$4 million grant to protect land from Horsetooth to Devil's Backbone

Larimer County, Fort Collins partner on conservation project

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Larimer County and Fort Collins received a \$4 million Great Outdoors Colorado grant to preserve about 2,300 acres between Horsetooth Mountain Open Space and Devil's Backbone Open Space. The four parcels will connect these and other natural areas to Lory State Park. (Submitted)

A project to protect 2,300 acres of land will connect open spaces and natural areas from Lory State Park to the Devil's Backbone along the western edge of Larimer County with the help of a \$4 million grant for "once-in-a-lifetime" conservation opportunities.

The county and Fort Collins are partnering on the Horsetooth Foothills Conservation Project that, once finished, will create a stretch of more than 7,000 connected acres, protecting pine forests, rolling meadows and sharp rock formations.

With one of the first grants from Great Outdoors Colorado's protect initiative, Larimer County and Fort Collins will partner to protect four parcels of land between Lory State Park, Horsetooth Mountain Open Space, Devil's Backbone Open Space and Coyote Ridge Natural Area.

About 1,000 acres of the property will be purchased outright, allowing future public access and trails, and 1,300 will be preserved via conservation easement, according to information from Kerri Rollins, the county's open lands director.

Together, it will create a large swath of protected lands, of views and of habitat in a growing area very close to the cities of Fort Collins and Loveland.

"It's over four square miles," noted John Stokes, director of the Fort Collins Natural Areas Department. "In this day and age, especially that close to Fort Collins, it's amazing."

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The "rare opportunity" of connecting existing open spaces and natural areas so close to Fort Collins is one of the reasons Great Outdoors Colorado approved \$4 million from a \$47 million pot for "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunities, according to a news release. These properties, together, will protect scenic views and wildlife habitat, including two miles of Redstone Creek.

In the future, when some of the property, is opened for trails and public access, it also will alleviate pressure on the trails at Horsetooth and other popular and often crowded open spaces, parks and natural areas. Horsetooth Mountain, alone, draws more than 100,000 visitors per year.

The total project price will be based on appraisals and is still under negotiation, though Rollins anticipates it will be about \$10 million plus costs associated with the purchases. Larimer County and Fort Collins plan to split the total above the grant and will work together on the conservation easements and property management as well.

Working with four different land owners, the project is complex, however, Stokes said he believes all pieces may be wrapped up by the end of the year.

Great Outdoors Colorado also announced a second grant this week to protect land in Larimer County.

The Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust received \$44,350 to help conserve 1,300 acres in northwest Larimer County.

This grant is part of a new land conservation program to pay for transaction costs to help land owners place conservation easements on their property. They retain ownership of their land and, at the same time, permanently conserve the land from development.

This project will involve an easement on 1,360 acres of agricultural land along Forest Creek, Granny Creek and the Larimer River, providing a buffer around a public campground, according to Great Outdoors Colorado. It will protect agriculture land, which Colorado loses at a rate of 30,000 acres per year, and help maintain water supply, scenic views and wildlife habitat.

Great Outdoors Colorado provides a portion of state lottery profits for conservation, parks, trails and natural areas. Since 1992, it has invested in more than 4,700 projects in all 64 counties.

In Larimer County, projects have received \$48.6 million.

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