

6 PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE ACQUISITION

6.1 Approach

General priorities for future Open Space acquisitions were formulated based on input from focus group members, expert opinion of the project team, and spatial analysis. Acquisition priorities can be distilled into the following general categories:

- corridors that connect otherwise isolated habitats, and lands contiguous with existing Open Space
- riparian areas, wetlands, and areas containing or near surface water resources
- areas conducive to species richness or diversity

The last bullet includes habitats known to support species of high interest or special concern and habitats that are currently under-represented or lacking from Open Space (e.g., native grasslands, high-quality semi-natural pastures, and areas having significant stands of trees).

These priorities were captured in the tiered evaluation processed described in Section 5. The tiered approach can be used to compare potential acquisitions to determine which has the highest overall value to wildlife. For example, an area containing a medium-sized patch of riparian habitat adjacent to existing Open Space might have a higher value than a large patch of cropland, isolated from existing Open Space and lacking corridors to link to other habitat. The prioritization process is perhaps most useful for determining where areas of wildlife value are located and comparing those areas against lands not currently in the Open Space system. This coarse-filter approach can be used to focus acquisition efforts where they may provide the best investment of limited funds and time while providing maximum benefit for area wildlife.

To locate high priority acquisition areas within the planning area, the priorities map (Map 6) was compared against areas currently in the Open Space system (i.e., City and County open space, parks, and municipal golf courses). High priority areas not in the Open Space system were regarded as priority acquisition areas. Because these priorities were based on Tier I criteria, knowledge of current or upcoming land development projects was not considered. This latter type of knowledge would be applied at the Tier II or III scale and might well remove an area or set of areas from consideration.

The results of this coarse filter prioritization identified areas along Boulder, St. Vrain, and Lefthand Creeks, described below.

6.2 Results

6.2.1 Boulder Creek

The largest priority area is located on Boulder Creek, near its confluence with St. Vrain Creek (south of the Boulder Creek Estates property in Weld County)(Map 6, Area D). This area is regarded by the Colorado Division of Wildlife as an important foraging and roosting habitat for bald eagles and also provides high-quality habitat and a movement corridor for other species. This area has been mined for gravel over many years, and wildlife habitat (riparian vegetation and the aquatic regime) has been greatly modified during this period. As a priority acquisition area, this portion of the planning area

might be an appropriate target for a large-scale restoration effort. Key restoration elements might include the reestablishment of hydrologic connectivity and the restoration of riparian and tallgrass prairie composition and structure. A detailed evaluation of this area would be useful, including the establishment of a baseline condition that documents long-term ecological patterns and ranges of variability. Getting in front of a restoration effort of this magnitude would provide ample opportunity for public education and involvement, while providing additional habitat (and possibly recreation opportunities) for numerous species, including the bald eagle and other species of high interest or special concern.

Tier II, III, and IV criteria (see Section 5) should be used to refine the prioritization process farther. This could include adding levels of economic and political reality to the process—for example, addressing site-scale aspects of specific areas—and identifying which properties warrant additional analysis or data gathering. It is likely that the land acquisition process will be driven by mechanisms outside the City's control, including the availability and price of land, location, size of properties, etc., but knowledge of these areas can help keep priorities at the forefront so that opportunities can be recognized should they arise.

6.2.2 Saint Vrain Creek

Three principal priority areas occur on St. Vrain Creek (Map 6, Areas A, E, and B). One is located immediately downstream from the confluence with Boulder Creek. This priority acquisition area should be regarded as part of the Boulder Creek priority area.

Another priority acquisition area on St. Vrain Creek is located near Airport Road. Currently, this portion of the western segment of the St. Vrain corridor is the only one not currently part the overall Open Space system. This part of the creek is considered an important foraging habitat and concentration area for the bald eagle. It also is located immediately east of occupied habitat for Preble's. As part of the western segment of the St. Vrain Creek corridor, this priority area is also a significant movement corridor for wildlife species.

Finally, the area located in general vicinity of the confluence of Lefthand and St. Vrain Creeks is characterized by relatively high total values, but only a narrow portion of St. Vrain Creek is currently part of the St. Vrain Creek Greenway system.

6.2.3 Lefthand Creek

A portion of Lefthand Creek located southwest of Longmont also ranks high in terms of wildlife value but is not currently in the Open Space system. It is also adjacent to current Open Space properties and is characterized by well-established riparian vegetation along much of the reach. This portion of Lefthand Creek retains corridor functionality (see Map 6, Area C).

6.2.4 Large Parcels in Western Weld County

While not ranking as high as areas associated with the riparian habitats and corridors described above, lands in the northeastern portion of the planning area (predominantly Weld County) should also be regarded as potential priority acquisition areas given the predominance of large patch sizes that remain there. Most wildlife habitat in this area is agricultural cropland and therefore a lower priority overall. However, use of innovative management strategies could benefit numerous wildlife species that rely on large patches of relatively contiguous habitat. Managing for wildlife in this part

of the planning area need not reduce agricultural production, but it might influence how production occurs over time. This could include changes in the seasonal rotation, level of use by livestock, and cropping methods to maximize habitat at suitable times (e.g., bird migration and nesting seasons).

These larger parcels should also be considered as possible relocation sites for projects in which prairie dogs need to be removed from City or private lands. Other Open Space (but not wildlife-related) considerations for these large parcels include educational opportunities involving grassland restoration and potential value for passive or active recreation, as community separators, and as sites for preserving the agricultural heritage of the area.

6.3 Strategies for Future Acquisition

As of the date of this Plan, the City has used a combination of purchase in fee and purchase of conservation easements when adding lands to the Open Space system. Some alternatives currently used by other cities in the region are summarized in the Tier IV matrix of Section 5.