

**Prairie Dog Working Group
September 11, 2017
Open Space Mountain Parks Annex: 7315 Red Deer Drive
FINAL MEETING SUMMARY**

ATTENDANCE

Participants: Kristin Cannon, Pat Comer, Aaron Cook, Keri Konold, Lindsey Sterling Krank, Joy Master, Amy Masching, Valerie Matheson, Andy Pelster, Carse Pustmueller, Eric Sims, Heather Swanson

Facilitation: Heather Bergman, Sam Haas

ACTION ITEMS

Amy Masching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the revised first recommendation’s definition of “plan.” Review the revised second recommendation for stakeholder engagement language.
Aaron Cook	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the revised first recommendation’s definition of “plan.”
Peak Facilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Send out a Doodle poll for possible meeting dates in October. Send out the meeting summary.
All Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise the recommendations per the Working Group’s agreements. Provide PDWG with available data on acres/map of the Southern Grasslands, acres/map/boundaries of native vegetation on Southern Grasslands, and acres/boundaries of past and present prairie dog colonies on the Southern Grasslands.
All PDWG Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indicate your availability for the next meeting on the Doodle poll that Peak Facilitation send out.

WORKING GROUP MEMBER STATEMENTS AND DISCUSSION OF GOALS AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Several Prairie Dog Working Group members provided statements about their general objectives for Phase Two of the Working Group.

- It is important that the Working Group consider all prairie dogs for relocation, and that enough land is made available. The best relocation methods should be used. This includes artificial burrows if necessary, and the best available science should guide decisions.
- The Working Group must define and agree to the overarching goals of the PDWG. The 2017 recommendations are piecemeal ideas that have been considered independently from the larger goal of effective prairie dog conservation. While prairie dog conservation and sustainability have been discussed, the group has not clearly defined these terms. Effective prairie dog conservation requires the creation of a large block of active prairie dog habitat that will sustainably support prairie dog populations as well as their commensal species such as the black-footed ferret. While there are many aspects to the complicated prairie dog issue, and it is easy to

get lost in the details when creating recommendations, the overall goal should be clear and should drive the creation of PDWG's recommendations for 2018 and beyond that are submitted to the City Manager. There should be a guiding theme or principle that prioritizes the Working Group's recommendations and ensures its efforts are clear, worthwhile, and effective.

- City Council's directive to the PDWG was to establish a group with a full range of community perspectives who could create adaptive management practices. City Council did not direct the Prairie Dog Working Group to define the overarching goal for prairie dog management in the City of Boulder. The City of Boulder's goals related to prairie dogs are laid out in multiple plans. Discussion of overarching goals should be the first step in phase two if the Working Group decides that understanding of the group's goal is their priority.
- The information packet (IP) submitted to City Council should specify that the Working Group plans to establish its goals and guiding principles during phase two. The Working Group will then work toward its goal by evaluating current plans and policies to assess areas of alignment and recommending changes to existing plans and procedures.

REVIEW AND FINALIZATION OF FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

City of Boulder staff has worked to flesh out the Prairie Dog Working Group's five recommendations from Phase One. Staff summarized the recommendations and Working Group members offered suggestions for revision. Included in the discussion were the changes proposed by the Task Group developed by the full PDWG at their last meeting of Phase One to work with staff to flesh out the recommendations.

Recommendation #1: Create guidelines and criteria for prioritizing relocation/take sites on both public and private lands.

Staff Presentation

Val Matheson, the staff lead for this recommendation, described the rationale behind the development of the proposed recommendation.

- The Administrative Rule was used as the framework for the priorities in this recommendation.
- The first priority was given to sites with imminent development and to areas where prairie dogs have re-colonized after they had been lawfully removed. Eleven prairie dogs were left at Foothills Community Park last year, and this spring there were 62 prairie dogs there.
- This proposal also includes a definition of imminent construction. It is defined as "demonstration to a high degree of probability that the land will be developed within 15 months."
- When the Prairie Dog Task Group met, they agreed to create a sub-prioritization within the first category to accommodate the possibility that there may be competing priorities. City land was given priority over private land. The second sub-priority within the first category was sites that have a plan but are not facing

imminent development (e.g., the initial prairie dog relocation of Foothills Community Park).

- Third priority was given to City-owned sites with significant adjacent neighbor conflicts that have resulted in sustained lethal control of prairie dogs.
- Fourth priority was given to sites where the landowner or the City department's desired future use conflicts with the presence of prairie dogs. This priority was not in the Administrative Rule.

Group Discussion

- The Working Group discussed that most sites would fall into the first priority and that capacity to meet second, third, and fourth priorities would be limited. The document must provide guidance for situations in which multiple sites are equally imminent.
- Some members of the Working Group expressed concern that many prairie dogs deemed not to be in imminent danger would not be relocated due to capacity issues. This recommendation would likely result in more private relocations.
- This recommendation only sets priorities within existing relocation sites; it does not create more receiving sites. Creation of additional receiving sites should be discussed during phase two.
- Naropa developers would like the sub-prioritization of City lands removed. Instead, City of Boulder staff should make decisions about which sites are the most imminent. The Prairie Dog Task Group agreed to prioritize City sites largely due to the expected community response; Task Group members thought that there would be less controversy about lethal control use on private lands than on public lands. However, the Naropa representative in the Working Group has had an experience that would suggest otherwise. Naropa received over 400,000 signatures protesting their application for a kill permit. They have been trying to move their prairie dogs for eight years, and other developers have jumped ahead and received relocation permits before them because Naropa did not have a development plan. Naropa is developing extended material for horticultural classes/experiential gardening and will present a plan for that.
- The Working Group must decide if and when lethal control of prairie dogs is okay. If the Working Group decides lethal control is not okay, this prioritization is futile. Staff said that City Council asked that lethal control be minimized, not eliminated. Some members of the working group heard Council members state that they didn't want prairie dogs killed.
- There was discussion about whether to keep the prioritization of sites that have experienced recolonization after prairie dogs were lawfully removed.
- It is impossible to predict how often two sites may have equal imminence at the same time; every year is different. The City of Boulder receives an average of one private property application for lethal control per year. The amount of receiving sites will shift every year. If multiple development plans, all intending to use lethal control, were submitted at once, the City of Boulder would prioritize the sites with prairie dog numbers that matched receiving sites.

Agreements

Based on the discussion above, the Working Group agreed to the following.

- Delete the second bullet of the first priority (“if there are multiple sites within this category, projects on the city property will be granted available receiving sites prior to projects on private property”). Insert that the City Manager has the ultimate decision-making authority.
- Insert a 5th priority: The City of Boulder will take prairie dogs from outside City of Boulder limits.
- Insert a definition of “plan” within the first priority. Wherever there is an explicit or implied reference to a plan, define what it means. Insert examples of reasonable development. *Amy Masching and Aaron Cook will review this.*

Recommendation #2: Create guidelines and criteria for prioritizing receiving sites on public lands within existing plans and develop recommendations for making receiving sites more feasible; develop recommendations for increasing landowner and stakeholder acceptance of the use of existing receiving sites.

Staff Presentation

Heather Swanson, the staff lead for this recommendation, described the rationale behind the development of the proposed recommendation.

- This recommendation presents a new set of criteria to prioritize receiving sites on Prairie Dog Conservation Areas (PCAs) and Grassland Preserves. The Task Group discussed the addition of an example, which can be done before the submission of the information packet.
- This recommendation also includes information about stakeholder engagement. It proposes a process for assessing the relocation sites and developing a plan with neighbors. This process would have to be initiated far ahead of the relocation.
- This recommendation also includes information about how to make receiving sites more feasible.
- One item for consideration is that other potential future recommendations (e.g., plague management) could work in direct opposition to this recommendation since achievement of those goals could lead to sustained occupancy in the Grassland Preserves above thresholds that would allow for relocation, thus reducing the availability of receiving sites in the long term within Grassland Preserves.

Group Discussion

- According to some members of the PDWG, creating more receiving sites is not included in this recommendation as it requires a policy change. The only changes that could be made in phase one are related to the improvement of neighbor conflicts. It may be possible to modify criteria that have built-in flexibility. There are certain criteria with explicit thresholds, such as vegetation, that would not be able to be modified.

- Some members of the PDWG maintain that creating more receiving sites (particularly on the Southern Grasslands) is essential to prairie dog conservation and will be discussed in phase two.
- The language should be changed from “strategies to increase availability of receiving sites” to “strategies to increase the availability of existing receiving sites” or “strategies to decrease the time required for receiving sites to become available.”
- There should be a paragraph in the recommendation document that describes what is in the supplemental document.
- The scoring system on Page Two has never been tested. It is important that the Working Group know how the scenarios could play out. The document should clarify why the scoring system has been recommended, and the supplemental document should provide an example. The document should also specify that the scoring system will not be used to restrict the number of available sites, but rather to prioritize them.
- From a prairie dog advocacy perspective, the first consideration should be habitat suitability. After the habitat is assessed as good prairie dog habitat, neighbor conflicts and other land use conflicts on the area should be addressed and mitigated so that the habitat is not rejected for prairie dog use. This recommendation should clarify the steps that will occur. The PCAs and the grassland preserves have different levels of criteria. Assessing habitat suitability first would likely narrow the opportunities to a smaller subset of sites.
- Prairie dog conservation areas are small and ultimately provide limited prairie dog habitat and population expansion. The focus should be on the Southern Grasslands where there is an opportunity to create large-block active prairie dog habitat to support sustainable populations of prairie dogs and prairie dog commensal species.
- From a conservation conflict transformation perspective, it is important to consider the words used to describe community engagement. For example, the phrase “increasing neighbor acceptance” may be interpreted as an effort to persuade, rather than collaborate. A better way to say it would be “increase stakeholder and neighbor engagement in the relocation site process.” The term “outreach” also implies that the convener is imparting knowledge on the public.
- There are both long-term and short-term components to the stakeholder/neighbor engagement. There are broad community conversations that must take place to support the short-term decisions. The document should capture that there is a cost-benefit analysis of investing in short-term community engagement efforts without supporting a simultaneous long-term effort.
- At some point, the City of Boulder may have to decide to use lands that have social conflict. The City of Boulder needs to know the threshold for community engagement that would allow the City to proceed with a relocation without receiving full community support. This should not be framed as an “endpoint” of engagement, but rather a potential decision point. There should not be tight parameters, as every project will differ.
- The Working Group discussed whether the recommendation should specify that the stakeholder engagement process is an effort to meet state relocation permit

requirements. Doing so may provoke some questions from the community about the integrity of the process.

Agreements

Based on the discussion above, the Working Group agreed to the following.

- Change the heading from “strategies for increasing stakeholder and neighbor acceptance of relocation site use” to “mitigation of conflicts with adjacent landowners.”
- The revised scoring system on Page Two should be moved to the supplemental material and should include a clarifying statement about its purpose.
- On Page Four, the heading should be changed from “strategies to increase availability of receiving sites” to “strategies to increase the feasibility of existing receiving sites.”
- The document should clarify that the criteria will not be used to decrease receiving site availability, but rather to prioritize receiving sites. Bold this statement.
- The document should list the Grassland Preserves first and the PCAs second.
- Where the document has any language related to “community outreach,” replace it with “community engagement.” *Amy Masching will review this.*
- On Page Three, in the fourth bullet of stakeholder engagement strategies, remove the word “robust.”
- The document should capture that there is a cost-benefit analysis of investing in short-term community engagement efforts while supporting a simultaneous long-term effort. Investing time now could create a long-term benefit.
- The document should state “after community engagement...” at the bottom of Page Three.

Recommendation #3: On approved receiving sites, ensure that the number of prairie dogs to be relocated have adequate accommodations, utilizing existing or artificial burrows (including nest boxes) and taking into consideration existing native vegetation.

Staff Presentation

Heather Swanson, the staff lead for this recommendation, described the rationale behind the development of the proposed recommendation.

- The intent of this recommendation is to maximize the relocation potential on PCAs. While this will be different for every site, it may require the installation of infrastructure (mostly nest boxes).
- The situation in the Grassland Preserves is more nuanced due to multiple conservation priorities. This recommendation lays out three potential situations. The first is in areas with non-native vegetation, or where the soil has previously been tilled or disturbed. The second is in areas of intact native vegetation that have not been tilled or previously disturbed. The third is in areas of rare plant communities or directly adjacent to these communities if the associated disturbance presents a threat to the conservation of the plant communities.

- Land that is not managed by Open Space Mountain Parks (OSMP), such as Parks and Recreation land or Utility land, will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Hopefully a comprehensive assessment of Parks and Recreation land will be conducted soon.
- The recommendation refers to plant communities ranked by Colorado Natural Heritage Program as S1, S2, or S3. This system ranks plant species along a spectrum of abundance. S1 means that the species is critically imperiled; and S3 means that the species is vulnerable.

Group Discussion

- Augured burrows will not be used because many feel that they are not as successful and do not provide sufficient cover.
- The recommendation specifies that the preservation of relocated prairie dogs will be balanced with preservation of intact native plant communities. There are likely no receiving sites that are completely covered by rare plant communities. Without having done the analysis, it is thought that this recommendation would not eliminate sites. The recommendation should specify that rare plant communities (and the directly adjacent area) embedded in a larger colony will not have nest boxes, but the rest of the colony might still be able to use nest boxes. It is unlikely that the use of these criteria would not exclude a single prairie dog colonies for relocation, but some members of the PDWG believe it could result in inadequate accommodation because of the proposed nest box restrictions.
- The City of Boulder currently conducts site-by-site evaluations in relation to nest box installation, but these evaluations have not been based on plant communities. This recommendation provides a framework for analysis.
- The recommendation only refers to plant communities, not rare insect or animal species. The City of Boulder has only collected lepidoptera surveys on colonies that have an established transect running through them. The host communities have been mapped, but rare plant/species surveys are not made publicly available. However, it may be possible to generalize rare plant/species on a map, using one color to signify all rare communities.
- The Colorado Natural Heritage Program rankings have not been tested on city lands. Reference to the rankings should be removed and replaced by a more general statement. From a vegetation and plant ecology perspective, the ranking is the bare minimum, and there are likely one percent of plants that fall into the critically imperiled category.
- There are concerns about the proposed restriction on nest boxes within native vegetation areas of the Grassland Preserves (referencing the second bullet of the recommendation, specifically). Some Working Group members had questions about how much actual disturbance nest box installation creates. There are 65 acres occupied by prairie dogs on the Southern Grasslands and many more unoccupied acres with native vegetation. Some Working Group members thought that in the few past/present occupied prairie dog acres, the prairie dogs should have adequate nest boxes to insure their survival after relocation even if that means putting nest boxes where there is native vegetation, They articulated that any disturbance to native vegetation from nest boxes could be mitigated by reseeding of native vegetation so

that adequate accommodation is provided to prairie dogs being relocated onto areas with native vegetation.

- It is difficult to balance competing priorities on the grasslands. The Grassland Management Plan references prairie dogs as one of the constituents on the Grassland Preserves but does not advocate for maximizing the protection of one species over another. However, the Plan does call for a large block of active prairie dog habitat that will support commensal species.
- OSMP is considering issuing a request for proposals (RFP) to do a risk analysis of the impact of nest box installation. The risk analysis would assess the importance of the plant communities in a broader regional context as well as assess the impact of disturbance associated with installation of nest boxes within this broader context. This is proposed on Page 13 of the supplemental document.
- In areas with intact native vegetation, natural burrows will still be used and maintained for prairie dog relocation.

Agreements

Based on the discussion above, the Working Group agreed to the following.

- The document should specify that natural burrows can still be used in rare plant communities. If there are documented (e.g., Colorado Natural Heritage Program) rare plant species/communities embedded in larger prairie dog colonies, nest boxes may be used in areas where there are no rare plants. Nest boxes also cannot be used on land directly adjacent to the rare plant species/community.
- Add that there is an option to explore seeding after the nest boxes are installed to rehabilitate any impact from the nest box installation.
- Staff will provide the PDWG with a map of the Southern Grasslands what shows acres/areas of intact native vegetation with an overlay of boundaries of past and existing colonies and existing receiving sites. The recommendation should include a ballpark number of acres that overlap intact native vegetation with prairie dog receiving sites. Additional information is needed to finish discussion of this recommendation.

2017 RELOCATIONS

Val Matheson provided an update on the 2017 prairie dog relocations.

Diagonal Crossing

- Diagonal Crossing is a private relocation from a property on the Diagonal Highway to OSMP land.
- 182 prairie dogs have been relocated so far. The relocation contractors thought they had caught nearly all the prairie dogs, then there was a sudden uptick in the number of prairie dogs getting trapped. The contractors concluded that prairie dogs were running across the highway to the site.
- A barrier around the Diagonal Crossing site will be installed.
- 25 artificial burrows were installed on the receiving site.

Foothills Community Park

- The City estimated that there were approximately 62 prairie dogs at Foothills Community Park in the spring of this year. That number has now decreased to 40.
- The prairie dogs from this site will be relocated to the Waneka site. Dusting occurred at the sending site.

6201 Spine Road

- The City of Boulder is working with the landowner. The landowner has secured a relocation contract for the 20 prairie dogs on their property.
- They need to submit technical document. It is a by-right development, so the approval could happen very fast.

NEXT STEPS

- The Prairie Dog Working Group must meet for three additional hours to complete the discussion on Recommendation #3 and to address the final two recommendations and the supplemental material. Phase Two work will begin in November, after the IP has been submitted to Boulder City Council.
- Peak Facilitation will send a Doodle Poll for meeting dates in October.
- City of Boulder staff will integrate the changes to the document that the group agreed to make.