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Montane Natural Areas 2026 Zone Update

DRAFT



May 2026

City of Fort Collins Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge and honor the lands situated within the City of Fort Collins as the original homelands of the Hinono'eiteen (Arapaho), Tsétséhéstâhese (Cheyenne), Nɨmɨnɨɨ (Comanche), Caiugu (Kiowa), Čariks i Čariks (Pawnee), Sosonih (Shoshone), Oc'eti S'akowin (Lakota) and Núuchiu (Ute) Peoples. This area is an important site of trade, gathering, and healing for these Native Nations. These lands are home to a diverse urban Native community representing multiple Native Nations and Indigenous Peoples. Despite forced removal and land dispossession, they continue to thrive as resilient members of our community. We are grateful for Native community members and honor the rich cultural heritage they bring to our collective community. We further recognize and value their social, intellectual, economic, and cultural contributions. The City of Fort Collins is committed to supporting, partnering, and working with the Native and Indigenous community.





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Acronyms:





ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
CSP	Conservation and Stewardship Planning
FCNA	Fort Collins Natural Areas
GIS	Geographic Information System
MCDA	Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis
PCA	Potential Conservation Area

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Executive Summary

The Montane Zone Update will guide the responsible stewardship of Bobcat Ridge and Crossline Canyons natural areas located west of the city of Fort Collins. Building on eight years of community feedback, staff expertise, and partner input, the zone update interprets the Natural Areas Values defined in the 2025 Natural Areas Strategic Framework and identifies tactics grounded in Fort Collins Natural Areas (FCNA) four goals.

-  **GOAL 1** Conserve and Protect Land & Water
-  **GOAL 2** Strengthen Habitats & Ecological Resilience
-  **GOAL 3** Support Access to Nature
-  **GOAL 4** Foster Community Connection & Stewardship

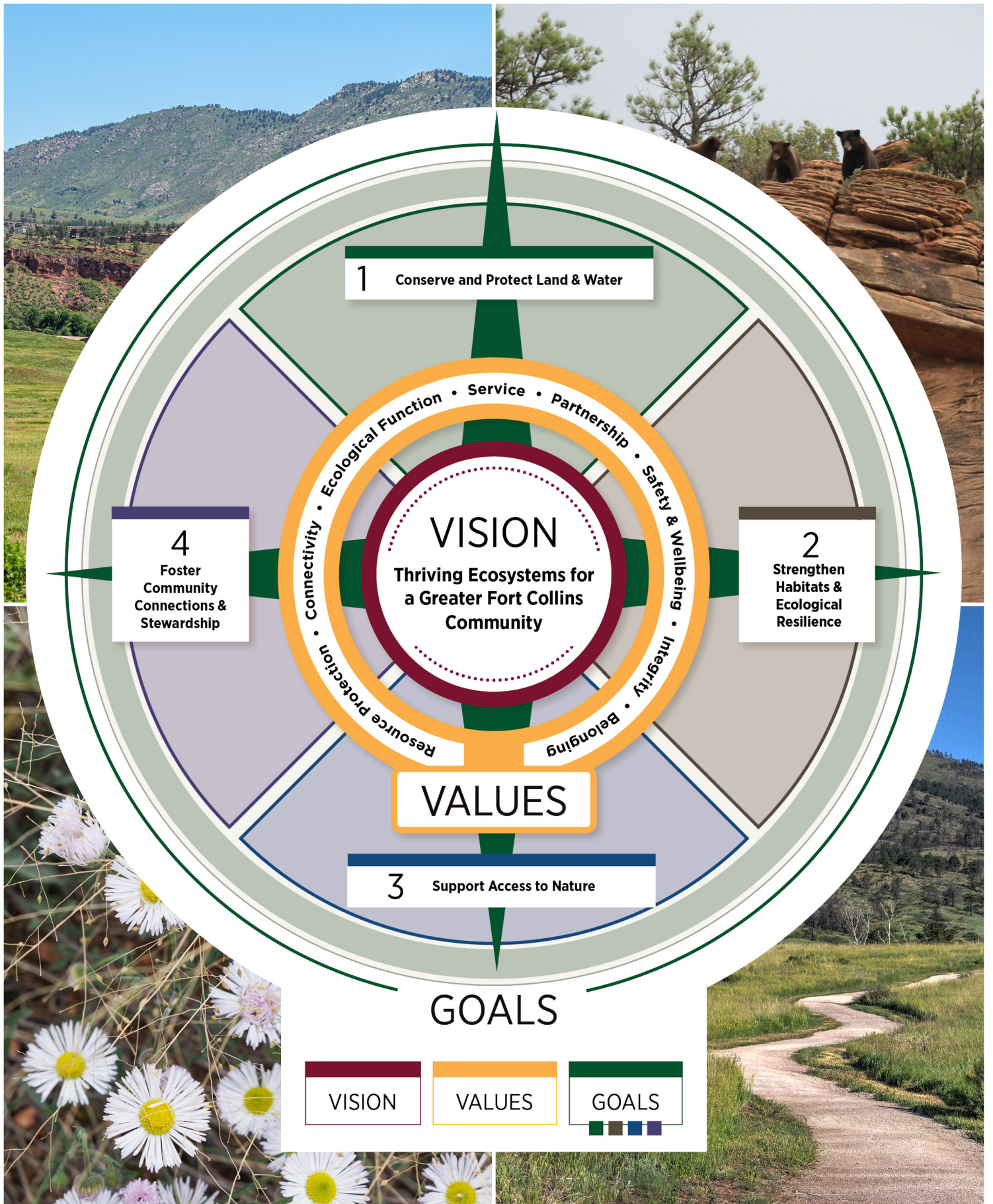
This Zone Update is part of an adaptive planning method which allows for modifications based on community feedback and changing landscape needs, while bolstering FCNA's vision, values, goals, mission, and ballot language. Looking forward, stewardship will focus on maintaining responsible visitor use as visitation increases and building ecological resiliency in a zone with frequent wildfire and flood events.

Key ecological actions include:

- Restoring the valley grassland and Buckhorn Creek at Bobcat Ridge Natural Area
- Assessing forest health, including fuels conditions
- Assessing drainages, ditches, and ponds for restoration potential
- Mapping, monitoring, and continuing to reduce non-native plants, especially cheatgrass

Key visitor use actions include:

- Mitigating user conflict and improving accessibility on certain trails
- Leveraging partnerships for storytelling, habitat protection, and trail connectivity
- Assessing the feasibility of a trail connection from Bobcat Ridge Natural Area into Roosevelt National Forest
- Improving visitor experience with new signs and improved interpretation

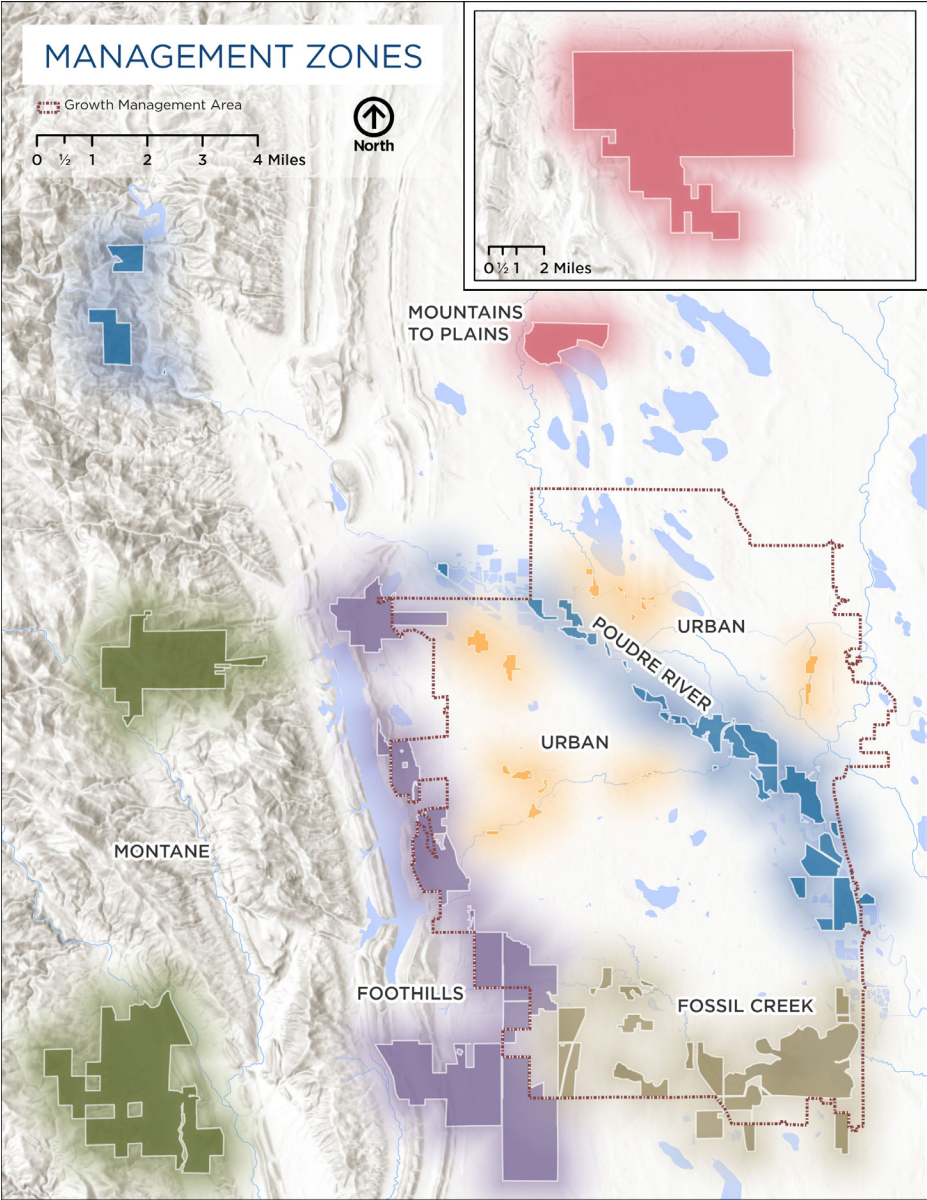


Conservation and Stewardship Planning Zones

FCNA’s Conservation and Stewardship Planning (CSP) process organizes Natural Areas work into six management zones that are defined by ecosystem type, geographic area, or special features.

Each zone is regularly evaluated to identify management updates and priorities. In-depth zone updates work to ensure alignment between FCNA management actions, the Natural Areas Strategic Framework, Natural Areas ballot language, community and partner priorities, and FCNA’s vision, mission, and values. Tactics are action items that can be completed in the next seven years and highlight the unique priorities of the Montane Zone. Tactics are in addition to the existing system-wide standard operating procedures and best management practices routinely employed by FCNA.

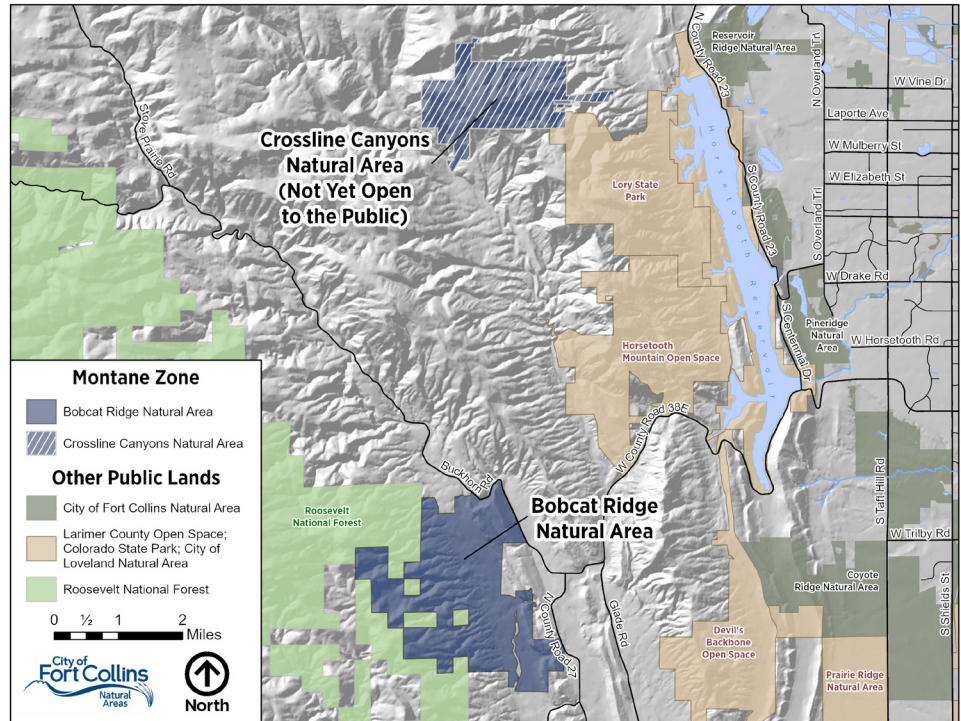
- Mountains to Plains
- Poudre River
- Urban
- Montane
- Foothills
- Fossil Creek



Montane Zone Overview

The Montane Zone encompasses steep, mountainous terrain, rocky canyons, and valuable wildlife habitat just west of Fort Collins. The two natural areas in the Montane Zone, Bobcat Ridge and Crossline Canyons, are adjacent to other public lands, conservation easements, and low-density housing developments. Wildlife and plant communities benefit from the connected fabric of undeveloped habitat.

The dramatic landscape of the Rocky Mountains to the west of Fort Collins is full of opportunities for community members to spend time in nature engaging in physical exercise, quiet reflection, wildlife viewing, or other forms of nature appreciation. Bobcat Ridge is perfectly situated, near the city but just far enough away to experience the quiet and solitude



of the mountains. Visitors to Bobcat Ridge Natural Area enjoy a variety of recreation opportunities across 22 miles of multiuse trails allowing for abundant wildlife viewing and scenic vistas. Crossline Canyons serves as valuable and relatively undisturbed wildlife habitat and contributes to the undeveloped backdrop of the city. While not currently open to the public due to no legal public access point, this natural area provides opportunities for research partnerships and education.

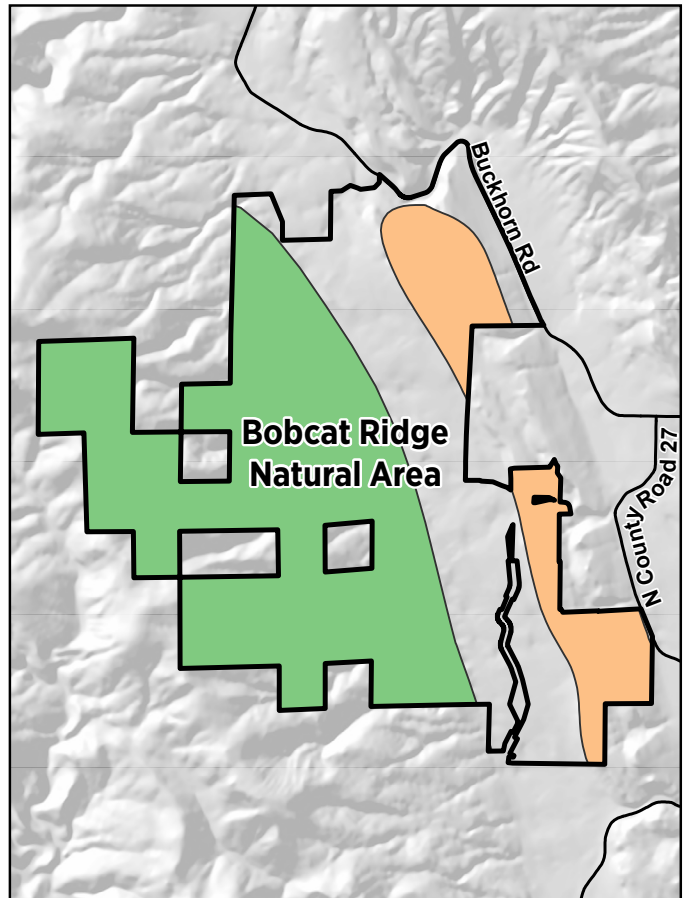
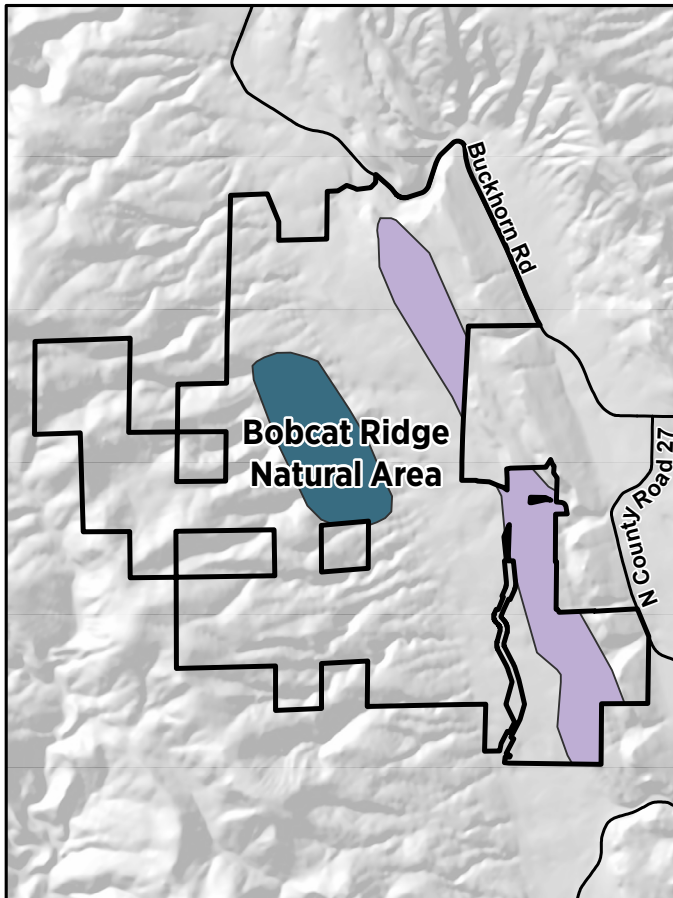
The Montane Zone natural areas protect nearly 5,000 acres of habitat. Ecological surveys on Bobcat Ridge and Crossline Canyons reveal 26 wildlife species of conservation priority, 43 rare plants, and four rare plant communities. At least 30 butterfly species inhabit Crossline Canyons Natural Area, including 4 different swallowtails.








Additionally, there are five Potential Conservation Areas (PCA) that intersect with Bobcat Ridge. PCA is a designation by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program for lands with significant biodiversity, warranting conservation and stewardship. These PCAs include rare plants and plant communities, the Preble’s meadow jumping mouse, and rare butterflies such as the Moss’s elfin. Biological diversity is high in the Montane Zone and future survey work may identify additional species and areas to be protected, including PCAs that intersect Crossline Canyons.

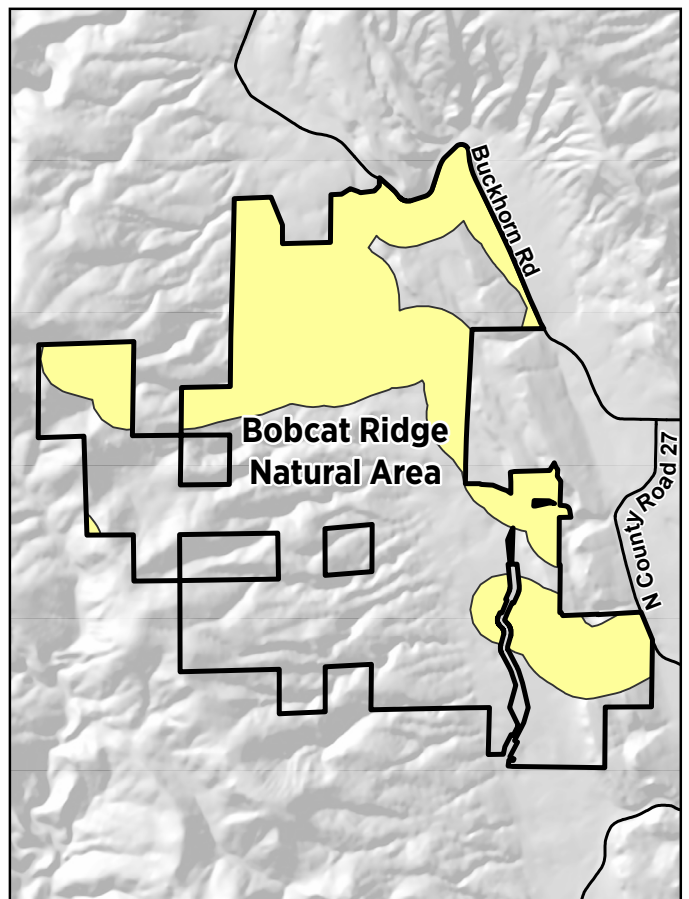
The Montane Zone is also prone to fire, flooding, and droughts, making for a dynamic landscape. Restoring resilient habitats in this zone is critical, with restoration of native grasslands underway in the valley at Bobcat Ridge. In addition, ongoing cheatgrass reduction efforts reduce fire potential and improve native plant communities.





**Colorado Natural Heritage Program
Potential Conservation Areas and
Biodiversity Significance**

-  Bobcat Ridge Canyons, General Interest
-  Big Thompson River, High
-  Bobcat Ridge Hogback, Very High
-  Masonville Hogbacks, Very High
-  Green Ridge, Very High



Community Engagement

Natural Areas staff and volunteers engaged 1,017 participants who provided responses to feedback questions in English and Spanish. The feedback was used to interpret how the Natural Areas Values are reflected in the Montane Zone and to develop actionable tactics that will guide work over the coming years.

What people appreciate about the natural areas in the Montane Zone:

Trail access

Nature and wildlife

Scenic beauty

Key feedback themes for natural areas in the Montane Zone:

- Wildlife and habitat protection
- Highly rated trail system
- Positive visitor experiences, with emphasis on:
 - Free access
 - Quiet and uncrowded spaces



The community voiced overwhelming satisfaction with Bobcat Ridge Natural Area and believes that it is well maintained. They equally value the natural area for its wildlife and habitat, as well as the recreational opportunities provided through its trail system. The community also appreciates Crossline Canyons for its conserved habitat, opportunities for education and research, and potential future public access.





Feedback Quote: “I love to ride in the Bobcat Ridge area. As someone who loves the outdoors, I think management that provides access that protects the wildlife and ecology of an area is fantastic. The more we can sustainably enjoy nature the more we will be united in protecting our resources.”

About the Feedback

Input was collected via on-site interviews, and a feedback form was provided online and at various events.

Outreach included:

- On-site interviews
- Mailing to neighbors
- Land Conservation and Stewardship Board meeting
- Natural Areas Enews announcement
- Social media posts
- Trailhead signs
- Volunteer continuing education presentation
- Two trailhead table opportunities with planners at Bobcat Ridge Natural Area
- Opportunity to hike with a planner at Bobcat Ridge Natural Area
- Booth at the Fort Collins Food Truck Rally at City Park



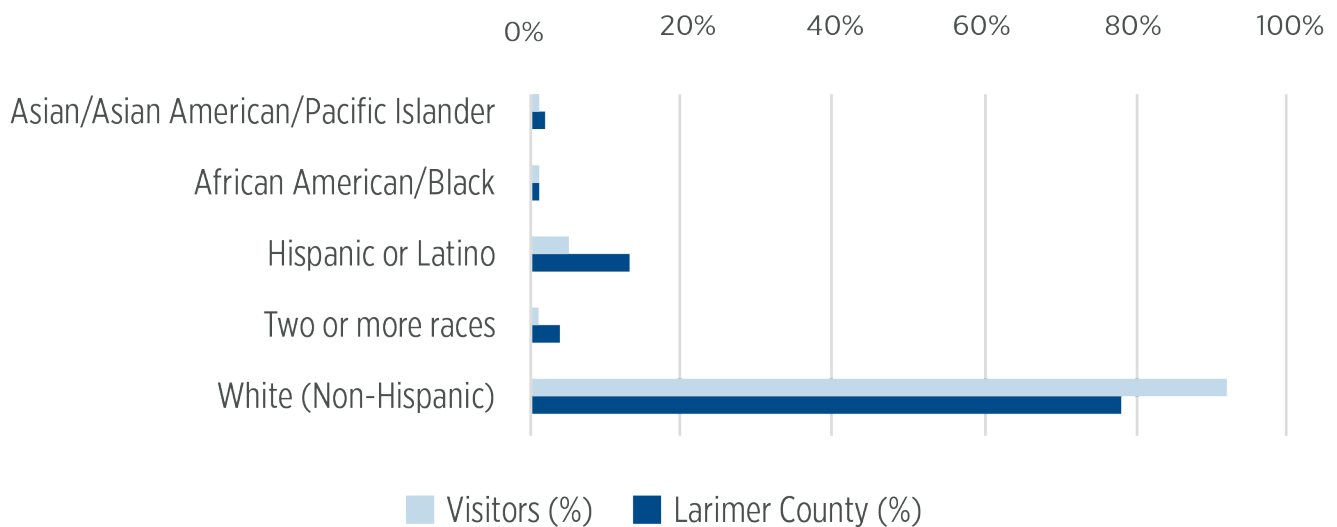
Bobcat Ridge Natural Area Visitor Demographic Summary

The demographics of visitors to Bobcat Ridge Natural Area were collected during on-site interviews from 2022-2023 and tend to be concentrated in specific groups of demographics. FCNA continually strives to conduct inclusive public engagement and encourage visitation that reflects the diverse demographics of the community and is always evolving its process to meet this goal.

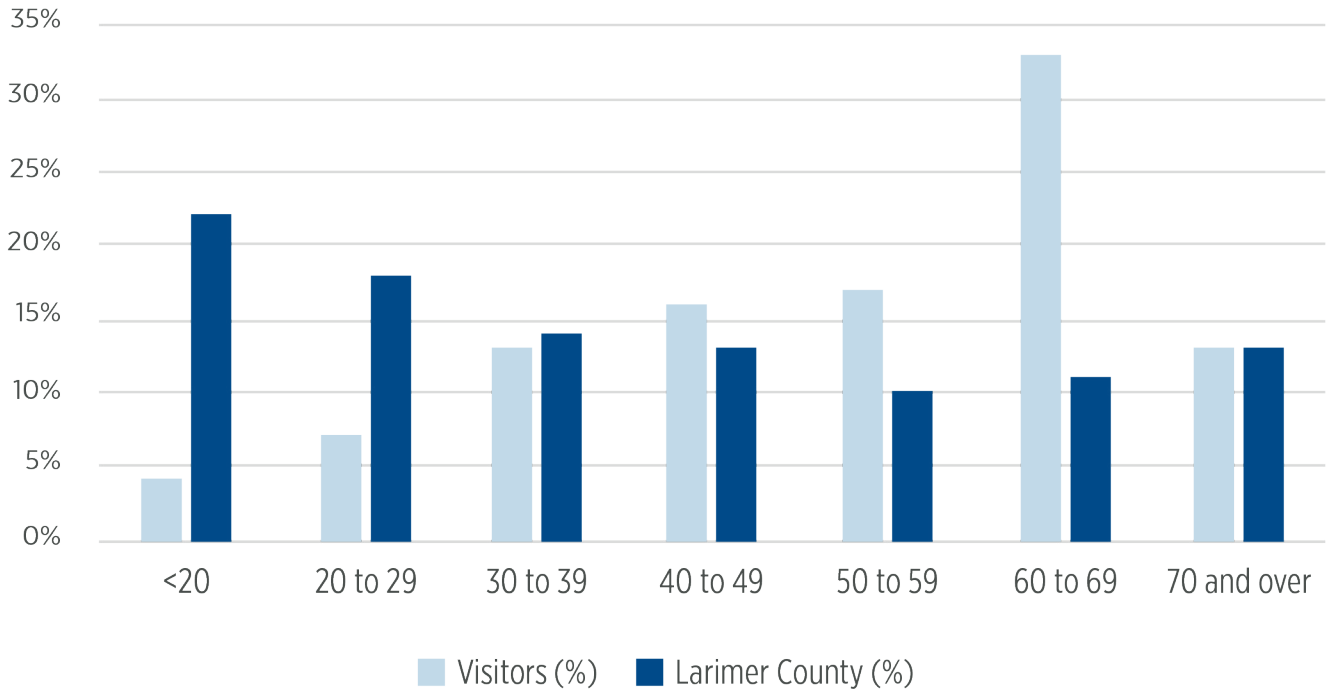


- The majority (**77%**) were Larimer County residents, with more than half living in the area for over ten years.
- Slightly more visitors were from Loveland (**38%**) than from Fort Collins (**35%**).
- **77%** of respondents had attained a bachelor's degree or higher certification.

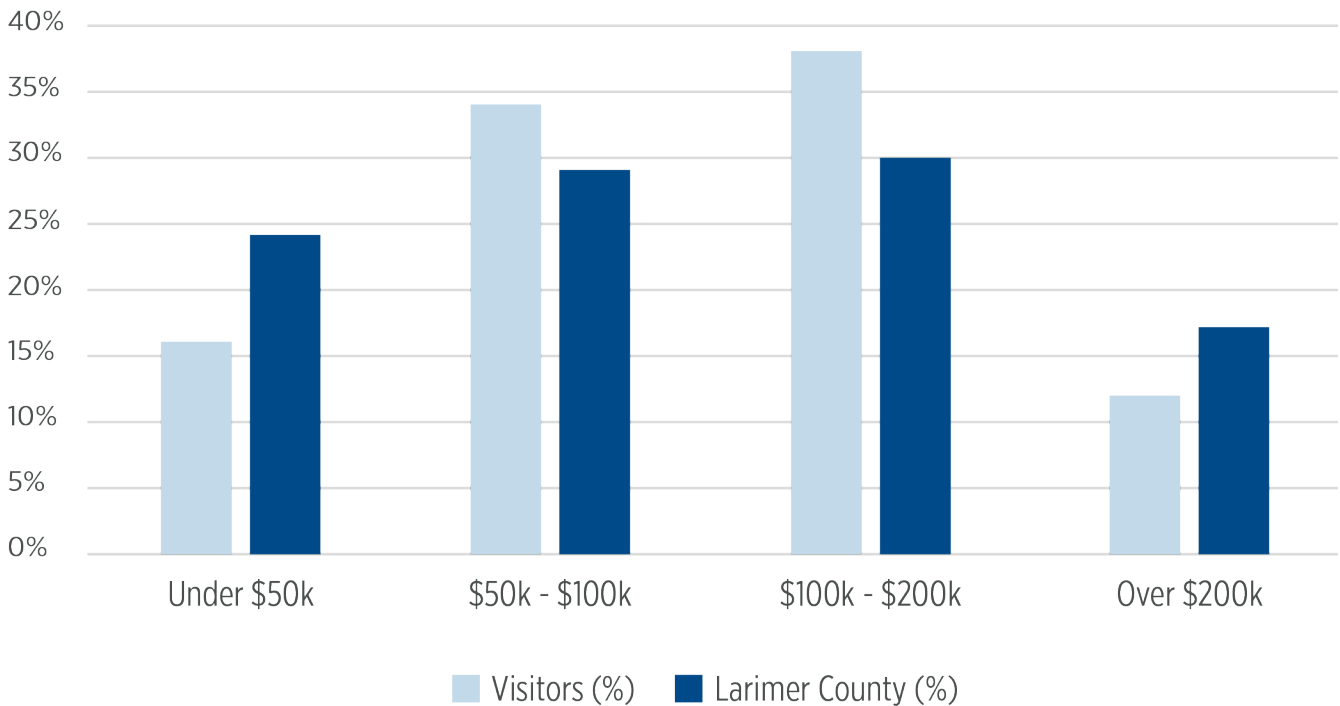
Race and Ethnicity



Age



Annual Household Income



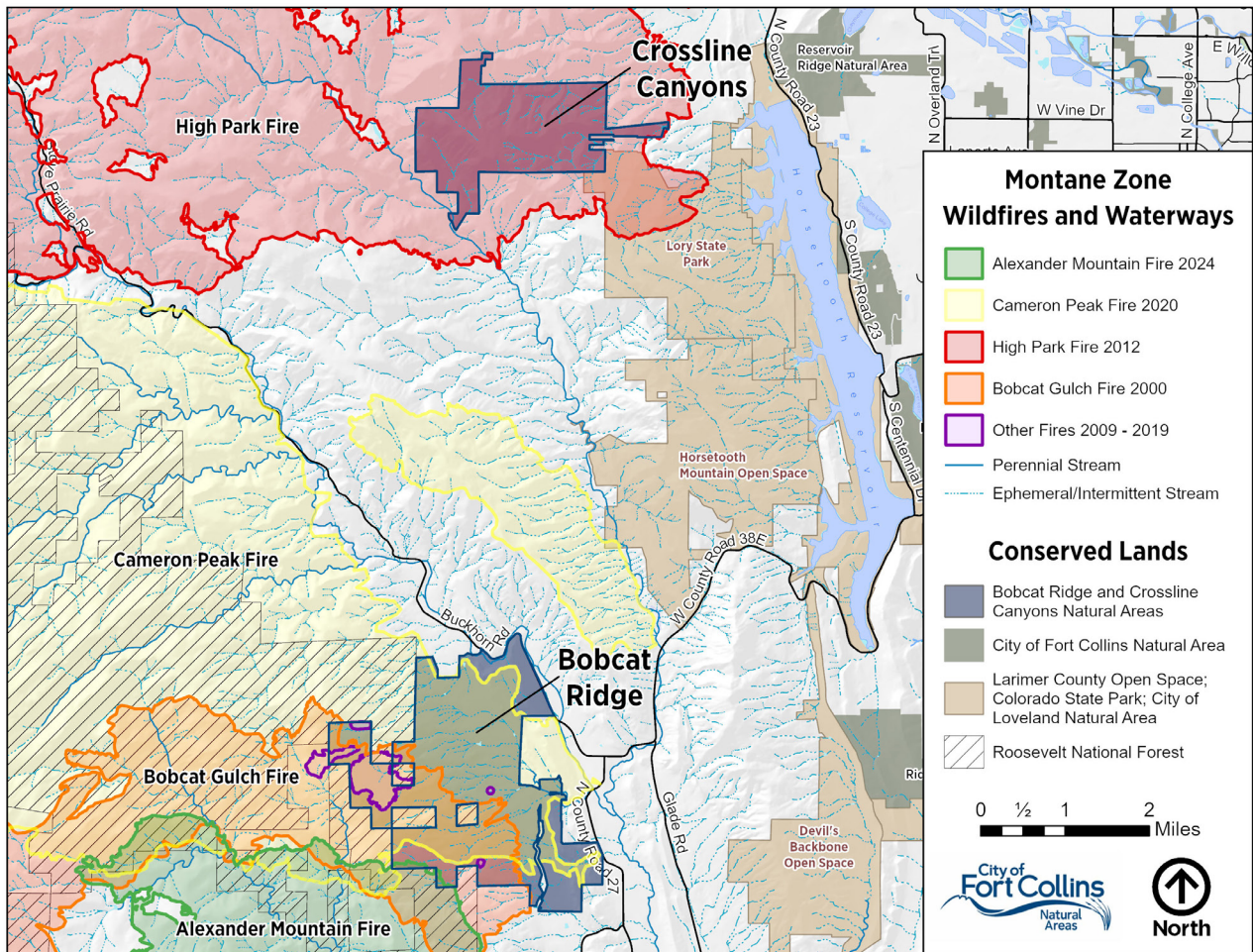
Community Feedback Shapes Zone Values and Tactics

A key function of the Montane Zone Update is to identify and define the community's values for the Montane Zone natural areas. From this input, actionable tactics are developed to implement work that aligns with values and goals. Community feedback is reflected in this plan through prioritizing:

Wildlife, Habitat Protection, and Biodiversity

The Montane Zone is important for a wide variety of species and the habitats they depend on. Feedback indicates that visitors enjoy seeing the plants and animals at Bobcat Ridge and appreciate that areas like Crossline Canyons are conserved so that wildlife can have the habitat and space they need to roam. FCNA plans to continue to utilize a variety of monitoring techniques to understand species presence and inform management actions such as habitat protection, restoration, and non-native plant control.





Fire and Flood Resiliency

Natural disturbances like fires and floods play an important ecological role in the Montane Zone, routinely affecting Bobcat Ridge and Crossline Canyons natural areas. Fire is part of a natural disturbance cycle and can have beneficial effects; however, sometimes fuels from fire suppression and non-native plants such as cheatgrass can increase the severity of fires. Feedback indicates that actions to address these disturbance events are important to the community. FCNA plans to explore opportunities to increase ecological resiliency by conducting a forest health assessment and a hydrological study to understand what actions could help the landscape recover from these events. The information gained will be used to plan improvements that have the potential to increase habitat quality along with fire and flood resistance and resilience.



Protecting Habitats while Enhancing Visitor Experiences

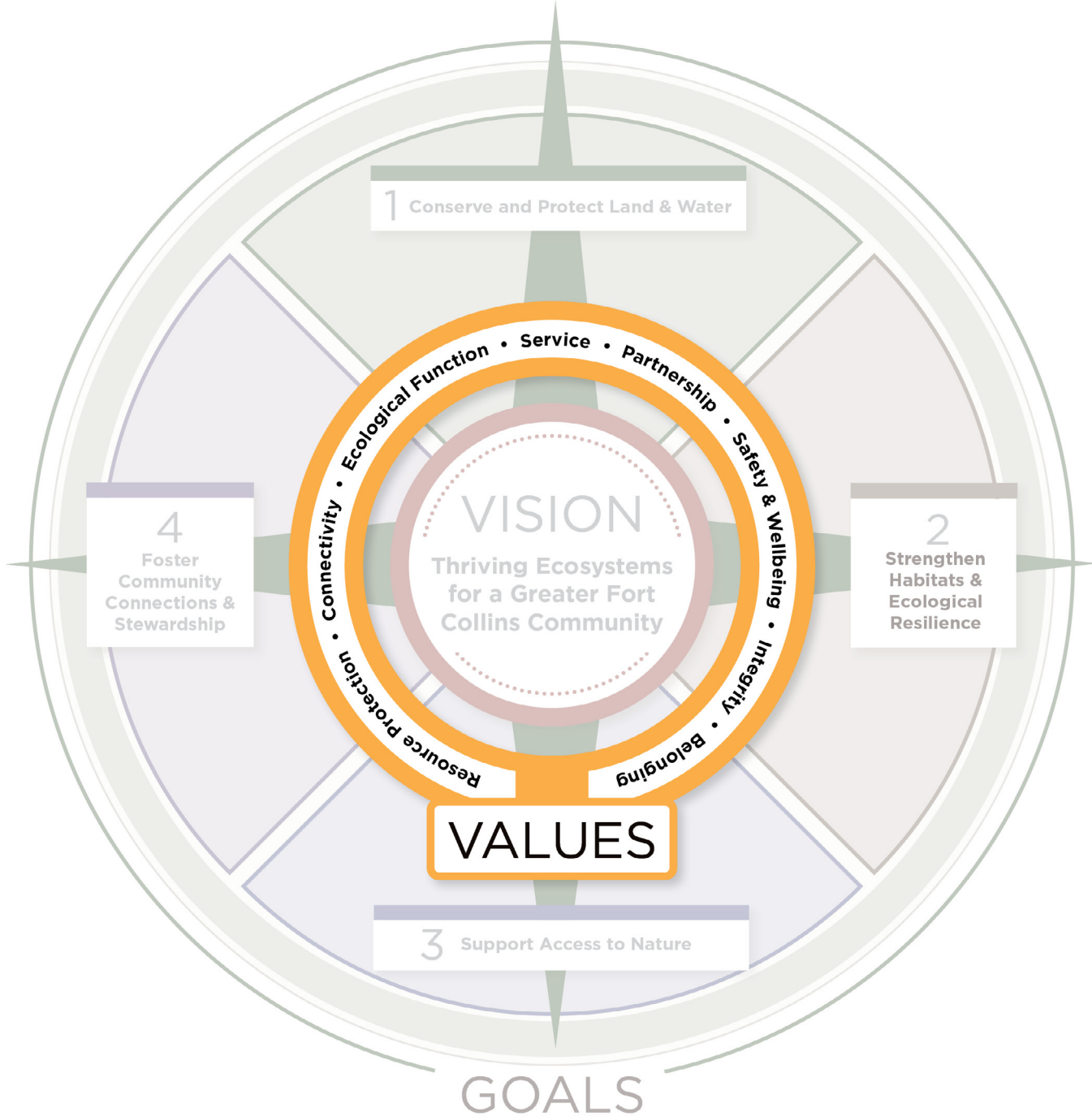
Maintaining healthy ecosystems while providing quality visitor opportunities is a well-known challenge in the stewardship of public lands. This challenge is also reflected in public feedback for the Montane Zone. Some respondents desire more trails while others show concern over negative ecological effects of adding more trails. FCNA opened the Elk Meadow Trail in fall 2025, bringing visitors to the north Bobcat Ridge valley. This new trail loop adds 1.75 miles to the current trail system and access into the most recently conserved portion of Bobcat Ridge. Careful planning for the new Elk Meadow Trail considered many ecological factors including areas with biological soil crusts and rare plants, breeding birds, elk and deer, and Preble's meadow jumping mouse habitat. Other considerations included visitor experience, safety, cultural resources, and resources needed to build and maintain the new trail. FCNA plans to assess the feasibility of enhancing connections between the Bobcat Ridge trail network and the Roosevelt National Forest using a similar process to consider all factors and trade-offs.

These examples provide a snapshot into how community input shapes management planning. Public feedback also informed plans for:

- Non-native vegetation management,
- Land conservation,
- Protecting scenic views,
- Providing areas for quiet solitude,
- Providing education and volunteer opportunities, and
- Providing high quality visitor experiences.



Montane Zone Values





The 2025 Natural Areas Strategic Framework identifies and describes eight Natural Areas Values. During a zone management update, FCNA gathers public feedback and investigates the unique and important qualities of the zone’s natural areas. This information is used to interpret how values are represented in the zone which then supports decision making in the years to come.

Resource Protection

FCNA commits to supporting species and features characteristic of the region’s ecosystem and heritage. In the Montane Zone, this includes prioritizing actions such as:

- Conserving wildlife and enhancing habitats, particularly for wide-ranging, large mammals such as deer, elk, black bears, and mountain lions
- Conserving biological soil crusts and globally rare flora such as Bell’s twinpod and mountain mahogany communities
- Enhancing ponderosa pine savannas and riparian forests
- Protecting sensitive areas from human disturbance, particularly on Crossline Canyons
- Protecting scenic views of the Bobcat valley, Dakota Hogbacks, Horsetooth Rock, and Front Range mountains to the west
- Protecting dark skies for education and wildlife habitat
- Preserving cultural and historic resources such as the stone circles and the cabin at Bobcat Ridge

Biological soil crusts in the Montane Zone consist of a thin layer of lichens, fungus, mosses, and algae that interact with soil to increase moisture and help stabilize the soil. These crusts can take decades to centuries to form and do not tolerate disturbance, even from foot traffic. It is important to protect areas with these crusts as they resist non-native plants like cheatgrass and help to maintain quality plant communities.

Ecological Function

FCNA works to sustain and improve the health and work of natural systems. In the Montane Zone, this includes prioritizing actions such as:

- Conserving areas with high floristic quality, such as those dominated by native plant species, are sensitive to disturbance and have narrow habitat requirements
- Enhancing ecological integrity through management actions like grassland restoration and beneficial ecological disturbance
- Supporting habitat for native wildlife browsing and grazing while ensuring that rare plant communities are protected and ecological integrity remains intact
- Supporting native pollinators and invertebrate diversity through habitat enhancement and restoration
- Supporting fire and flood resilience and recovery
- Supporting a healthy Buckhorn Creek and watershed

The valley in Bobcat Ridge currently consists of mostly non-native grasses from previous agricultural operations. With a goal of 700 acres of restoration, Natural Areas has initiated grassland restoration on 300 acres in the valley to date. This effort aims to increase native grass and flowering plants which will expand invertebrate diversity and support grassland birds and native pollinators.



Connectivity

FCNA protects a connected landscape of conserved land to support ecosystems and create movement corridors that provide a balance of services to both wildlife and people. In the Montane Zone, this includes prioritizing actions such as:

- Conserving landscape connections for habitat continuity through connected public lands and conservation easements
- Joining adjacent public land through trail connections
- Connecting the Northern Colorado community with the mountains

FCNA will continue to conserve land from willing sellers that connect habitats and visitor use opportunities in the Montane Zone. Relationships with public land neighbors including Lory State Park and the US Forest Service are also valuable for managing resources as well as visitor use across boundaries. Partnering on projects such as trail connections, non-native plant management, and forest and fuels management are all ways that FCNA can leverage resources and management of a connected landscape.



Partnership

FCNA leverages shared decision-making and invests in increasing the impact of our conservation actions through building relationships across City departments, agencies, and with community groups. In the Montane Zone, this includes prioritizing actions such as:

- Integrating Native American and Indigenous perspectives in management and storytelling
- Maintaining effective partnerships for cross-boundary, landscape-scale resource and recreation management
- Continuing to build relationships with those interested in expanding conservation work on and around Bobcat Ridge and Crossline Canyons
- Continuing to seek and recognize external funding partners such as the Pulliam Charitable Trust

Native American and Indigenous perspectives are important considerations for projects ranging from sign creation and storytelling to resource management efforts such as restoration and cultural fire practices. FCNA values these perspectives and seeks input on key projects and management practices.

Safety & Wellbeing

FCNA provides safe environments for community members to engage with and find renewal through time spent in nature, while also protecting and ensuring the safety of natural systems. In the Montane Zone, this includes prioritizing actions such as:

- Providing quietude away from the city
- Providing connections to Rangers and emergency services, such as the Ranger hotline and emergency call box
- Improving emergency access for Rangers and first responders
- Continuing to monitor trail use and visitor satisfaction and implement education campaigns on trail etiquette as needed

Visitors to Bobcat Ridge especially note that the natural area is a great place to find solitude and quiet spaces, away from crowds. This can be a rare opportunity as communities along the Front Range increase in size; careful planning helps to maintain this opportunity. Monitoring trail use and visitor satisfaction, along with encouraging trail etiquette can also help maintain high quality visitor experiences.

Belonging

FCNA ensures activities and places are welcoming to all and encourages a diversity of experiences. In the Montane Zone, this includes prioritizing actions such as:

- Providing a wide range of opportunities, from trails that are accessible to those featuring more challenging terrain
- Providing opportunities for wildlife viewing, photography, and art
- Continuing to provide educational opportunities on topics like fire, history, visitor safety, and wildlife
- Providing volunteer partnerships and opportunities, particularly for trail work at Bobcat Ridge

Bobcat Ridge's topography offers some of the most challenging experiences in the natural areas system due to the steep, rocky terrain, opportunity for higher mileage distances, and significant elevation gains. Many hikers, mountain bikers, trail runners, and equestrians come to access the DR Trail, Ginny Trail, or On the Rocks Trail for an exciting, endurance-testing adventure. The valley in Bobcat Ridge offers a more relaxing and accessible opportunity for a lower elevation hike to the historic cabin and beyond. Opportunities to stop, enjoy the scenery, take a photo, or watch the abundant wildlife abound. Maintaining these trails requires ongoing effort and offers valuable opportunities for partnership that help keep the trails open and enjoyable.



Service

FCNA demonstrates honesty, transparency, inclusivity, and respect by providing authentic and diverse engagement opportunities that focus on listening and active participation. In the Montane Zone, this includes prioritizing actions such as:

- Continuing Volunteer Ranger Assistant patrols
- Providing on-site staff presence
- Providing high-quality visitor experiences, educational programming, and interpretation

On-site staff presence, including Rangers and Volunteer Ranger Assistants, are especially valuable at Bobcat Ridge since it is somewhat remote and the parking lot can fill up on busy weekends. Staff and Volunteer Ranger Assistants help guide visitors on the trail, respond to emergencies, and manage traffic in the parking lot, all leading to a smoother and safer experience for all.

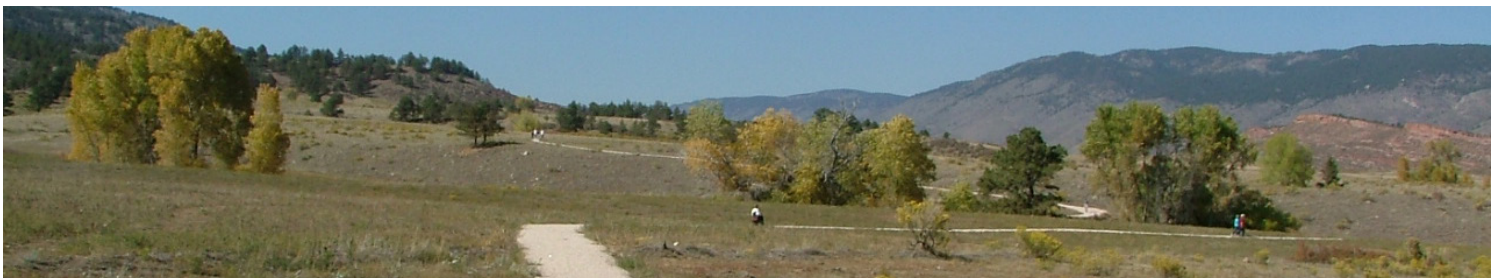
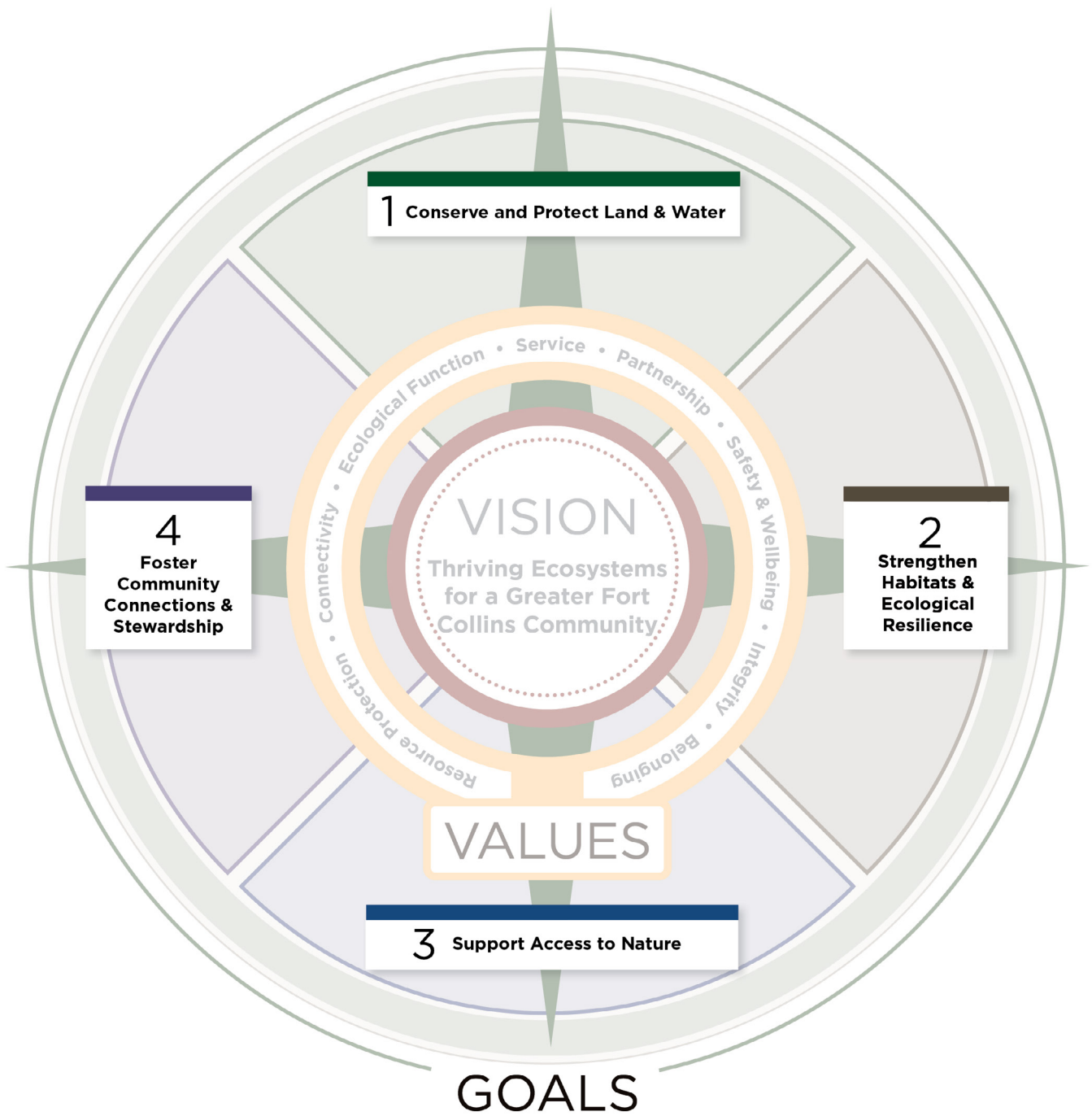
Integrity

FCNA implements the community's vision and values by responsible management of the community's ecological, financial, and social resources. In the Montane Zone, this includes prioritizing actions such as:

- Continuing to provide visitor access and high-quality visitor experiences
- Stewarding infrastructure in a way that provides a high level of service while conserving Department resources
- Protecting resources and safety by monitoring for trespass at Crossline Canyons and Bobcat Ridge natural areas

There are many buildings and other infrastructure in the Montane Zone that are under FCNA's care. From trails and associated infrastructure to historic buildings, FCNA strives to maintain what is important to the community and preserve what is historically and culturally significant. Buildings that fall into a historic designation will be managed as such, while other buildings may be decommissioned or managed until they reach the end of their lifecycle.

Goals and Tactics



Conserve and Protect Land & Water

GOAL 1: Conserve and Protect Land & Water

The protection of land and water sustains connected landscapes, sensitive and important habitats, and the cultural connections and heritage of the region.

Tactics:

- Improve the bridge at Buckhorn Creek to provide safe crossing and enhance stream function
- Continue to participate as a shareholder in the Buckhorn Highline Ditch and complete updates to the diversion structure that diverts ditch water shares from Buckhorn Creek
- Complete a conservation easement on Crossline Canyons
- Partner on regional conservation efforts that will enhance FCNA's conservation goals
- Advance conversations with Lory State Park regarding coordinated management actions
- Advance conversations with US Forest Service regarding coordinated management actions

Replacing the bridge over Buckhorn Creek will allow for safer crossing into the north end of Bobcat Ridge and enhance stream connectivity for fish passage and healthy stream conditions. Additionally, the facilities on the north end of Bobcat Ridge, including Creekhaven Event Center, currently support department functions and equipment storage. Comprehensive site planning is needed to understand the feasibility of visitor use and potential ecological restoration in this area.

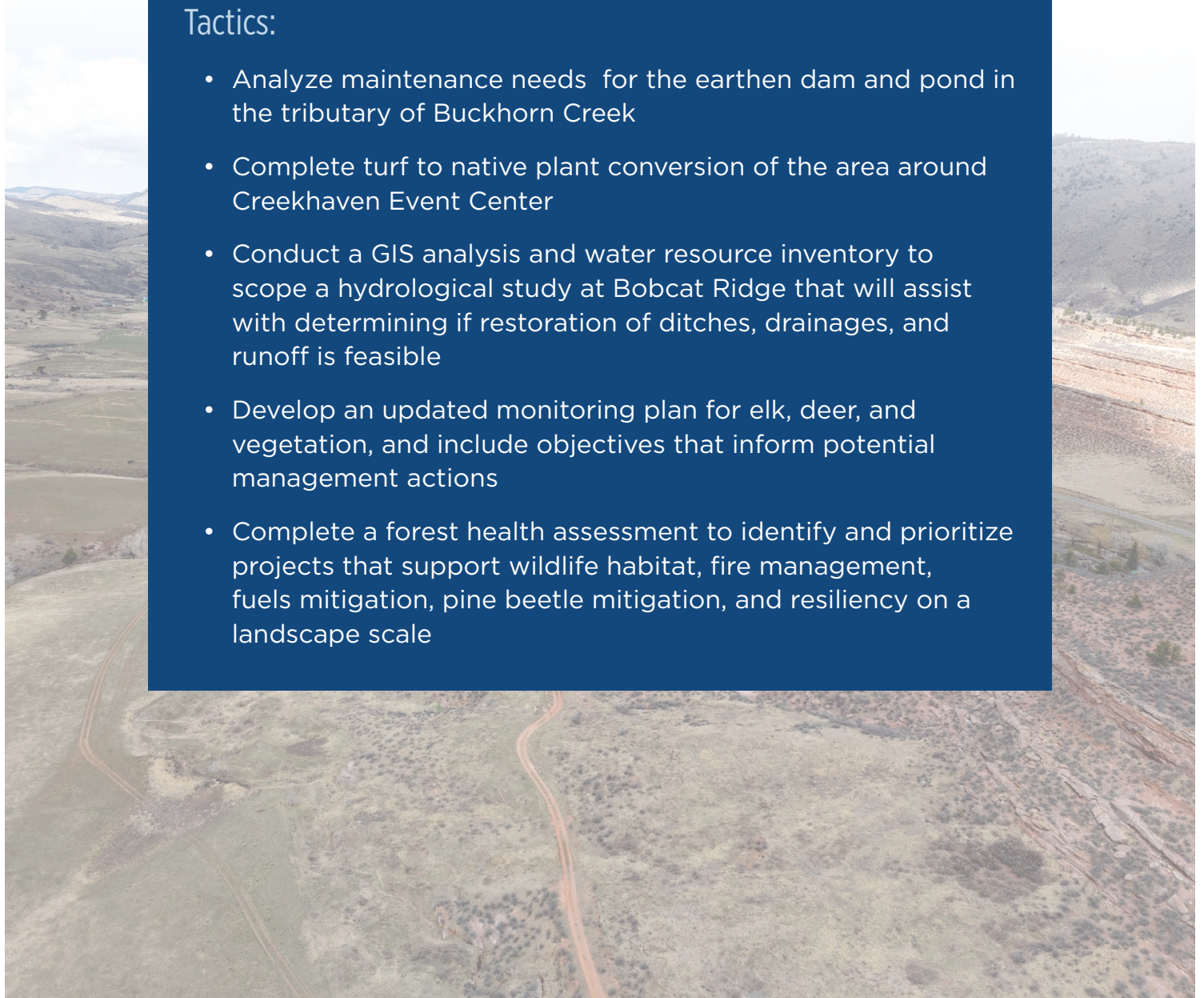
Strengthen Habitats & Ecological Resilience

GOAL 2: Strengthen Habitats & Ecological Resilience

Healthy ecosystems provide a wide range of habitats, clean water, and protection in changing conditions, allowing plants and wildlife to thrive. Through restoration and adaptive management, FCNA works to take a data-informed approach to improve the condition of ecosystems.

Tactics:

- Analyze maintenance needs for the earthen dam and pond in the tributary of Buckhorn Creek
- Complete turf to native plant conversion of the area around Creekhaven Event Center
- Conduct a GIS analysis and water resource inventory to scope a hydrological study at Bobcat Ridge that will assist with determining if restoration of ditches, drainages, and runoff is feasible
- Develop an updated monitoring plan for elk, deer, and vegetation, and include objectives that inform potential management actions
- Complete a forest health assessment to identify and prioritize projects that support wildlife habitat, fire management, fuels mitigation, pine beetle mitigation, and resiliency on a landscape scale



Strengthen Habitats & Ecological Resilience Cont.

- Plan and implement a restoration project on Buckhorn Creek that addresses water quality issues and floodplain disconnection as it becomes prioritized through the MCDA
- Explore the feasibility of excluding cattle from the drainages on the west side of Crossline Canyons
- Restore the Bobcat Ridge valley to mixed grassland with the goal of initiating approximately 700 acres of grassland treatment
- Continue to monitor cheatgrass pre- and post-treatment for vegetation cover by type and species present as part of an ongoing grant completion
- Complete comprehensive mapping of cheatgrass at Bobcat Ridge and Crossline Canyons to inform future treatment plans
- Strengthen relationships with local research institutions and encourage expanded studies on Crossline Canyons that align with FCNA's mission and may inform future management priorities

A herd of 600 elk spend the winter on Bobcat Ridge and surrounding lands, with a small number of animals staying year-round. FCNA, in partnership with Colorado Parks and Wildlife, seeks to better understand effects of browsing by the herds of elk and deer on the natural area. By establishing a monitoring plan for elk, deer, and vegetation, FCNA can make data-informed decisions on potential management actions. Sustainable management of browsing is key for protecting rare mountain mahogany plant communities and maintaining healthy habitat for wintering elk and deer.

Support Access to Nature

GOAL 3: Support Access to Nature

Human connection to nature supports wellbeing, inspires a sense of community, and instills a conservation ethic. By providing diverse opportunities to connect with nature, FCNA contributes to the overall welfare of the community in ways that are grounded in resource protection, equity, and inclusion.

Tactics:

- Make initial updates to Creekhaven Event Center to address ADA accessibility
- Complete a comprehensive site plan for the northernmost section of Bobcat Ridge as a foundation for potential restoration and visitor use projects
- Evaluate the feasibility of a trail extension from Bobcat Ridge into the Roosevelt National Forest through an interdisciplinary framework
- Explore opportunities to increase safety and enhance accessibility of DR, Valley Loop, and Elk Meadow Trails
- Consult with the equestrian community to inform and then implement improvements to hitching posts in the parking lot

FCNA plans to assess and complete work on the DR, Valley Loop, Elk Meadow trails to open accessibility in corners, identify and improve safety issues especially related to narrow sections of trail, and improve overall trail sustainability. Enhancing trail accessibility on the Valley Loop Trail will allow access for mobility devices and more community members to enjoy the benefits of getting out in nature. Similarly, identifying and mitigating narrow sections of trail and blind corners on the DR trail will improve safety.

Foster Community Connections & Stewardship

GOAL 4: Foster Community Connections & Stewardship

As Fort Collins' population changes, how people experience natural areas continues to evolve. Natural Areas' engagement and education bolster the community's commitment to conservation and land stewardship, inspiring people to protect the environment on conserved lands and beyond.

Tactics:

- Update signage including directional signs at key trail intersections
- Explore interpretive opportunities of the proposed native garden around Creekhaven Event Center during site planning
- Explore opportunities to streamline and improve interpretation of the history and natural environment at Bobcat Ridge
- Establish an asset management strategy for the Montane Zone

Signs across the natural areas system will get refreshed as part of a new sign management strategy that aims to make sign messaging, design, placement, and quantity consistent across all natural areas. New directional signage will be added at key intersections to provide better clarity for trail users.

Resources & Thank You

Visit fortcollins.gov/naturalareas to learn more about the Montane Zone and to find opportunities for providing feedback.

Thank you to the voters and taxpayers of the City of Fort Collins and Larimer County for supporting community-initiated sales taxes that ensure open lands in the Montane Zone are preserved for generations to come.

Related plans, policies, and reports

Natural Areas Strategic Framework, 2025

Wildlife Conservation Guidelines, 2017

Bobcat Ridge Natural Area Management Plan Update, 2017

Restoration Plan, 2016

Fire Management Plan, 2012

