

Poudre Trail gaps will soon be no more, thanks to \$2 million Great Outdoors Colorado grant

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<https://www.coloradoan.com/story/news/2019/09/30/poudre-river-trail-completion-sight-after-great-outdoors-colorado-grant/3819331002/>

The final funding hurdle to complete the nearly 40-year-old Poudre Trail has been cleared with the awarding of a \$2 million grant.

The Great Outdoors Colorado Board approved the grant to Larimer County and partners the city of Fort Collins and the towns of Timnath and Windsor on Friday. The move secures funding for the completion of the final 4.7 miles of the 45-mile trail from Bellvue to Greeley.

The grant money will pay for construction of the trail at three gaps, said Meegan Flenniken, Larimer County's resource manager. She said the final easements with private property owners for the final segments of the trail have either been finalized or are in the process of being finalized. Funding for those easements has been secured by Larimer County, Fort Collins, Timnath and Windsor.

"Completion of this project will fulfill a decades-long partnership to construct one of the region's highest priority trail connections," said Zac Wiebe, a planning and natural resource specialist with Larimer County Department of Natural Resources.

Final design work will begin this fall, with construction beginning shortly thereafter. Construction of the trail must be completed by 2022, according to the grant.

According to GOCO, the Poudre River Regional Trail sees around 300,000 visitors annually.

Poudre Trail map



Filling in the gaps

Here are where the remaining gaps are located:

West of Interstate 25: This 1.66-mile gap runs from the Colorado State University Environmental Learning Center in east Fort Collins to the existing trail in Timnath, just east of I-25. The trail will be

routed where the Poudre River flows under I-25 just north of Harmony Road as part of the ongoing I-25 North Express Lanes Project. As part of that project, a new bridge will be constructed across the Poudre River.

The segment will also connect to a future Fort Collins community park, city-managed Running Deer and Arapaho Bend natural areas, and other sites along the Poudre River.

Timnath: Sections of the trail are currently under construction as part of a new housing development project. The grant will fund a 0.9-mile trail filling a gap between the housing developments and the existing portion of trail in town. This segment will also connect residents to Timnath Community Park, Bethke Elementary School and surrounding neighborhoods.

Windsor: This 2.5-mile section will connect the trail to the existing trailhead at River Bluffs Open Space, just east of Ptarmigan Country Club (Larimer County roads 32E and 3) and connect to the existing continuous trail to Greeley. An offshoot of the trail will also connect users to Kyger Reservoir and Windsor's trail system.

With the latest grant, GOCO funding in Larimer County has received nearly \$55 million in funds and conserved more than 64,000 acres of land.

Larimer County buying flood parcel to add to Forks Park in Big Thompson Canyon
Forks Park, closed since 2013, will reopen in April



LOVELAND, CO – OCTOBER 1, 2019: The Big Thompson River, photographed Monday, Oct. 1, 2019, runs alongside Forks Park in Drake in the Big Thompson Canyon west of Loveland. (Jenny Sparks/Loveland Reporter-Herald)

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Larimer County is buying land on which a mobile home was destroyed during the 2013 flood and adding it to Forks Park in the Big Thompson Canyon.

The county commissioners voted 3-0 on Tuesday to buy the 0.33-acre parcel for \$60,000 from the estate of Thomas R. Weis, adding riverfront property to one of four county parks located in the canyon. The purchase is part of an overall vision to fill in gaps and provide more contiguous land at Forks Park, which is just east of Drake.

“This is the first step toward accomplishing that goal,” said Meegan Flenniken, land conservation, planning and resource program manager with Larimer County’s Department of Natural Resources.

Weis Fee Big Thompson River Priority Area



The Larimer County Department of Natural Resources provided this map showing Forks Park and a one-third acre parcel, outlined in yellow, that Larimer County is buying to add to the park west of Loveland in the Big Thompson Canyon. The property in the canyon is a parcel of land that was privately owned on on which a mobile home was destroyed during the 2013 flood. Larimer County intends to use the property to add on to the park. (Larimer County Department of Natural Resources)

Forks Park is one of four Larimer County parks in the Big Thompson Canyon that were damaged and closed to public access after the 2013 flood. Narrows Park and Sleepy Hollow have reopened, Glade Park is open to walk-in fishing access, but Forks Park is still undergoing work and not yet reopened.

Larimer County bought the land for Forks Park from residents after the 1976 flood caused widespread devastation and turned the area into a public park, popular for fishing and picnicking.

Now, the county is buying some flood-damaged parcels, as it did in the late 1970s, including this one known as the Weis parcel just west of the existing Forks Park.

“The property was developed prior to the 1976 flood and contains a mobile home and detached garage,” according to a memo given to the county commissioners. “The 2013 flood caused damage to the mobile home, which has since been uninhabited.”

The county plans to remove the severely damaged mobile home and remaining concrete walls from the property and absorb the land into Forks Park. Costs associated with the cleanup range from \$15,000 to \$20,000, according to estimates from three contractors, according to county information.

As Larimer County works to expand Forks Park, it is working with the Colorado Department of Transportation to obtain two other parcels owned by the state agency, and are partnered with them on building a 15-car parking lot at the site. Other improvements include a vault toilet, a kiosk and a trail to river access.

“It will open April of 2020,” said Flenniken.

The new piece of land will allow increased habitat and conservation land and improve opportunities for Larimer County residents to fish, picnic and simply enjoy lands along the Big Thompson River.

“That fishing access is so valuable,” said Commissioner Tom Donnelly, a Loveland resident.

“This opportunity comes so rarely. I think this is a great opportunity by county staff. This is a real important third of an acre in our plans to provide recreation in the Big Thompson Canyon.”

Loveland woman ensures acres near Flatiron will remain cattle grazing ground forever
Conservation easements protect private land from development



Jarene Pittington, left, checks the creek below to make sure there is water for her cattle to drink as Charlie Johnson, Larimer County Senior Land Agent, checks out the view Thursday, Oct. 3, 2019, at her ranch near Flatiron Reservoir west of Loveland. Pittington worked with Johnson and Larimer County to place a conservation easement on the property to make sure it will always be a cattle ranch. (Jenny Sparks/Loveland Reporter-Herald)

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Cattle graze on the land at Jarene Pittington's ranch on Thursday, Oct. 3, 2019, near Flatiron Reservoir west of Loveland. Pittington worked with Larimer County to place a conservation easement on the property to make sure it will always be a cattle ranch. (Jenny Sparks/Loveland Reporter-Herald)

Jarene Pittington spent most of her life on a cattle ranch west of Loveland, exploring the land as a child and caring for the land, the habitat and the animals most of her adult life.

Tough in the way only a rancher can be, yet kind and caring, Jarene wanted to make sure her 162 acres stayed a ranch, protected from development, forever.

So she donated a conservation easement to Larimer County recently, ensuring that her grasslands and hills, her creek and native grasses, will remain as they exist now.

“She did it for all the right reasons,” said Charlie Johnson, land agent with the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources who worked with Pittington. “It was for such pure reasons. She wanted it to remain cattle grazing.”

But what is a conservation easement? It is a tool that land managers can use to keep lands free from development at the request of the landowner. The private resident still owns his or her land, but agrees to a restriction that says it will not be developed. Different conservation easements can have different stipulations, crafted specifically for the needs and terrain of those specific acres.



Cattle graze on the land at Jarene Pittington’s ranch on Thursday, Oct. 3, 2019, near Flatiron Reservoir west of Loveland. Pittington worked with Larimer County to place a conservation easement on the property to make sure it will always be a cattle ranch. (Jenny Sparks/Loveland Reporter-Herald)

For Pittington, there is a 5-acre space around where her barns, sheds and home stand on which she retained the right to build. The rest of her acres will remain as a cattle ranch, free and undeveloped. If she sells her property in the future, the buyer is limited to those same rules.

Land trusts and open lands programs use conservation easements on a regular basis to protect land, to protect habitat and views, without actually buying the land and managing it. The property owners can receive tax incentives for this move. And while many land trusts that are not funded seek donated conservation easements, Larimer County’s Department of Natural Resources, funded by a sales tax, often pays the landowner a sum for the value of that easement.

Right now, the department and its land conservation partners have conserved 21,130 acres in easements, spending \$6.24 million to make that happen. That is just Larimer County, not including those easements held by surrounding cities, towns and land trusts.

“Acquiring (conservation easements) is less expensive than a fee-simple purchase, and because the land is privately owned and managed, the county doesn’t incur long-term management costs beyond annually monitoring the CE,” explained Meegen Flenniken, land conservation, planning and resource manager for the natural resources department.

Most conservation easements do not have public access; that is up to the discretion of the land owners. But the tool allows those landowners to realize a portion of the development value of their land and, at the same time, preserve “values important to them,” Flenniken said.

“It’s very important to maintain that level of conservation of wildlife habitat and farming and ranching,” Johnson said. “Conserving the habitat is very important.”

While she will receive tax incentives for the conservation easement, Pittington did not receive the \$300,000 value associated with her land. She donated that conservation easement to Larimer County for the sole reason of preserving the land she loves, and at the same time adding onto more than 8,000 acres of privately conserved land as well as county and U.S. Forest Service land in the area surrounding Flatiron Reservoir.

“That’s very rare,” Johnson said, noting that because the Larimer County program is funded most of its conservation easements are paid.

The payoff is well beyond money, protecting Pittington’s lifestyle but also protecting the views and the wildlife habitat in an area near three reservoirs and multiple campgrounds — Carter Lake, Flatiron Reservoir and Pinewood Reservoir. There is no public access on her property, but residents will feel and see and hear the natural benefits at those nearby parks and campgrounds.



A view of the landscape at Jarene Pittington’s ranch Thursday, Oct. 3, 2019, near Flatiron Reservoir west of Loveland. (Jenny Sparks/Loveland Reporter-Herald)

Pittington clearly loves the land and her way of life. On a tour of her ranch, she counted and checked on her cattle, made sure they had a water supply and were safe. She told stories about ranch life — including ones where neighbors called her to take out rattlesnakes with her shotgun.

Growing up just west of Loveland, she graduated from Loveland High School in 1959 when it was still in the old Bill Reed Middle School building and attended Washington School. Her father worked for the county's road and bridge department, on top of ranching, and helped rebuild U.S. 34 after the 1976 flood. And she remembers times when Walt Clark, the person the school is named after, drove her home from classes.

She has a deep history in this area, and on her land in particular.

Cottonwood Creek runs through her native foothills grasslands and shrublands, which smell like the great outdoors with a mixture of mountain mahogany and pine. Wildlife such as deer, elk, bear, mountain lion, birds, frogs, fish and insects thrive in this habitat; on a recent tour, a handful of deer munched on the native foods sources and a coyote scattered over the ridge top.

Pittington said those deer were born on her land, spotted babies earlier this season, and she watched grow and thrive on land her parents bought in 1935. Surveying her land, she spoke about a lifetime there, caring for the terrain, raising cattle and appreciating all that nature has to offer.

“That is why I did it,” she said simply.