



Board Summary Report

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Agenda Date: 3/31/2026

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To: Board of County Commissioners

Through: Director Name, Title, Department

Prepared By:

Dan Payson, Open Spaces, Parks, and Trails Manager; Matt Bixenman, Fairgrounds Site Manager

Presenter: Dan Payson, Open Spaces, Parks, and Trails Manager; Matt Bixenman, Fairgrounds Site Manager

Subject:

Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB) Grant Request

Purpose and Request:

The purpose of this session is to request permission from the Board of County Commissioners to pursue a grant opportunity from the Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB) in the amount of \$265,000. This grant would be used to remove the existing bluegrass on the Central Greens lawns at the Arapahoe County Fairgrounds and replace it with a drought-tolerant turfgrass species, Tahoma 31 Bermudagrass. As part of the grant requirements, there is a 50% matching requirement. As such, we would use \$287,000 of funding in Open Spaces Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) to install a new irrigation system for the South Lawns, install three (3) new irrigation central controllers, and remove the turfgrass strips on north side of the Fairgrounds Event Center and convert that area to a perennial bed.

Alignment with Strategic Plan: Economic Resilience and Stability - Support long-term economic resilience through responsible fiscal and investment strategies.

Background and Discussion: In response to the escalating challenges posed by water scarcity and the need for sustainable landscape maintenance practices, this project emerged as a strategic initiative to address these pressing issues.

In 2025, Arapahoe County Open Spaces (ACOS) initially converted the southwest quadrant of the Central Green to Tahoma 31 Bermudagrass. Based on the first nine months of the pilot project, we have reduced our water usage by an estimated 50% and our maintenance inputs (reduced herbicide & pesticide applications and staff time) by over 80%. While we are still evaluating the success of the pilot project, if it is determined to be successful, we would then convert the remaining three quadrants in May 2027 using the grant funding from CWCB. Based on our current water rates of \$6.50 per 1,000 gallons, we are estimating that we will save over \$10,800 and over 1.06 acre-feet (>345,402 gallons of water) annually.

The Open Spaces department and CWCB staff have been working collaboratively over the last seven

months to prepare for this grant request. CWCB staff has advised the county to apply for this grant in the July 1 cycle for a few reasons: First, more funding is typically given during the first cycle than the December cycle because of available CWCB funding. This is why we are requesting approval to pursue this grant opportunity now versus after our pilot project has been determined a success or failure. Secondly, the award for the December cycle would not be awarded until March 2027 which is after our portion of the project would begin (January 2027). Applying in the July 2026 cycle allows us to confirm our funding resources for the project before it is implemented and gives us the best opportunity to receive funding from the CWCB. (If it is determined in late summer of 2026 that the pilot was unsuccessful and the County receives a CWCB grant in October 2026, the department will decline the grant.)

This turfgrass conversion is designed to help the county be seen as leaders within our industry and community by promoting water conservation. Launching this project, staff will be leading by example at one of our flagship properties by converting our traditional cool-season turfgrass to a drought-tolerant turfgrass, Tahoma 31.

In conjunction with the County's new landscape standards and the department's current irrigation improvement project at the Fairground, we are looking to continue to build on our 2025 pilot project to reduce our demand for water. On average, cool-season grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass use over 2.4 acre-feet of water in Colorado. Tahoma 31 was developed by Oklahoma State University and was first sold in Colorado on a large scale in 2021. When compared to cool-season turfgrasses, Tahoma 31 Bermudagrass has demonstrated the ability to use less than 1.16 acre-feet, which is 14 inches of water annually. Based on the activity levels of the 2025 Arapahoe County Fair, Tahoma 31 does well in high-stress environments and will recover better from the heavy foot traffic because it is a horizontal growing grass. Tahoma 31 has been tested through the National Turfgrass Evaluation Program (NTEP) at over 20 sites throughout the country. While being evaluated in the NTEP trials, Tahoma 31 excelled in specific areas such as spring green-up, low water usage, cold tolerance, and turf quality despite high use. Having these strong characteristics is important because of Colorado's arid climate and the nature of the events at the Fairgrounds.

If the county receives a CWCB grant, staff will be responsible for three years (2027-2030) of water monitoring and reporting to the state. These tasks can be accomplished through existing staff time and resources. The county will also showcase the turf replacement and resource savings to the public. The start of this potential communication plan is already underway in the department.

Alternatives:

Some alternatives to this grant request:

- 1. Not approve the grant request and use ACOS funds to complete this project:** These projects were approved as a 2027 CIP projects; \$400,000 for the turfgrass conversion and \$115,000 for the irrigation system at the Fairgrounds. However, we would only spend \$287,000 if we were awarded this grant versus the \$515,000 approved for these projects.
- 2. Not move forward with grant approval and project and leave site as-is:** This option would hamstring our department in reducing water needs and other resource inputs (financial and personnel).
- 3. Delay:** versions of drought-tolerant turfgrass species may become available, but that will be a minimum of 3 to 5 years based on talking with local sod farmers. Specific farmers are working

in collaboration with Land-Grant Universities in developing cold-hardy, drought tolerant “warm-season” grasses. Additionally, the department could wait to assess the success of the pilot in the fall of 2026 and apply for state CWCB funds (if they are available) at a later date.

Fiscal Impact: Currently, ACOS has been approved for \$400,000 to support this project through the ACOS 2027 CIP Process. If the grant was approved, ACOS would be potentially given \$263,000 from the Colorado Water Conservation Board to help support the project. The funds approved and allocated for this project through the ACOS CIP Process are supported by the Open Spaces Sales and Use Tax of Arapahoe County.

Alignment with Strategic Implementation Strategies: N/A.

Staff Recommendation: Staff recommends the approval to pursue a grant from the Colorado Water Conservation Board in the amount of \$263,000 for the July 1, 2026 cycle.

Concurrence: N/A