

Recommended Changes to the Trail Study Area Planning Process for Public Review

3/2/07

Background

The Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP) Department is committed to assess the effectiveness of Visitor Master Plan (VMP) management strategies and actions and revise them based on new information gained from research and experience. In keeping with this commitment, OSMP has conducted an assessment of how well the process worked for the first two Trail Study Area (TSA) plans—Marshall Mesa / Southern Grasslands and Eldorado Mountain / Doudy Draw. These two TSA plans were the first of ten scheduled in the VMP, with the intent of completing additional TSA plans to eventually complete planning for the entire OSMP land system.

Four goals were formulated for the assessment:

1. Target completion of Trail Study Area planning for the entire OSMP system within five years.
2. Allocate resources to complete TSA planning efficiently and effectively.
3. Develop information critical to addressing strategic issues and system-wide needs and opportunities for resource conservation and recreation.
4. Make the TSA public involvement process more inclusive, collaborative, and efficient.

The TSA planning assessment was conducted in the latter part of 2006 and first part of 2007 and included consultation of the OSMP staff and the public. A questionnaire was sent to the public who participated in the completed TSA plans, and a public meeting was held on January 23, 2006. Many of the suggested changes to the TSA planning process offered by the public and the staff are incorporated into the recommendations and associated specific actions listed in this document. Additional staff specific recommendations (not included) were formulated to addressing ways to enhance staff capacities.

Recommendations

A. Geographic Scope and Schedule for Planning

- A.1 **Create four larger planning areas for Trail Study Area plans, inclusive of all OSMP-managed lands (see Map 1 and Attachment A).**
- A.2 **Complete TSA plans, approximately one per year, in the following order: West TSA, North TSA, South TSA, and East TSA (see Attachment B for further details).**

Enlarging TSA boundaries to create larger planning areas will allow comprehensive trail and resource protection planning for the whole OSMP system. Areas managed by OSMP that are not currently located within TSAs (53%) will be integrated into the TSA process rather than being left for future years. The larger planning areas will also contribute to an area-wide approach to dealing with resource protection and recreation opportunities which provides for improved consistency of visitor access and resource protection planning. The larger areas will increase the scope of work required to complete each TSA, however overall efficiency is gained by focusing staff and community efforts on a single area which may have similar attributes that can be assessed and planned for collectively. Planning subareas will be used to help inventory and analysis efforts focus on smaller areas within a TSA.

Completing approximately one larger TSA plan per year will allow visitor use facilities and resource protections to be put in place across the OSMP system in a more reasonable timeframe than is expected by the current approach of completing one smaller TSA per year. Process efficiencies gained through implementing subsequent recommendations can off-set the larger scope of work.

B. Planning Information and System-Wide Context

B.1 Fill key information gaps and complete additional analysis to support TSA planning.

- a. Complete additional inventories and maps that fill key identified gaps for natural resource and recreation resource information.
- b. Conduct Geographical Information System (GIS) spatial analysis and mapping to improve the planning information base, including system-wide information.
- c. Allocate staff and additional consultant resources to develop needed baseline data on current resource conditions and recreational use to allow monitoring and assessment of the impacts of new trails and visitor use and identification of appropriate management responses.

B.2 Develop a system-wide context for recreation and resource protection planning.

- a. Collect and synthesize information and direction from existing plans and reports that will contribute to the system-wide context.
- b. Identify system-wide resource conservation goals, targets, and priorities that augment the Forest Ecosystem Management Plan and how they will be incorporated into TSA planning.
- c. Incorporate system-wide resource information and resource conservation goals, targets, and priorities from the Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan (currently underway) and how they will be incorporated into TSA planning.
- d. Provide better definition of system-wide recreation program goals, targets, and priorities identified in the Visitor Master Plan.
- e. Integrate the direction from these various plans to provide a system-wide context for Trail Study Area planning.

The system-wide context for resource conservation will primarily be derived from two ecosystem management plans (forest and grasslands). The most important resource protection needs will be identified by: 1) augmenting the existing Forest Ecosystem Management Plan with information on critical protection needs for forest habitats (goals, conservation targets, and priorities); and 2) using information gained in the Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan process to determine critical protection needs for grassland habitats (goals, targets, and priorities). Some examples of conservation targets important from a system-wide perspective and requiring a higher level of protection might include: grassland-nesting birds, nesting raptors, rare plant species or communities, rare or sensitive wildlife species and their habitats, and wildlife movement corridors.

The system-wide context for recreation resources will primarily be derived from the adopted Visitor Master Plan and to-be-developed recreation program goals, targets, and priorities. Some examples of recreation program targets important from a system-wide perspective include: key trail connections and access improvements, and areas considered to expand or enhance mountain biking, hang gliding, no-dog, or other opportunities.

C. Public Involvement Process

C.1 Improve the process of working with community groups.

- a. Use community working groups to identify key issues and possible solutions that help staff evaluate alternatives and recommendations.
- b. Communicate policy priorities or “givens” to the community at the initiation of the TSA process to focus public deliberations.
- c. Communicate key decision factors, rationales, and trade-offs supported by OSMP at the end of the TSA process.
- d. Establish and support staff liaisons with community groups to foster productive ongoing working relationships.
- e. Develop standard methods for communicating with neighboring landowners, neighborhood associations, and other local community members who may have an interest in TSA planning outcomes.

C.2 Provide varied opportunities for public involvement.

- a. Utilize public contacts with visitors by rangers and outreach staff, in order to provide opportunities for sharing of information and public input or feedback.
- b. Conduct public field trips for TSA planning.
- c. Lead “natural selection” hikes in the TSAs that are in the planning process.
- d. Use the Chautauqua Ranger Cottage for public outreach by providing displays and information.
- e. Consolidate and conduct a small number of public meetings.
- f. Utilize, as much as possible, web-based applications to promote opportunities for public input.

In the TSA assessment, a need was identified to bring people together in support of a balanced, strategic, and comprehensive approach to TSA planning. Community working groups are proposed as a method of bringing people together, building shared understanding and common ground, and reducing the polarization among the various community interests. These groups will help identify key issues and possible solutions and be a sounding board for staff in the evaluation of TSA alternatives and plan recommendations. Ideas from the stakeholder group will be reported out for broader community input.

Attachment A

Description of the Four Enlarged Trail Study Areas (TSAs)

West Trail Study Area:

- Mountain Parks North and South TSAs
- Western Mountain Parks Habitat Conservation Area
- Shanahan / South Mesa TSA
- Flagstaff / Chautauqua area
- Sanitas / Anemone Hill area

The West TSA contains the mountain backdrop and adjacent areas, with a combination of sensitive resources and high visitation. The West TSA extends from the western boundary of Mountain Parks to Broadway / S.H. 93 on the east and from Eldorado Springs Drive (S.H. 170) on the south to Linden Avenue on the north. The Shanahan Ridge area and the South Mesa area are included in the West TSA because of the interconnected visitor travel patterns with the Mountain Parks.

North Trail Study Area

- Wonderland Lake area
- North Foothills Trail Study Area
- East Beech and Boulder Valley Ranch areas
- Boulder Reservoir area and lands along the Diagonal Highway
- Northern tier lands

The North TSA on the west contains the northern front of the foothills and the most northerly lands in the OSMP system, extending east to the Diagonal Highway. High visitation areas include the Wonderland Lake area and the Boulder Valley Ranch area. A large number of agricultural uses (especially cattle grazing) are present in this TSA.

South Trail Study Area

- South Boulder Creek Area
- Tallgrass Prairie East TSA
- ✓ Eldorado Mountain / Doudy Draw TSA (plan completed 12/06)
- ✓ Marshall Mesa / Southern Grasslands TSA (plan completed 12/05)
- Jewel Mountain TSA

The South TSA includes the two Trail Study Areas where TSA plans have already been completed and other areas to the south and west of Baseline Reservoir. The South Boulder Creek area is a high visitation area in the TSA. Cattle grazing is a major use in much of this TSA.

East TSA Plan

- East Boulder / Dry Creek TSA
- East Boulder Valley / Teller Farm area
- Union Pacific-White Rocks TSA
- Gunbarrel / Heatherwood / Lower Boulder Creek area
- Creek Confluence area

The East TSA includes the lands furthest east in the OSMP system. The highest visitation areas in the East TSA include Teller Farm and areas around the Gunbarrel / Heatherwood subdivisions. Most of the lands in this TSA are either cropland or rangeland.

Attachment B

Priorities for Completing TSA Plans

1. **West TSA Plan.** The West plan is the first one to be completed because the TSA is largely forested and the existing Forest Ecosystem Management Plan (FEMP), with some augmentation, can provide needed system-wide context for resource conservation for this area. The trail system is well developed in the West TSA. A key issue for TSA planning is the high density of undesignated trails, including climbing access trails. The West TSA Plan can draw on the Mountain Parks Resource Protection and Visitor Use Plan and the Forest Ecosystem Management Plan (both adopted in 1999).
2. **North TSA Plan.** This plan is a high priority because it includes the North Foothills Habitat Conservation Area and nearby areas which are experiencing a significant increase in visitation, given their proximity to the rapidly developing northern part of the city. The new Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan will help provide system-wide context for resource conservation priorities. Key issues for TSA planning include high densities of undesignated trails in the Boulder Valley Ranch area and potential trail connections. The North TSA Plan can draw on the North Boulder Valley Area Management Plan (adopted 1997) and the Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan (to be completed in 2008).
3. **South TSA Plan.** This plan includes the already adopted Marshall Mesa / Southern Grasslands and Eldorado Mountain / Doudy Draw TSA plans and will incorporate planning for the areas not yet included in TSA plans. The Tallgrass Prairie East Habitat Conservation Area (HCA) and Jewel Mountain HCA are included in this TSA. Key issues for TSA planning include visitor access in the Jewel Mountain area and connection of Dry Creek trails with the South Boulder Creek trail. The South TSA Plan can draw on the South Boulder Creek Area Management Plan (adopted 1996) and the Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan (to be completed in 2008). Including the two existing areas where TSA plans are already completed will foster the area-wide planning approach and better inform planning for the areas where TSA planning is still to be completed. Implementation of the adopted Marshall Mesa / Southern Grasslands TSA Plan and the Eldorado Mountain / Doudy Draw TSA Plan will proceed as scheduled, including new resource protection measures and construction of new trails.
4. **East TSA Plan.** The Lower Boulder Creek HCA is in this TSA. No new trails will be planned in the HCA, and on-trail requirements are already in place. Key issues for TSA planning include high densities of undesignated trails near Gunbarrel / Heatherwood and potential trail connections from the Dry Creek Area to Teller Farm and along the abandoned Union Pacific railroad right-of-way from 55th Street to the towns of Lafayette and Erie. The East TSA plan can draw on the Grassland Ecosystem Management Plan (to be completed in 2008), which includes OSMP's agricultural properties.