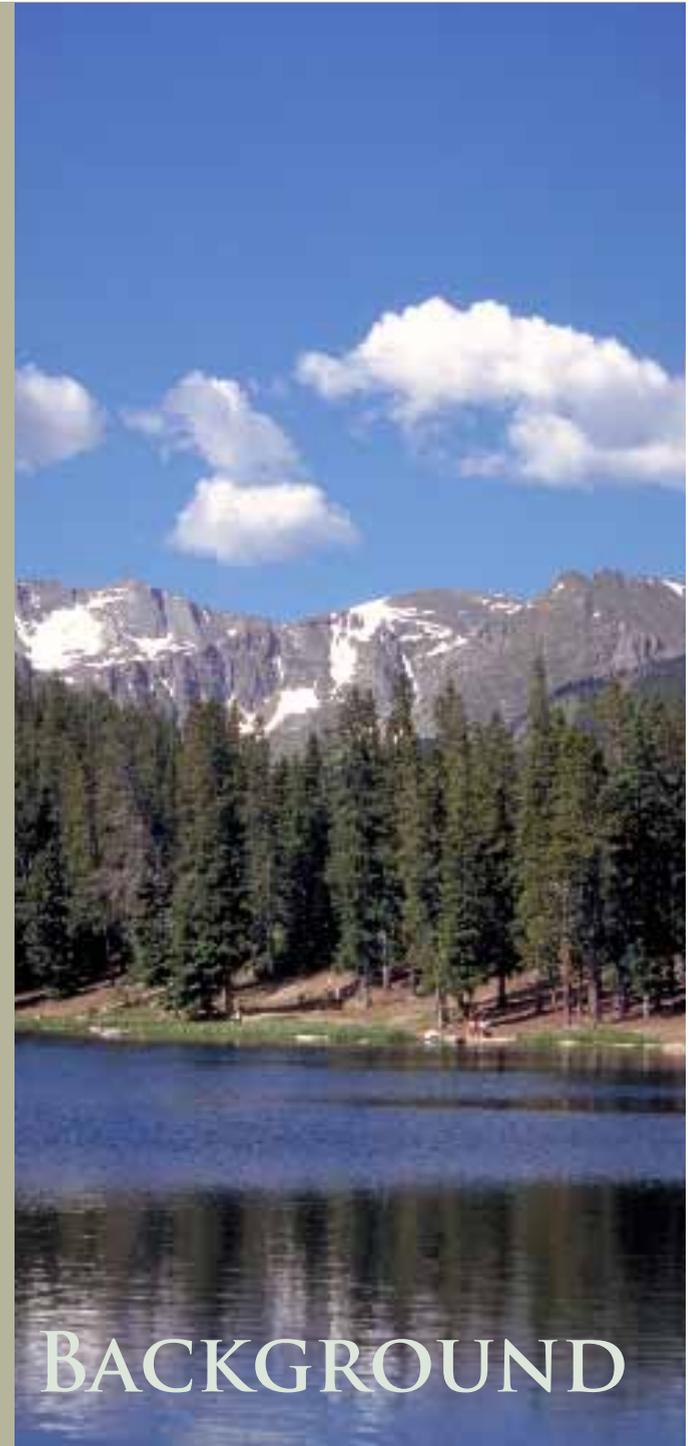


CHAPTER 1 BACKGROUND





Lookout Mountain Park, © Mike Strunk

CHAPTER 1 BACKGROUND



Red Rocks Amphitheatre

“Denver needs a Mountain Park for 1913. Every year that it is delayed, it means money lost to the merchants of Denver. There is no reason why this magnificent section of peaks, parks and canyons should not be open to tourists by June 1st, 1913”

—Letter from John Brisben Walker to FL Olmsted, Jr.,
October 24, 1912

1.A. INTRODUCTION

In the early 1900s Denver Mayor Robert Speer and his civic colleagues crafted and then aggressively built their bold vision for a “City Beautiful” Denver. Speer’s plan spurred the City and County of Denver on a decades-long goal to provide its residents with miles of beautiful tree-lined streets, lush parks and parkways, views to the mountains, and, beyond the city’s limits, what would become a grand 14,141-acre Mountain Park system. They believed that

Mountain Parks were as key to quality of life and economic advantage as the neighborhood park, that what makes living in Denver a priceless privilege are those spectacular mountains just fifteen miles from the Capitol.



Picnic Shelter at Bergen Park

What an unforgivable irony, civic leaders noted, it would be to lose the priceless beauty of the mountains to development or be denied recreational access. A Denver Mountain Parks (DMP) system would ensure equity and access for everyone living in Denver (as well as for

the sought-after tourists) and not just for the owners of mountain property.

The result was a Mountain Park system based on a 1914 plan for a chain of parks that eventually stretched from Winter Park Ski Resort in Grand County to the 1,000-acre historic Daniels Park ranch in Douglas County. In between is Clear Creek County with Echo Lake and Summit Lake Parks, the latter being the highest city park in the United States, located at 13,000 feet, just below the Mt. Evans summit. The core of the system, built first, is the historic Lariat Loop of connected roads, trails, and parks in Jefferson County.

The Mountain Parks are known for their creeks, lakes, and back country, for their preservation of wildlife, watersheds, and important natural features, and for their distinctive historic buildings, those stone shelters, well houses, and lodges built between 1912 and 1940.

More than two million people visit the Denver Mountain Parks yearly. On a summer Saturday at Lookout Mountain picnic area, you can hear up to ten different languages spoken.

1.B. NEED FOR A MASTER PLAN

Any plan from 1914 needs updating. In fact, all public facilities need periodic renovation and assessment against contemporary needs. Denver's fifty-year strategy for its parks and recreation system—the 2003 *DPR Game Plan*—clearly called for a new vision for the Denver Mountain Parks system.

The *Game Plan* itself devoted only four pages to this 14,141-acre system (70% of the entire DPR system) that spans four counties and 95 years of history. Coverage was sparse primarily because of persistent and difficult questions about the Mountain Parks that were beyond the *Game Plan's* scope. This updated Denver Mountain Parks Master Plan fills that gap, answering those longstanding questions with a vision for the future.

What, for example, is DMP's recreational niche today in a mountain world filled with buzzing interstates, hamlets turned into towns, and changing Denver demographics? In 1920, the metro area had 300,000 residents, 85% of whom lived in Denver. The Colorado Demography Office projects almost 3 million people living in the six counties comprising the Metro Area by 2015, only 20% of whom will live in Denver. What new amenities will be needed by this expanding population and who should provide them?

Today Denver is no longer the sole provider of mountain recreation. Douglas, Jefferson, Clear Creek, and Boulder Counties together own more than 200,000 acres of public open space, serving both recreational and preservation needs. It's estimated almost 70% of Denver residents visit a typical DMP at least once a year, but they are heavy users of these other open space parks as well. In turn, residents from across the six-county metro region are visiting DMP along with all the open space systems. How does Denver fit into a regional recreational open space system?

Context has changed as well. Some DMP, such as Dedisse, Bergen, or Fillius in Evergreen, are surrounded by development. And parks that required an all-day excursion in the past can be reached in less than 30 minutes from downtown Denver.



Picnickers at Dedisse Park

After the 1912 mill levy was retired in 1956, funding for the Mountain Parks slipped as they competed with urban projects and repairs, and improvements lagged. In addition to caring for the existing resources, the Master Plan proposes new facilities, trails, and programs that meet today's needs and carry the system into the future. This Master Plan also provides the management strategies to meet contemporary needs and to protect the priceless character, resources, and design that make each park special and memorable.

The *Game Plan* also acknowledged the decades old debate of whether Denver even should spend tax dollars on parks located outside of the City and County of Denver. That question was raised even in 1912 when voters were asked to support a mill levy for the ambitious (and to some, audacious) plan to build and maintain a system of roads and parks in the foothills for Denver residents.



Winter, Echo Lake Park

City officials were leery, but voters responded by passing the mill levy by a comfortable margin. Would voters today? Are the Mountain Parks considered vital enough to the City and to residents today to warrant public expenditure at a level comparable to other open space systems?

For some civic leaders, those questions had enough weight to bump the DMP off the November 2007 “Better Denver” Infrastructure Bond ballot, and to defer improvements until this plan answered those questions about the importance of the Mountain Parks for Denver and the role of regional collaboration.

“Undoubtedly the three chief things to be accomplished are: first, the provision of a system of first-class roads.... second, the protection of at least the more important parts of that scenery.... third, the opening to the public for general use of sufficient areas....”

—Frederick Law Olmsted, Junior
July 17, 1912 letter to the Denver Board of Park Commissioners

1.C. THE PLANNING PROCESS

The **Denver Mountain Parks Master Plan** is funded by a 2006 Great Outdoors Colorado Planning Grant, the Denver Mountain Parks Foundation, and 2006 City Capital Improvement Funds. A fifty-member Advisory Group was invited by Mayor John Hickenlooper to provide community insight, process oversight, and review of the final plan, and was co-chaired by City Councilwoman Peggy Lehmann and civic leader Landri Taylor.

The Advisory Group included elected officials, civic leaders, and staff from the four counties. Three special Roundtable workshops, which included Advisory Group members plus invited experts, were held to elicit ideas on Recreation, on Funding, and on Marketing/Communications. Mountain park tours were offered to the Advisory Group as well as to City Council members.

Gathering input from Denver and regional users, neighbors, stakeholder groups, and non-users is a challenge for a park system that covers four counties. Consequently, the primary tool to reach Denver and regional users was the 800-person intensive individual interview process done between August 2006 and July 2007 throughout the Denver Mountain Park system. That data built upon ongoing survey work done by Colorado State Parks and Jefferson County. In addition, a number of questions in the 2002 DPR Game Plan survey of the general public in Denver were directed at the mountain park system. Jefferson County Open Space and Denver Parks and Recreation also conducted individual surveys through both park systems during the summer of 2001.

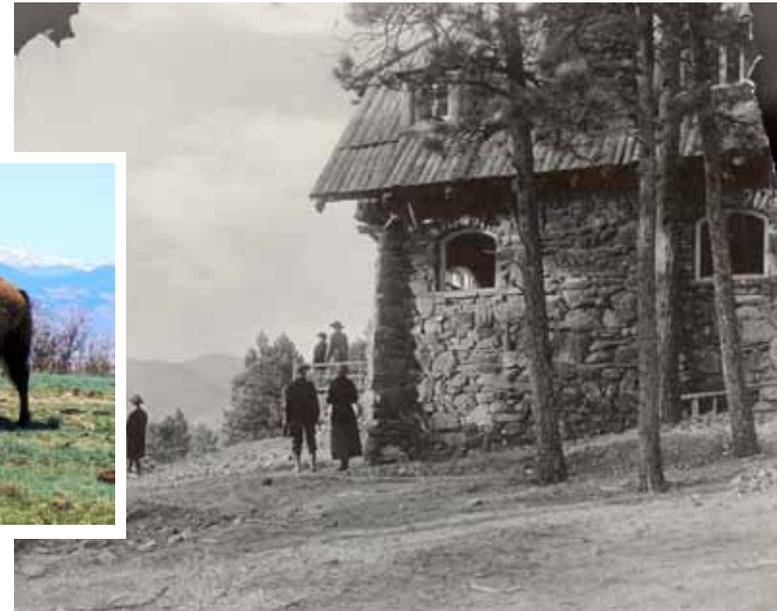
In addition, a well publicized community meeting was held in Douglas County in August 2007 and a joint Jefferson County Open Space and Denver Mountain Parks community open house was held at Red Rocks Amphitheatre in October 2007. The team met with Clear Creek County officials and residents also in October. Two more focused public workshops were held on the future of Lookout Mountain Park and the Buffalo Bill Museum in 2008.

Individual meetings or comments were sought from organizations with specific interests, such as rock climbing or fishing groups. Information on the master plan was posted on www.denvermountain-parks.org and readers were invited to submit comments or to use the Mountain Parks blog.

As with all master plan processes, presentations and reviews were made to the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, City Council Public Amenities Committee, InterNeighborhood Cooperation (INC, representing registered Denver neighborhoods), and other interested organizations. The goal was to gather a broad spectrum of input among users and non-users, Denver residents and residents of other counties, the general public and special interest groups.



Bison in Daniels Park



Chief Hosa Lodge, DPL Western History Collection

1.D. PRINCIPLES, VISION AND GOALS

An important task for an Advisory Group is establishing the guiding principles for the content of the Plan and for the process. The Denver Mountain Parks Master Plan will be an addendum to the **DPR Game Plan** and embodies the four values that drive the department's overall planning:

- ▶ A sustainable environment
- ▶ Equity of resources
- ▶ Sound Economics
- ▶ Engagement

In addition, the Master Plan Advisory Group endorsed overarching principles and goals for the Denver Mountain Parks based upon the Game Plan values:

- ▶ Refuge - Equity
Denver should ensure that all residents, not just those who can afford it, have access to a mountain refuge from the city. Given its large population base, Denver should proactively protect land for its residents' use.

- ▶ Protection - Sustainability
Denver should continue protecting the natural resources—water, wildlife, views, forests and meadows, mountaintops—that are essential to the future of the region. Denver Mountain Parks are Greenprint Denver in action since 1912.
- ▶ Wonder - Engagement
Denver should ensure that every city adult and child experiences the wonder of nature, in both the urban and mountain environments. Connecting kids to nature produces quantifiable physical, educational, and social benefits.
- ▶ Stewardship - Sound Economics, Sustainability
Denver should be a vigilant steward of this economic benefit and public asset, caring for these irreplaceable mountain lands and natural resources for today and for the future.

- ▶ **Partnership - Sound economics, Engagement, Equity**
Denver should be a full partner with the other counties and cities to provide this regional open space system. Because Denver Mountain Parks have evolved into an integral part of a regional recreational resource, it is more important than ever before to see them in that larger context.
- ▶ **Celebration - Sound economics, Engagement, Equity**
Denver should protect and celebrate its story of rich western history expressed throughout the mountain parks. Denver Mountain Parks contain some of the most important historical and cultural attractions in the region for residents and tourists.



October 2007 Open House at Red Rocks Park, hosted jointly with Jefferson County Open Space

1.E. THE SYSTEM

The far-flung Denver Mountain Park system is complex. It stretches across five ecosystems from close to the summit of Mt. Evans to the Douglas County foothills and was acquired over seven decades. Its roster includes internationally known icons, such as Red Rocks, Mt. Evans, the Buffalo Bill Grave and Museum, and large popular parks such as Genesee or Evergreen Lake/Dedisse in Evergreen. Highly social parks, like O'Fallon Park along Bear Creek, have been family picnic destinations for four generations and can generate up to 1,000 visitors and traffic jams on a June weekend. Other conservation areas are not publicly accessible; few people realize that they

were purchased to protect views, forests, and water. The diversity makes it difficult to describe the DMP in a few phrases or to organize recommendations and the parks in a simplistic manner.

Consequently, for purposes of this Master Plan and its implementation, the Mountain Parks system is organized into four equally important but different tiers, based on their visitors, uses, geography, and historic integrity. The similarities within a category help craft recommendations both for new directions in uses and recreation and for stewardship and protection. Just as critical is the importance of Denver Mountain Parks as an overall system. It was envisioned and built and can be experienced as an interconnected system of related parks. Recommendations will begin with the system as a whole followed by recommendations for each tier of parks.

Described in more detail in Chapter 4, the four broad tiers of Denver Mountain Parks are:

- ▶ **The Stars:** the internationally known parks of Red Rocks, Echo and Summit Lake Parks (Mt. Evans), Lookout Mountain Parks (Buffalo Bill Grave and Museum), and Winter Park Ski Resort.
- ▶ **The Hearts of the System:** the large special parks such as Daniels, Genesee, Dedisse, Newton.
- ▶ **Picnic Parks:** the many small to large parks located along Bear Creek, and those that create gateways to the mountains.
- ▶ **Conservation/Wilderness Parks:** the undeveloped and often inaccessible parcels valued for preservation of views and resources, with potentially limited recreation.

The level of legal protection that all Denver parks have is unusual compared to other municipal and county systems. The original land-owners and civic leaders who together crafted the DMP system were concerned that these parks and their beauty be protected forever from development. By City Charter, all designated Denver parks require a majority of Denver voters to approve any potential sale or lease.

In addition, more than 90% of DMP land has additional deed restrictions, often requiring the land to remain public park land. Despite these restrictions, each park or parcel in the DMP system was evaluated in the Master Plan for any dramatic change in role, original integrity, or recreational value. In the Master Plan process, many difficult questions were researched and options were explored.

CONCLUSION

Conversations from the early 20th century led to a 1914 acquisition plan for Denver Mountain Parks. Change over the last 90 years—regional collaboration, funding mechanisms, recreational uses, urban growth, new open space systems, and access issues—all call for a new look at the Denver Mountain Parks. The primary questions addressed in the Master Plan include:

- ▶ “How are the DMP used and valued by Denver residents and other visitors?”
- ▶ “How can they best serve Denver residents as a recreational, cultural, and natural resource?”
- ▶ “How can we best protect the significant natural, cultural, and historic resources while accommodating recreation?”
- ▶ “How can Denver residents and newer partners fund and sustain this legacy for its survival into the future?”

By asking and answering these questions, this Master Plan will chart the way for the Denver Mountain Parks in time for their 2013 centennial and beyond.

DENVER MOUNTAIN PARKS AT A GLANCE

- ▶ 14,141 acres total
- ▶ 10,271 acres in Jefferson County
- ▶ 1,001 acres in Douglas County
- ▶ 2,780 acres in Clear Creek County
- ▶ 89 acres in Grand County
- ▶ 22 accessible (developed) parks
- ▶ 24 conservation/wilderness areas
- ▶ Bison herds: Daniels and Genesee Parks
- ▶ 2007 operating budget: \$780,000
- ▶ 2007 capital budget: \$200,000



Postcard of Buffalo Bill's Grave