



M A S T E R P L A N

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Mayor John W. Hickenlooper

Kevin Patterson, Manager of Denver Parks and Recreation

Bart Berger, President of the Denver Mountain Parks Foundation

Denver City Council Members:

Carol Boigan
 Charlie Brown
 Jeanne Faatz
 Rick Garcia
 Michael Hancock
 Marcia Johnson
 Peggy Lehmann
 Doug Linkhart
 Paul D. López
 Carla Madison
 Judy Montero
 Chris Nevitt
 Jeanne Robb

Master Plan Advisory Group:

Co-chair Peggy Lehmann, Denver City Councilwoman
 Co-chair Landri Taylor
 Cheryl Armstrong, CEO, Beckwourth Mt. Club
 Tad Bowman, Theatres and Arenas
 Bill Carle, H.W. Stewart, Inc.
 Allan Casey, Evergreen Park & Recreation District Board
 Michael Cooke, civic leader
 Harry Dale, Clear Creek County Commissioner
 Jack Finlaw, Director, Denver Theatres and Arenas
 Sharon Effenbein, Denver Parks & Recreation Advisory Board
 Patrick Emery, Denver Public Schools Balarat Director
 Carolyn Etter, landscape historian
 Dave Ferrill, Mayor's Office
 Scott Gilmore, Division of Wildlife
 Rich Grant, Metro Visitors Center
 Felicity Hannay, Jefferson County Open Space Advisory Committee
 Kathy Hartman, Jefferson County Commissioner
 Alexis Holdman, Denver Parks & Recreation Advisory Board
 Wendy Holmes, Douglas County
 Jean Jones, Mile High Girl Scouts
 Harry Lewis, Lewis Investments
 Doug Linkhart, Denver Councilman
 Cheryl Matthews, Douglas Co. Open Space Director
 Wayne Matthai, Canyon Area Residents for Environment Board
 Kevin McCasky, Jefferson County Commissioner
 James Mejía, Mayor's Office
 Ed Neuberger, Commission on Disabilities
 Gordon Rippey, DMPF Board
 Doug Robotham, Colorado Conservation Trust
 Tim and Kathryn Ryan, DMPF Board
 Ralph Schell, Director, Jefferson County Open Space
 Joe Tempel, Executive Director, Friends of Dinosaur Ridge
 Gary Thorsen, Colorado State Parks
 Steve Turner, Director, Historic Denver Inc.

Gary Walter, Douglas County Public Works
 Bert Weaver, Clear Creek County
 Dave Webster, President, Inter-Neighborhood Cooperation
 Tom Wooten, Ross Consulting
 Melanie Worley, Douglas County Commissioner
 Dick Wulf, Director, Evergreen Park & Recreation District
 Frank Young, Clear Creek Open Space

Roundtable Experts:

Anne Baker-Easley, Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado
 Deanne Buck, Access Fund
 Curt Carlson, Colorado Parks & Recreation Association
 Erik Dyce, Theatres and Arenas
 Colleen Gadd, Jefferson County Open Space
 Mark Guebert-Stewart, Recreational Equipment, Inc.
 Karen Hardesty, Colorado Division of Wildlife
 Fabby Hillyard, LODO District
 Diane Hitchings, USDA Forest Service
 Gerhard Holtzendorf, Recreational Equipment, Inc.
 Tim Hutchens, Denver Parks & Recreation, Outdoor Rec
 Michelle Madrid-Montoya, Denver Parks & Recreation
 Bryan Martin, Colorado Mountain Club
 Roberto Moreno, Alpino
 David Nickum, Trout Unlimited
 Polly Reetz, Audubon Society
 Ken Sherbenou, Wonderful Outdoor World
 Susan Smith, Audubon Society
 Chantal Unfug, Mayor's Office

Staff team:

Susan Baird, Project Manager
 Michael Barney
 Steve Friesen
 Dick Gannon
 Jude O'Connor
 Scott Robson
 A.J. Tripp-Addison
 Sally White

Consultant team:

Mundus Bishop Design, Inc. Project Lead
 Andrews and Anderson, P.C.
 Civic Results
 CW&H Graphics
 CTM Mapping
 ERO Resources
 Meredith Consulting
 The Trust for Public Lands
 Walden Consulting

Primary authors:

Susan Baird, Tina Bishop

Editors:

Sally White, Susan Baird

Contributing authors and editors:

Bart Berger, Jude O'Connor, A.J. Tripp-Addison

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DENVER PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT,
NATURAL RESOURCES DIVISION

201 West Colfax, Suite 605
Denver, CO 80202
720-913-0651



DENVER
THE MILE HIGH CITY

January 2009

Dear Denver Residents and Regional Partners:

In June 2006 I invited a cross-section of regional leaders to bring their best critical thinking to evaluate the management, funding, and future of Denver's renowned Mountain Park system. I want to thank them and the hundreds of other people who contributed to this long overdue Master Plan. Hard questions, rigorous research, and realistic strategies were critically needed in order to assess the Mountain Parks' importance to Denver residents and to create a long-term plan to sustain what comprises 70% of the Denver Parks and Recreation system.

I posed a number of questions to the Advisory Group. How do we both protect the Parks and promote them? How do we celebrate and utilize that which makes them remarkable? How do five counties work together to have our respective systems of parks and open spaces complement each other and fully serve the thousands of regional and local visitors?

Research for the Plan reaffirmed the high value to and heavy use of the Denver Mountain Parks by Denver residents, even though the regional context of the Parks has changed dramatically since Denver made its first purchase of Genesee Park in 1912. Denver is now surrounded by other cities and counties that have purchased thousands of acres of open space for their own residents. Front Range residents and tourists visit all of these open space parks in heavy numbers. Denver must continue to be a leader in what has become a regional, reciprocal open space system, protecting invaluable natural resources and scenic beauty while providing recreation to all.

Denver Mountain Parks continue to be a source of civic pride, unmatched experience, and national recognition. Where else can you see a bison calf, marmots in the tundra of Summit Lake, Buffalo Bill's saddle; or picnic by Bear Creek and hear a concert at Red Rocks all in a single day trip? This thoughtful Plan provides a sound and sustainable approach to managing Denver Mountain Parks, ensuring that this tremendous asset thrives another 100 years.

Sincerely,

John W. Hickenlooper
Mayor

January 12, 2009

Letter from the Denver Parks and Recreation Manager:

The extensive research done for this Plan reaffirms that Denver's investment in what would become a 14,000-acre Mountain Park system was a smart one. The City was decades ahead in safeguarding public access to the foothills and mountains while, simultaneously, preserving important environmental resources. As the Plan points out, it is important for the department to pay close attention to the management of the Denver Mountain Parks. A majority of Denver residents say that they value and visit their Mountain Parks as much, if not more, than traditional recreation facilities in town. But the issue is not to pit one part of the park system against another. Every portion of Denver's extensive park and recreation system serves different and equally important needs and audiences.

Today our Mountain Parks are Denver's contribution to a regional and reciprocal open space system stretching the entire length of the Front Range. Denver residents are heavy users of all these county and city open space systems. The challenge to Denver and to the Parks and Recreation Department is how to more equitably support this historic and significant portion of the park system through both lean and flush economic times. It is time to reinvest in the Mountain Parks with a fairer share of city resources, renewed and new partnerships, and innovation.

"Equality of opportunity" was the impetus expressed 90 years ago when starting the Mountain Park system. It resonates as much today. The Plan has received strong endorsements from, among others, its regional partners, Inter-Neighborhood Cooperation (INC), The Park People, and the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board. As Manager of Denver Parks and Recreation, I would like to thank the many civic leaders, stakeholders, and park users who worked for 18 months to create this thoughtful plan.

Kevin Patterson, Manager
Denver Parks and Recreation

Letter from the Denver Mountain Parks Foundation

In 1904, Denver's visionary Mayor Speer blended public generosity and civic spirit with governmental capacity and resolve to create a magnificent system of urban parks. Furthermore, he and other business leaders knew this was a city with unique potential because of its Front Range backdrop.

This "gateway to the mountains" would make Colorado more attractive to tourists than Switzerland itself. In 1911, the Joint Committee of the Mountain Park Project reported on a year-long study assessing the need, feasibility and means for establishing a Denver Mountain Park.

Economics really made the case to the voters. They understood that the attraction of a mountain park experience for travelers would also give them cause to linger. A mere ½ mill additional property tax would make this dream real as well as mean more money to the economy of this fledgling burg.

For 42 years, the Mountain Parks Commission oversaw the acquisition of Federal land, gifts and bequests of property from individuals, and the building of roadways, shelters, way stations and recreational venues. The system became "worth 100 times its cost." It not only served to make our mountains accessible but gave Denver an exalted reputation for vision and progressive city planning.

We now also can celebrate our Mountain Parks legacy in the context of what we have become: a metropolitan region spanning from Boulder to Castle Rock, from Aurora to Floyd Hill. We join other neighboring municipalities in their commitment to open and natural areas for all the things people need: places to play, exercise, learn, relax, be together, be alone.

Unfortunate changes made in the 1950s left Mountain Parks impecunious, and have eventually necessitated this Master Planning effort. Denver now is reacquainting itself with the *raison d'être* of this bold park system. Through the efforts of Denver's Parks and Recreation Department, the Denver Mountain Parks Foundation, and Mundus Bishop Design, the early rationale for creating the Mountain Parks can be revisited, appreciated and expanded to meet current needs.

Denver has reawakened to its need to get back into this game in this new century and apply that in action. This Master Plan should finally provide the tools to move from "conceive" to "achieve."

W. Bart Berger, Founder and
President of the Denver Mountain Parks Foundation

Letter from the Mountain Parks Advisory Group

We are the fifty-person Mountain Parks Advisory Group representing Denver residents, recreation users, economic development, natural resource management, historic preservation, mountain communities, and elected officials from Denver, Jefferson County, Douglas County, and Clear Creek County. We took the task of asking hard questions and pursuing all ideas for the Mountain Parks seriously. Through research we discovered that misconceptions and misinformation about Mountain Parks abound, leaving the system underfunded and unrecognized.

Do Denver residents value and use Denver Mountain Parks? Yes, in droves. Surveys showed that at least 68% of Denver households visit a typical (excluding Red Rocks) Denver Mountain Park at least once a year. That's up to 400,000 Denver residents. Add regional visitors and visits to Red Rocks, Buffalo Bill, and Mt. Evans, and you have up to 3 million visitors a year. Denver decision-makers need to acknowledge how important this huge, irreplaceable asset is to the people of Denver and to the City.

What about having another entity manage the system? Use of the Mountain Parks as well as other open space parks is absolutely reciprocal. In other words, other open space providers already serve Denver residents, and want Denver to be an equal partner in this regional system. We learned, too, that deed restrictions and Charter protection would make a sale close to impossible for 95% of the parks. The Mountain Parks are Denver's to protect and to manage.

Of course, Denver must continue searching out additional revenues and partnerships for the Mountain Parks, as well as for the rest of the park system. The Master Plan addresses those funding strategies, plus ideas to get more Denver kids into the mountains, protect the rich diversity of wildlife and landscape, and ensure that the parks meet the needs of visitors through marketing and communication. The Plan sets out the values and direction for the coming decades. Even if the first steps implemented from this Plan must be modest during these difficult economic times, Denver's long-term commitment to its Mountain Parks can and should be highly vocal, visible, and fair.

On behalf of the entire Advisory Group,

Councilwoman Peggy Lehmann and Landri Taylor, Co-Chairs