

Open Space Element

“[I]f in a city we had six vacant lots available to the youngsters of a certain neighborhood for playing ball, it might be “development” to build houses on the first, and the second, and the third, and the fourth, and even the fifth, but when we build houses on the last one, we forget what houses are for.”

– Aldo Leopold, 20th century naturalist

Vision: Preserve, protect, and enhance our County’s open space.

Background and Existing Conditions

“Open space”—the words mean many different things to different people. However, the words also elicit a similar overall sentiment from everyone—an area that provides some type of refuge from the developed landscape. At its core, “open space” is a place to recharge one’s soul, to reconnect with the natural environment, and to recreate. Open space is, in fact, why most of us live in Summit County.

A broad variety of lands in the County provide open space benefits to our residents and visitors. Open meadows, irrigated hay pastures, forested mountainsides, wetlands, and riparian areas are examples of open space. Open space provides many resources. Some areas are available for passive recreational pursuits, while other open space areas may be more limited in their use—primarily providing a green and “open” landscape view. While open space is often viewed as a pristine landscape, there is also a necessity for smaller open areas in our developed urban settings. These can be in the form of public parks or greenways that provide a visual relief from the developed landscape. As the County continues to develop, protection of these “urban open spaces” is critically important to maintaining our quality of life, while protection of the outlying rural open areas is also needed.

We are extremely fortunate in the County to have a wealth of readily available open space areas. The most obvious open space is the mountains that surround our populated valleys. Most of these mountain areas are located within the White River National Forest. In fact, over 81 percent of the land in our County is located in the national forest. Although a variety of activities are allowed on national forest lands, those activities are permitted with an emphasis on protecting the natural environment, including scenic open space values. Almost a third of the lands within the national forest are designated wilderness areas. These wilderness areas provide outstanding open space values.

In addition to national forest lands, a smaller amount of land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is held in the County and provides additional open space values. Lands held by state agencies such as the Colorado Division of Wildlife provide some other smaller tracts of open space.

County residents have repeatedly expressed their desires to see open spaces preserved to the maximum extent possible. They have backed up these desires by further taxing themselves to allow funds for open space acquisition to be generated. As a result, Summit County government has acquired several thousand acres of land to permanently protect its open space values. Several of the towns, most notably Breckenridge and Frisco, have undertaken similar open space acquisition efforts. Most of the towns also have developed parks, which provide some open space benefits.

Finally, private landowners have done much to preserve the remaining private open space areas in the County. Over 11,000 acres of private land have been voluntarily placed in conservation easements to protect the open space values of those lands into perpetuity. As Table 4 shows, the vast majority of these conservation easements have been established on ranches in the Lower Blue Basin.

In total, about 86 percent of the land base in the County can be considered “open space” lands. Table 1 provides an overview of open space areas in the County. Tables 2-4 provide more background on open space protected by the County, towns, and through conservation easements.

Summit County Open Space Protection Program

As a result of the open space property tax levies discussed earlier, the County generates several million dollars annually to acquire key open space parcels. Table 2 summarizes properties that have been acquired to date. A typically higher standard for open space is expected of properties acquired by the County, compared to open space that might be preserved as part of a development proposal. These lands must meet a list of criteria established in the County’s Open Space Protection Plan.

The criteria address the following: access (to trailheads and recreation), agricultural/cultural, buffers (between urban and undeveloped lands), extensions (land adjacent to public lands), recreational (passive uses such as trails), unique lands (outstanding environmentally sensitive areas), and view corridors. In addition to these criteria, the Open Space Protection Plan identifies general areas of open space protection emphasis for each of the County’s four planning basins. This element recommends that the identification of areas of open space emphasis should continue to be refined in future basin master plans.

The Summit County Open Space Advisory Council is responsible for evaluating potential open space acquisitions and forwarding recommendations on acquisitions to the Board of County Commissioners, who make the final determination on open space acquisitions. The Summit County Open Space and Trails department is responsible for staffing and providing technical assistance to the Open Space Advisory Council.

Property	Acres
White River National Forest ¹	324,713
Bureau of Land Management	1,225
Colorado Dept. of Natural Resources (Division of Wildlife)	111
Colorado State Land Board	320
Summit County Government Open Space	2,298
Town of Breckenridge Open Space	155
Town of Breckenridge/Summit County Open Space	1,137
Town of Frisco Open Space	40
Town of Silverthorne	106
Town and County Parks	400
Conservation Easements	11,728
Total	342,233
	86 % of total land area
All Private and Public Lands in Summit County: 396,245	

¹ Includes 82,720 acres in Eagles Nest Wilderness and 12,739 acres in Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness.

Source: November, 2003, Summit County Planning Department, additional data provided by the towns of Silverthorne, Dillon, Frisco, and Breckenridge.

Jurisdiction	Acres
Town of Breckenridge	155
Town of Frisco	40
Town of Dillon	173
Town of Silverthorne	106
Summit County	2,298
Town of Breckenridge/Summit County ¹	1,137
Total	3,909

¹ Open space jointly held by the Town and Summit County.
Source: Summit County Planning Department.

Property	Acres
Town of Breckenridge	
Riverwalk Park and Plaza	8.70
Kingdom Park and Recreation Center	29.50
Carter Park	9.37
Town of Frisco	
Meadow Creek Park	4.16
Pioneer Park	0.96
Post Office Pocket Park	0.75
Frisco Recreation Area at Peninsula	219.00
Triangle Park	1.53
Walter Byron Park	20.00
Marina Lakefront Park	5.70
Frisco Historic Park	0.96
Community Center Pocket Park	0.12
Old Town Hall Pocket Park	0.15
Town of Dillon	
Town Park	10.00
Marina/Amphitheatre Park	22.00
Town of Silverthorne	
Cottonwood Community Park	17.00
Trent Community Park	3.80
Rainbow Community Park	7.00
Arctic Placer Pocket Park	1.00
Elementary School Pocket Park	4.50
Summit County	
Blue River Park	34.00
Total	400.20

Source: Summit County Planning Department.

Basin	Acres in Conservation Easements
Snake River	179
Lower Blue	11,330
Upper Blue	46
Ten Mile	173

Table 4. Conservation Easements in Summit County	
Basin	Acres in Conservation Easements
Countywide Total	11,728

Source: Summit County Planning Department.

Despite the apparent plentifulness of open space in the County, there are still numerous prized open space areas that could be impacted by development in the future. While some development will be necessary to accommodate projected growth in the County, there is an accompanying need to preserve open space in these areas so that new residents continue to have open space opportunities in close proximity to their residences and to maintain the overall community character. Depending on specific site conditions, the open space contributions of a project may vary considerably. Some areas may have prominent landscapes, visible from public viewpoints, which should be maintained. Other areas may contain environmentally sensitive areas that should be protected. Finally, some areas may contain little in terms of high quality open space areas but land could still be set aside for small pocket parks, possibly containing playgrounds or developed recreation facilities such as basketball courts. This element emphasizes that open space needs should be evaluated in all future development proposals.

Goals, Policies/Actions

Goal A. Preserve and protect the County's open space and minimize the negative impacts on open space associated with development.

Policy/Action 1. Protect open space through the use of regulations, incentives, and other mechanisms including land exchanges, land dedications, transfer of development rights, cluster subdivisions, sensitive site design, and other methods.

Policy/Action 2. Prevent the encroachment of incompatible land uses into open space areas.

Policy/Action 3. Create and maintain open space buffers around each of the County's urban areas to create a distinct separation between urban areas, to preserve community identity, and to prevent urban sprawl.

3.1 Provide open space areas within urban areas, where feasible. A more developed recreational focus and less pristine setting may be appropriate in urban areas.

Policy/Action 4. Designate a portion of land in new developments for open space purposes, when critical open space is documented.

Policy/Action 5. Open space protection efforts should consider effects on private property rights.

Goal B. Protect open space in Summit County through acquisition of property interests in addition to other incentive-based and regulatory techniques.

Policy/Action 1. Seek permanent protection of open space through public acquisition of property interests such as full fee simple ownership, conservation easements, and access easements, when regulatory and incentive programs are insufficient to protect open space.

Policy/Action 2. Support the continued existence of the County's open space acquisition program, specifically:

2.1 Maintain sufficient funding to acquire and sustainably manage open space.

- 2.2 Continue to appoint a citizen Advisory Council charged with giving recommendations and guidance on open space protection directly to the Board of County Commissioners.
- Policy/Action 3. Regularly update the Summit County Open Space Protection Plan to address community open space issues and to promote implementation of the plan.
- Policy/Action 4. Pursue innovative approaches to leverage monies used for open space acquisition purposes by integrating the efforts of the County's open space acquisition program with other appropriate programs and agencies, including:
- 4.1 Land exchanges and other landownership adjustments with the U.S. Forest Service.
 - 4.2 Joint open space purchases with the towns, metro districts, and other appropriate parties (e.g., land trusts).
 - 4.3 The County's Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) programs.
 - 4.4 Great Outdoors Colorado funding and other local/state/federal grant funding.
 - 4.5 Staff assistance to neighborhoods to address neighborhood-specific open space and trail access issues.
- Policy/Action 5. Utilize the County's Open Space Protection Plan to provide guidance on the types of lands to protect, the open space selection criteria to be used, areas of open space protection emphasis, and the operating procedures of the County's open space acquisition program.
- Policy/Action 6. The County's open space acquisition program should consider the goals, policies and actions articulated in basin master plans when evaluating acquisition proposals, as well as whether existing regulations and incentives can adequately meet these goals, policies and actions.
- 6.1 Consider the long-term management costs of a proposed property acquisition before formally acquiring property interest.
- Policy/Action 7. Provide education to property owners and residents about the County's open space acquisition program and other open space protection options and incentives to protect open space values on private land (e.g., conservation easements).
- Policy/Action 8. Work cooperatively with landowners to protect the types of open space lands identified in the Open Space Protection Plan.
- Policy/Action 9. Sustainably manage open space areas through appropriate means (e.g., management plans) to protect their open space resources.
- Policy/Action 10. Place open space acquired by the County in an appropriate type of long-term restriction on use (e.g., rezoning to Open Space Zone district, conservation easement), with the exception of parcels identified during the acquisition process as suitable for disposal, so that open space resources are protected.

Sustainability Measures

Sustainability indicators are used as a means to assess progress toward achievement of specific goals and policies/actions outlined in this element. The indicator is a quantitative measurement that reflects data available from the Open Space and Trails Department.

Table 5. Local Government and Privately Protected Open Space		
	Acres in 2003	Acres in 2008
Summit County Government Open Space	2,298	
Town Open Space	301	
Joint Town/County Open Space	1,137	
Town and County Parks	400	
Conservation Easements	11,728	
Total	15,864	

Sources: Summit County Open Space and Trails and Planning Departments.

Implementation Strategies

Many of the policies and actions identified in this element propose some future work in order to see their successful implementation. The table below identifies specific strategies recommended to fully implement the Open Space Element. Priorities are identified to give an indication of the current relative importance of a particular implementation strategy. These priorities are provided as guidelines only.

Goal, Policy/Action	Project/Description	Timeframe	Priority
A.1	The County Planning Department should continue to evaluate opportunities to protect open space as it updates or develops regulations. An example is applying the rural land use subdivision regulations to other basins of the County (besides the Lower Blue Basin) or developing TDR regulations for the Lower Blue and Ten Mile Basins. Open space preservation should be one of the issues considered whenever land exchanges are proposed.	Ongoing	Medium
B.1, B.2, B.3, B.4, B.5, B.6, B.7, B.8, B.9	The Open Space and Trails Department, in conjunction with the Open Space Advisory Council and the BOCC, shall produce an annual work program which identifies specific projects to be addressed during the upcoming year that are described under these policies and actions.	Annual	High
B.2.1	The BOCC, with input and recommendations from the Open Space Advisory Council, should review future funding needs for the open space acquisition program prior to the expiration of the current property tax mill levies and develop strategies to ensure sufficient funding is maintained	2003-04 2008-09	High

G:\MAJPROJ\Master Plan Directory\CCP October 2009\Open Space Element.doc