



Board Summary Report

File #: 24-218

Agenda Date: 4/15/2024

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To: Board of County Commissioners

Through: Gini Pingenot, Director, Open Spaces

Prepared By: Gini Pingenot, Director, Open Spaces

Glen Poole, Operations Manager, Open Spaces

Presenter: Glen Poole, Operations Manager, Open Spaces

Subject:

1:00 PM *Highline Canal Trail, Natural Resource Management Plan Funding

Purpose and Request:

Arapahoe County and the Open Spaces Department anticipate acquiring portions of the High Line Canal property in June 2024 from Denver Water. Open Space Operations, the High Line Canal Conservancy (Conservancy), and a small team of Canal Collaborative members have selected Biohabitats and Dig Studio to facilitate and develop a Natural Resource Management Plan (NRM Plan) for the High Line Canal. The NRM Plan will serve to guide future management and stewardship of the entire property. The Open Spaces Department is requesting approval to allocate \$162,000 of joint project funds to support the High Line Canal NRM Plan. The total cost for the NRM Plan is expected to be \$355,000, Arapahoe County’s share of \$162,000 represents 45% of the total cost.

Background and Discussion: Denver Water has reduced its use of the Canal for irrigation water delivery to its historic customers. The Canal is a landscape in transition, with the corridor’s riparian like ecosystem now relying on stormwater inputs to sustain vegetation and trees. Arapahoe County will be taking ownership of 47 miles of the 71-mile-long Canal (66% of the total trail length). Denver Water has agreed to support a transition process after the County acquires the property, with the transition period ending at the close of 2026. Denver Water will continue to fulfill its existing maintenance responsibilities during this transition period and will support County staff in learning Denver Water management processes and protocols for the Canal. During this transition period, Denver Water and the Conservancy are making significant investments in habitat restoration, large-scale hazard tree mitigation, debris removal, invasive species mitigation, and management of ash trees. These investments in supporting Canal maintenance and restoration will ensure a smooth transition at the end of 2026 for Arapahoe County and its partners. The NRM Plan will guide the County’s management relationships with the local agencies responsible for operating and maintaining the Canal within the County’s ownership. The NRM Plan will establish overarching recommendations for the management of vegetation, the tree canopy, local wildlife, habitat restoration, and noxious weed management.

The NRM Plan scope was developed with input from Canal Collaborative partners and consists of six primary focus areas:

- 1.) Assessment of Existing Conditions
- 2.) Formalizing Goals, Defining Subareas, and Setting Targets
- 3.) Maintenance of Existing Resources
- 4.) Landscape Enhancement Strategies
- 5.) Operations and Management Structure Recommendations
- 6.) Public Communications Planning.

The Conservancy will lead the procurement process for the NRM Plan and will be facilitating the project management of the NRM Plan. A Steering Committee was formed to assist the Conservancy in leading the development of the NRM Plan, which includes representatives from Arapahoe County Open Spaces, Denver Parks and Recreation, Douglas County, and the Mile High Flood District. The Conservancy advertised a Request for Proposals (RFP) to hire a consultant to develop the NRM Plan in January and received responses to the RFP in mid-February. The Steering Committee reviewed the RFP submittals, interviewed the top two consultants, and selected the partnership of Biohabitats and Dig Studio as the consultant for the project. The consultant team has scheduled 14 months to complete the NRM Plan and its associated engagement process.

The Conservancy has requested funds from the Steering Committee members and other Collaborative partners to support the project. These partners have or are anticipated to contribute a combined total of \$193,000 toward the project. As a future owner of most of the Canal, Arapahoe County would provide a large portion of the funding to support the NRM Plan. The total project cost is expected to be \$355,000 with Arapahoe County contributing \$162,000 dollars (45% of the budget). The Open Spaces Department has been a strong proponent for the development of a canal wide NRM Plan. When the property transfers, the County will take over management of recreational leases and stormwater agreements that govern the County's portion of the Canal. The NRM Plan will serve as a guide for the County and its recreational / stormwater partners in the sustainable management of the Canal moving forward. It also will provide guidance for the County in establishing minimum levels of care, creating operating plans, centralizing Canal maintenance contracts, and negotiating future leases. These are all outcomes the County hopes to complete during the transition period, setting the County up for success as Denver Water formally shifts its focus to be limited to only water works purposes on the Canal.

Fiscal Impact: The Open Space Acquisition and Development Fund would support the \$162,000 NRM Funding request. The fund balance is sufficient to sustainably support this joint project request.

Alternatives: Approve, modify, or deny the recommended NRM Plan funding request.

Alignment with Strategic Plan:

- Be fiscally sustainable
- Provide essential and mandated service
- Be community focused

Staff Recommendation: Open Spaces staff recommends BOCC approval of the joint project funding request of \$162,000 from the \$4 million-dollar Highline Canal Working Group pledge within the Open Space Acquisition and Development Fund to support the High Line Canal Natural Resource Management Plan.

Concurrence: On April 4, 2024, the Open Space and Trails Advisory Board recommended the BOCC approve the joint project funding request to support the NRM Plan for the High Line Canal. The following Departments or agencies concur with this funding request as well: Public Works and Development, County Attorney's

Office, and South East Metro Stormwater Authority.