

Open Space and Mountain Parks West Trail Study Area Plan



Overview of the Planning Process

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Community Meeting on October 1, 2008

West Trails Study Area Project Purpose

The purpose of the West Trail Study Area (TSA) Plan is to provide the management direction and implementation strategies which will protect natural and cultural resources, improve the visitor experience, and provide a physically and environmentally sustainable trail system in the West TSA.

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Table of Contents:

1. West Trail Study Area Natural, Cultural, and Recreational Resources and the Challenge of Balancing Resource Protection and Recreational Use.....	2
2. Key Features of the West TSA Planning Process.....	3
3. West TSA Planning Goals.....	4
4. Overall Planning Approach and Flow of Work for the West TSA Plan.....	5
5. The West TSA Planning Framework Using Targets, Attributes, and Indicators.....	6
6. Project Deliverables for the West TSA Plan.....	9
7. West TSA Plan Project Schedule.....	11
8. Public Involvement Process for the West TSA Plan.....	12
9. Attachments	
A: West Trail Study Area Map.....	12

1. West Trail Study Area Natural, Cultural, and Recreational Resources and the Challenge of Balancing Resource Protection and Recreational Use

Overview. The West Trail Study Area includes Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP) lands west of Broadway and SH 93 from Linden Avenue to Eldorado Springs Drive. See the West TSA Plan Map in [Attachment A](#). The West TSA is a large area (11,250 acres) that contains multiple Visitor Master Plan management areas—Passive Recreation Areas (1,500 acres), Natural Areas (5,240 acres), Habitat Conservation Area (3,960 acres), and federal land where a management area designation may be added at a later time (550 acres, including National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Institute for Standards and Technology, and National Center for Atmospheric Research). The large size of the West TSA requires an area-wide planning approach to address habitat protection and connections at a landscape level and address trails and trail connections in a larger geographic context.

The West TSA contains a highly diverse set of forested and grassland ecosystems at the juncture of the Rocky Mountains and the Great Plains and is one of the most biologically diverse areas in Open Space and Mountain Parks, the Colorado Front Range, and the interior United States. The West TSA mountain backdrop and transitional area to the plains are an exceptional natural resource heritage to preserve and enjoy. The West TSA also contains many historic and paleontological resources worth preserving. At the same time, the West TSA contains many high-use visitor areas, receives a high proportion of the total visitation on OSMP, and is a regional draw for recreation. The West TSA offers a wide range of exceptional recreational opportunities. In addition, the West TSA shares boundaries with many city neighborhoods and many residents recreate in the West TSA very frequently. The juxtaposition of high resource values and very high visitor use at the doorstep of the city creates many challenges to sustaining the health of ecosystems and providing high-quality visitor opportunities that are compatible with resource protection.

Natural Ecosystems. Many of the ecosystems in the West TSA are healthy and functioning naturally. The West TSA contains many rare, sensitive, and unique plant species and communities and a wide array of wildlife species, some of which are highly sensitive to human presence and visitor use. In the ever increasing urbanization of the Front Range, the West TSA provides extremely valuable habitat and a certain amount of refuge to sensitive species. Some of these natural assets are or will be threatened by high and increasing visitor use and increasing dispersal of the use. A major focus of the West TSA Plan will be to maintain or increase the level of natural resource protection, in order to maintain the balance between resource protection and recreation.

Cultural and Geological Resources. The West TSA contains a wide range of important historic, paleontological, and geologic resources. Cultural resources include cultural features and sites important to indigenous people, sites and structures indicative of European settlement and mining, and trails and structures constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) for use by visitors to OSMP lands. The West TSA geological formations, such as the Flatirons and Red Rocks, record geological history, are well known, and provide beauty to the mountain backdrop. Some of these cultural and geological resources may require a higher level of protection, in order to enable long term stewardship of the resource.

Recreational Opportunities. Most visitors to the West TSA (and the OSMP system as a whole) report a high quality of experience, and innumerable visitors greatly enjoy the natural setting for passive recreation. Recreational opportunities abound in the West TSA, and many consider it a world-class recreational destination. The range of recreational activities covers the gambit, with the most popular being hiking / running, dog walking, rock climbing, and nature study. However,

increasing levels of visitor use over time have degraded the visitor experience with loss of remoteness and increased visitor conflict. A second major focus for the West TSA plan will be to maintain and improve the quality of visitor experience.

Trail System. The West TSA contains an extensive trail system, with many mountain backdrop trails built in the early 20th century, and a high density of trails in many areas. Many of these trails were not located or built to be physically and environmentally sustainable. Many trails were built in canyon riparian areas, which are some of the most ecologically sensitive lands in the West TSA. A third major focus for the West TSA Plan will be on making the existing trail system more sustainable and on reducing the extensive network of undesignated trails. A backlog of deferred trail rebuilds and reroutes in the West TSA needs to be addressed. Expanding the current level of visitor access by building trails in un-trailed areas is not likely to be a focus.

2. Key Features of the West TSA Planning Process

The completion of the first two TSA plans and implementation of these plans have provided many lessons. Building on what has been learned to date, several adaptive changes to the planning process for the West TSA are being implemented. Key features of the West TSA planning process include:

- **New Planning Framework.** The West TSA Plan utilizes a new planning framework that involves identifying targets, attributes, and indicators for natural, cultural, and recreational resources. It's the same framework used by the Grassland Plan. The Nature Conservancy developed this framework and calls it Conservation Action Planning (CAP). The CAP framework will allow us to focus and prioritize management actions to provide a higher level of natural and cultural resource protection and to enhance the visitor experience. *See sections # 4 and # 5 (page 5) below.*
- **More Comprehensive Natural Resource Inventory.** The West TSA Plan involves completing a more comprehensive natural resource inventory at the front end of the planning process. This change will enable use to identify the habitat requirements for the most ecologically important and sensitive native plant and animal species (which are natural resource targets) and to identify biodiversity hot spots and critical habitat areas. ERO consultants has helped OSMP staff in this part of the inventory. This information will be combined with the recreation inventory information to identify **best opportunity areas**, where resource protection and recreational opportunities are likely to be most compatible.
- **Final Trail Alignments.** Where possible, the West TSA Plan will determine final alignments for major trail reroutes and new trails, which will allow us to plan and implement them in a more time efficient way for both staff and the public. The Eldorado Mountain-Doudy Draw Trail Study Area had two separate processes to pick conceptual trail alignments and then go back and plan final trail alignments. This approach was very time consuming and wore out both staff and the public. The West TSA Plan will avoid this and reduce the time required to actually implement changes on the ground.
- **Community Collaboration in Shaping the West TSA Plan.** The community involvement process is designed to be more inclusive and encourage a higher level of collaboration with and among community interests. Public involvement opportunities are provided at key steps in the planning process, which is designed to sequentially move forward and build on staff work and community collaboration. Public input will be sought in the inventory of existing conditions, definition of desired conditions, formulation of management objectives and strategies, and development of the plan itself. Community meetings in the near future will involve the public in the identification of desired conditions for natural, cultural, and recreational, and resources. *See section # 8 (page 11) below.*

- **Decision Making Transparency.** Better transparency of how plan decisions are made will be provided with enhanced documentation and justification of decisions.

3. West TSA Planning Goals

These goals are not all inclusive and may be revised or expanded in the future. At the outset of the West TSA Plan, these goals help define the scope of the plan.

1. **Provide a high level of protection for valuable and fragile natural resources.** Visitor travel will be channeled to trails and areas where visitor use impacts on natural resources can be avoided or minimized. Where needed, natural resource protection measures will be implemented to avoid or minimize impacts, such as setbacks or buffers from sensitive resources, seasonal wildlife closures, and activity-specific restrictions that modify or preclude certain types of uses in sensitive areas.
2. **Enhance recreational opportunities where a high quality experience can be provided, the activity is compatible with resource protection, and visitor conflict can be minimized.** Expanded access or improved facilities may be considered to support the wide range of different passive recreational activities. Educational / interpretive opportunities may be enhanced for natural and cultural resources and for low-impact visitor use techniques.
3. **Provide an appropriate balance of resource protection and visitor access matched to the specific natural and recreational qualities of different areas.** This approach involves accommodating higher levels of recreational use in areas where visitor use impacts can be minimized and providing more limited recreational opportunities in areas with higher ecological values. The Visitor Master Plan management area designations (Passive Recreation Areas, Natural Areas, and Habitat Conservation Areas) provide general guidance in balancing resource protection and visitor access opportunities. However, more specific guidance will be developed for subareas where appropriate.
4. **Ensure that new or rerouted trails and trail connections provide trail locations and designs that protect natural and cultural resources, provide a high quality visitor experience, are physically sustainable, and encourage visitors to stay on-trail.** Trails are intended to provide access to major visitor destinations, concentrate visitor use in travel corridors where resource impacts can be minimized, and allow closure and reclamation of user-created undesignated trails. The intended use, design, and alignment of trails will be matched to the specific management area and setting.
5. **Retrofit and improve the existing trail system to make it more physically and environmentally sustainable.** The West TSA contains many trails that were not built to be sustainable, and these deficiencies will be addressed by trail rebuilds and reroutes. In addition, the extensive network of user-created undesignated trails has created unacceptable resource impacts. Undesignated trail management actions will significantly shrink this network of undesignated trails with retention and designation of certain undesignated trails and closure and restoration of others.
6. **Prioritize management actions to protect, maintain, and restore the integrity of historic resources.** The West TSA contains many historic resources. Protections will be implemented when appropriate to maintain or preserve their historic significance and values.

4. Overall Planning Approach and Flow of Work for the West TSA Plan

The West TSA planning process sequentially builds from Phase 1, 2, and 3.

Figure 1. West TSA Planning Process



Phase 1: Inventory Existing Conditions

2nd Quarter 2008-1st Quarter 2009

Key Questions: What do we care about? Where are we now?

- Review existing policy direction and key plan considerations.
- Define the scope of planning issues.
- Identify targets, attributes, and indicators for natural, cultural, and recreational resources (see definitions below).
- Using this planning framework, inventory existing conditions for natural, cultural, and recreational resources.

Phase 2: Define Desired Conditions

4th Quarter 2008-1st Q 2009

Key Question: Where do we want to be?

- Define desired future conditions using the targets, attributes, and indicators.
- Set management objectives and thresholds of acceptability for the indicators.
- Assess what resources meet or exceed desired conditions and what resources fall short of desired conditions.
- Identify the range of possible strategies that could be used to maintain desired conditions and bring existing conditions up to desired conditions.

Phase 3: Develop Plan Implementation Strategies

2nd Q 2009-2nd Q 2010

Key Question: How are we going to get there?

- Develop and evaluate plan alternatives and implementation strategies to maintain desired conditions and bring existing conditions up to desired conditions.
- Select preferred alternatives.
- Develop a cohesive plan and implementation program (including monitoring) for the West TSA.

Because of the size and diversity of natural resources and recreational opportunities in the West TSA, planning subareas will be defined. For these subareas, management goals and objectives will be formulated, geared to the specific needs in the subarea. The planning subareas are: Sanitas, Red Rocks, Flagstaff, Flatirons, South Mesa, Western Mountain Parks Habitat Conservation Area, and Boulder Falls (see West TSA Plan Map in Attachment A). The federal properties adjacent to Boulder Mountain Parks, the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), are included in the West TSA Plan.

The planning and implementation horizon for the West TSA Plan is ten years. Plan revision and course correction will be considered as experience is gained in implementing the Plan.

5. The West TSA Planning Framework Using Targets, Attributes, and Indicators

A new planning framework is being used for the West TSA Plan, which uses targets, attributes, and indicators (TAIs). The West TSA planning framework is very similar to the one used by the Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan, which is based on The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Conservation Action Planning (CAP). The TNC planning framework has been around for a long time, is used by many of TNC's partners, and is being used by many other public agencies. The West TSA planning framework will adapt the TNC model to meet the specific context and needs of OSMP.

The TNC planning framework has been applied to a variety of planning settings, focused not only on biodiversity conservation targets, but also recreational and other targets. The Larimer County Parks and Open Lands Department is one example of a public agency currently using the TNC's planning framework. In their Red Mountain Open Space Resource Management and Implementation Plan, they are planning for ecological conservation, cultural resource conservation, western heritage conservation, and outdoor recreation targets. If you are interested, you can find this plan at http://www.co.larimer.co.us/naturalresources/laramie_foothills.htm.

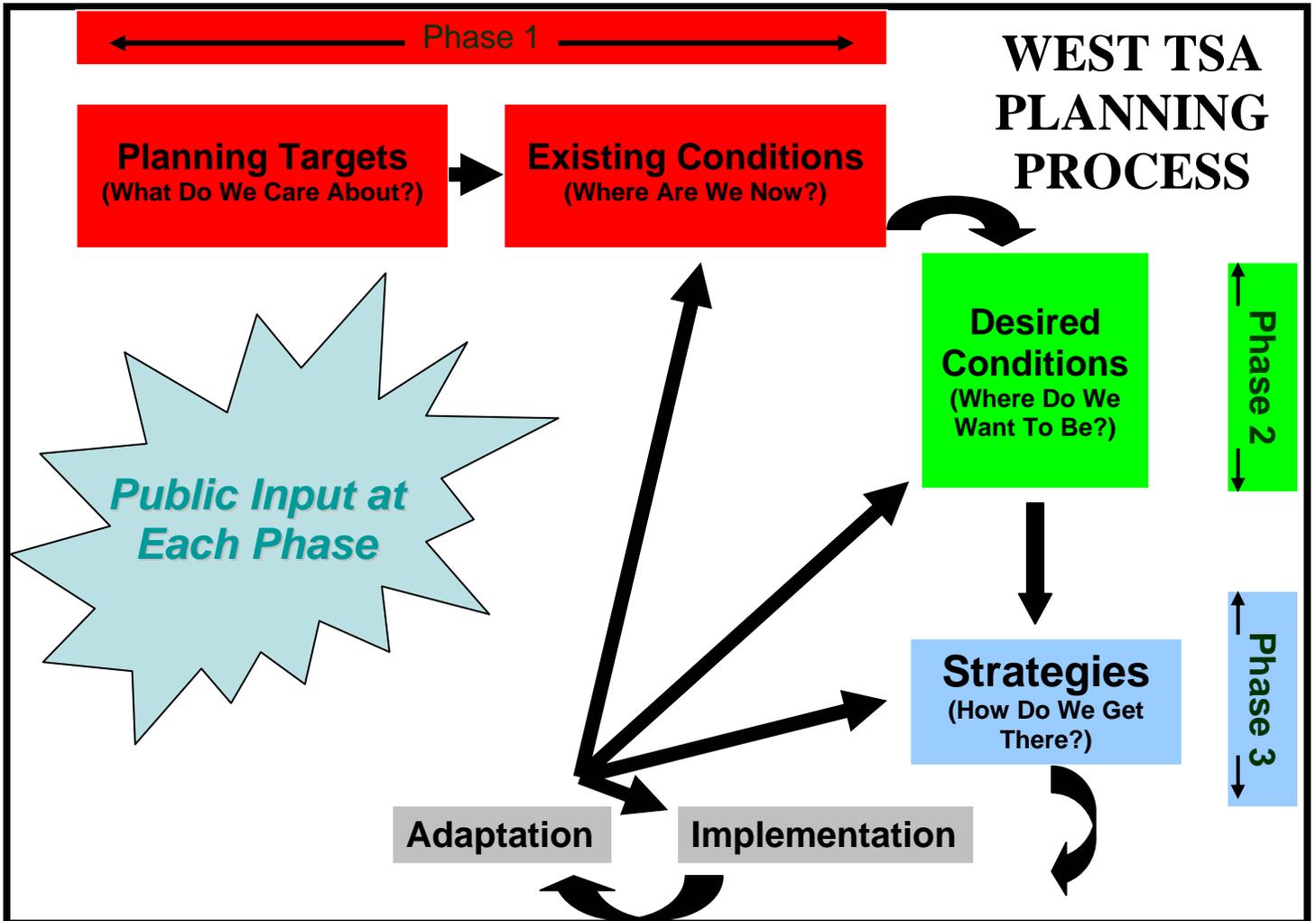
In Phase 1 of the West TSA planning process, targets, attributes and indicators will be used to characterize and assess existing conditions for natural, recreational and cultural resources. **In Phase 2**, TAIs will be used to define desired conditions and identify strategies to bring existing conditions in line with desired conditions. **In Phase 3**, the results of earlier phases will enable development and evaluation of specific plan proposals and strategies that will eventually be incorporated into a cohesive plan.

Some definitions are in order. **Targets** broadly define what we care about, such as quality of the visitor experience, visitor infrastructure, ecological systems, and cultural resources (these targets were identified in the Visitor Master Plan). **Attributes** are defining or key characteristics or qualities of the targets, which if degraded could result in the eventual loss of the target. **Indicators** are measurable aspects of the attribute. They allow comparison of existing to desired conditions, as well as tracking the condition of attributes as they change over time. Definition of desired natural, cultural, and recreational resource conditions involves setting guidelines or

standards for the indicators. Standards identify a minimum or maximum numerical value for the indicator measures that defines a threshold beyond which conditions may change from acceptable to unacceptable.

Figure 2 below is a more general explanation of the planning framework. Targets, attributes, and indicators will help characterize both existing and desired conditions during Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the planning process.

Figure 2



6. Project Deliverables for the West TSA Plan

The anticipated set of project deliverables is:

2008

- Targets, Attributes, and Indicators Report (4th Q)
- Policy Direction and Key Plan Considerations Report (4th Q)

2009

- Inventory and Assessment Report (1st Q)
- Plan Alternatives Evaluation Report (4th Q)

2010

- Draft Plan (1st Q)
- Final Plan (2nd Q)

7. West TSA Plan Project Schedule

The timeframe for the West TSA Plan project is anticipated to be approximately 24 months. This timeframe is based on the large geographic size of the West TSA, the wide range and complexity of issues to be addressed, the anticipated high degree of community interest in the plan, and expanded expectations for the plan (based on what was learned from experience after the Marshall Mesa-Southern Grasslands TSA Plan and the Eldorado Mountain-Doudy Draw TSA Plan.

An initial schedule for each of the major project milestones and associated deliverables is as follows:

Table 2: Schedule for West TSA Plan Project Milestones and Deliverables

Note: ** Indicates Public Input for that Deliverable

	Milestones and Deliverables	2 nd Q 2008	3 rd Q 2008	4 th Q 2008	1 st Q 2009	2 nd Q 2009	3 rd Q 2009
Phase 1	Step 1. West TSA Plan Project Organization and Launch	Project Start-Up	Project Description **				
	Step 2. Review of Existing Policy Direction and Key Plan Considerations		Begin Policy Direction / Plan Considerations Work	Policy Direction / Plan Considerations Report **			
	Step 3. Identification of Targets, Attributes, and Indicators for Natural, Cultural, Recreational Targets		Begin Target Identification	Targets, Attributes, and Indicators Report **			
	Step 4. Inventory and Assessment of Existing Conditions	Inventory of Existing Conditions Work Started			Inventory and Assessment Report**		
Phase 2	Step 5. Definition of Desired Future Conditions and Range of Possible Strategies			Desired Conditions Work / Community Meetings	Desired Conditions Worked into Inventory Report		
Phase 3	Step 6. Design of Plan Proposals and Alternatives					Begin Design of Plan Proposals	Plan Proposals Working Draft
	Step 7. Evaluation of Plan Proposals and Alternatives						Analysis of Plan Proposals & Alternatives
	Step 8. Writing of the Draft West TSA Plan Document						
	Step 9. Public Review, Revision, & Adoption of the West Trail Study Area Plan						

8. Public Involvement Process for the West TSA Plan (some dates may change)

For the West TSA Plan, an effort is being made to streamline the public process. The intent is to enable staff to do the technical work using their expertise, make the process time-efficient for public involvement, and provide formal public involvement opportunities at key planning steps. The progression of planning steps will provide timely windows of opportunity for the public to offer ideas, concerns, and suggestions. Moving forward toward completion of the West TSA Plan will be emphasized in considering and incorporating public input at the right time. This process is designed to sequentially complete each planning step in a timely way, and previous planning steps will not be revisited.

The formal opportunities for public involvement include:

2008

1. Community Meeting to Introduce the West TSA Plan, October 1, 2008

Introduction to the West TSA Plan, information on the overall planning process will be provided. This meeting is an opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback.

2. Public Comment on West TSA Plan Process, October 2008

A packet of information on the West TSA planning project will be provided on the westtsa.org webpage, shortly after the West TSA community meeting on October 1. Electronic or written comments and suggestions can be submitted.

3. Community Meeting to Review Two Reports: 1) West TSA Summary Report for Natural, Recreational, and Cultural Resource Targets, Attributes and Indicators; and 2) Policy Direction and Key Plan Considerations Report

This meeting will be the opportunity to comment and ask questions on these reports. The focus will be on "Did the OSMP staff get it right? Is there anything staff missed?"

4. Series of Community Meetings to Help Define Desired Conditions

Separate facilitated community meetings will individually focus on: 1) natural and cultural resource protection (with break-out groups for natural and cultural); 2) biking; 3) hiking /running; 4) horseback riding; 5) dog walking / no-dog opportunities; 6) climbing / bouldering; and 7) neighborhood access (one meeting with break-out groups for clusters of neighborhoods). These meetings are the opportunities for the public to identify desired conditions for natural, recreational, and cultural resources. In addition, informal non-facilitated meetings with the public to discuss desired conditions for other recreational activities will take place.

2009

5. Community Meeting to Review the West TSA Inventory and Assessment Report

This meeting is the opportunity to comment and ask questions on the Inventory and Assessment Report. The focus will be on "Did OSMP staff get it right? Is there anything staff missed?"

6. Community Conversations on Selected Issues

Interested community members will have the opportunity to provide ideas on issues and possible solutions, which will help staff evaluate TSA plan alternatives.

2010

7. Community Meeting to Review the West TSA Plan Alternatives Evaluation Report

This meeting is the opportunity to review the staff's evaluation of plan alternatives and ask "Did staff miss any pros and cons of the alternatives? Are there any new alternatives to consider?"

8. Community Meeting to Review the Draft West TSA Plan

This meeting is an opportunity to comment on the draft plan.

9. Public Hearing at the OSBT Meeting on the Draft West TSA Plan

This meeting is an opportunity to comment on the draft plan.

10. Public Hearing at the OSBT Meeting on the Final West TSA Plan

This meeting is an opportunity to comment on the final plan.

Attachment A
West Trail Study Area Map