

Priority Projects

Chapter 5:

Implementation Plan

Priority Projects & Implementation Plan



Rio Grande Greenbelt Park



Open Space Opportunities & Priorities

DEVELOPING OPPORTUNITIES AND IDENTIFYING PROJECTS: COMMUNITY INPUT AND ANALYSIS

This chapter outlines opportunities and projects that Costilla County residents are most interested in seeing the county implement. This chapter was created through the efforts of the Working Group reaching out to the community via public surveys and public meetings. Two different surveys gave County residents and visitors an opportunity to share their vision, ideas, and voice their concerns. A survey conducted in April 2011, requested input on the types of recreational areas and activities that community members were interested in seeing conserved, improved or further developed. More specifically, the Working Group requested input to the following questions:

- What types of parks and recreation facilities are you most interested in seeing developed/further developed?
- What would be your primary activity in a park? (rank your top three choices)
- What types of trails are you most interested in seeing developed? (rank your top three choices)
- What would be your primary activity on a trail? (rank your top three choices)
- What destinations are you most interested in seeing connected by trails? Please specify.
- What types of open space are you most interested in seeing protected? (rank your top three choices)
- Who should manage and operate the parks, open space and trail system?
- How important is it to you that facilities are developed to showcase heritage to visitors (such as a historical walking trail through San Luis)?

- What specific trail, recreation and open space projects are you most interested in seeing developed?

The answers helped guide the Working Group in focusing on specific areas for conservation. It also shed some light on what the community views as recreational resources and how the community would utilize recreational areas if they were further developed. The Working Group took the responses generated during the first survey and created a second survey that focused on prioritizing projects for the county to consider in current and future planning.

The following summary from the second survey responses also helped create the content for this chapter:

- County residents are interested in projects that protect water resources, wildlife areas, historic/cultural resources, water rights, scenic areas, and agricultural lands.
- County residents will support projects that increase opportunities for public use and enjoyment of open lands.
- County residents will support projects through volunteering their time to support initial development and management and participate in programs and events.
- Residents would like the county to consider improving existing county parks, develop youth service projects, develop safe bicycle routes, and organize and maintain a county program.
- The two highest priority areas for improvement are the Town of San Luis Park and the Sanchez Reservoir.

This comprehensive section takes into consideration the areas of the county that communities would like to see protected as public space or as a private conserved land and provides recommendations on land protection actions by

individuals, public entities, and non-profit organizations. It also assesses the current conditions of existing recreational areas, including parks and trails, and provides recommendations on improvements or development of additional recreational areas. Most importantly, this chapter provides recommendations for thoughtful financial planning and leverage from financial sources and partnerships to implement these project ideas. The ideas incorporated in this chapter will help ensure that Costilla County is a place where people can enjoy publicly accessible places for recreation.

WHAT IS OPEN SPACE?

Open Space has many definitions and means different things to different people, depending on their own context. Open Space is generally referred to as an undeveloped or minimally developed land and water resources, sometimes it does not include land used for agricultural purposes. In this plan, we take a broad sense of the term, as borrowed from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (and slightly modified).

Open space may be defined as an area of land or water that either remains in its natural state or is used for agriculture, free from intensive development for residential, commercial, industrial or institutional use. Open space can be publicly or privately owned. It includes agricultural and forest land, undeveloped scenic lands, public parks and preserves. It also includes water bodies. Open Space projects may also be associated with trails, recreation, or protection of archaeological, historical, or culturally significant sites.

The goals of the Open Space section of this Plan are:

- To encourage and guide thoughtful and well-rationed land protection actions by public entities, individuals, and by nonprofit organizations such as Colorado Open Lands and Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust; and
- To ensure thoughtful expenditure of public moneys, and to leverage additional money from other sources for implementation of the plan.

The goals of the Open Space section, and the criteria to be applied to potential projects, have been guided by the County's community engagement process and survey and have been carried forward by the Working Group in the belief that they will serve the needs of Costilla County far into the future. Nevertheless, the plan should be reviewed as progress is made in building a cohesive system of open spaces, as development and open space needs evolve, and as new information becomes available.

As the initial step in the community engagement process, County residents and partners were given the opportunity to identify areas of the County that they would like to see protected in some way, either as a public space or as private conserved land. The areas that were pointed out by residents were representative of different types of conservation values, such as excellent elk habitat or prime agricultural land. In a mail survey conducted several months later, questions were refined to determine what types of conservation values residents were most interested in protecting. Specifically, residents were asked:

Which of the following criteria should the County consider when prioritizing projects? Mark all that apply.

65% felt it would be important to "Protect water resources (rivers, wetlands)"

64% marked "Increase opportunities for public use & enjoyment of open lands (allows access)"

62% marked "Protect wildlife areas"

60% checked "Protect historic/cultural resources"

58% wanted to "Protect water rights (such as acequias)"

54% wanted to "Protect scenic areas"

51% marked "Protect agricultural land (farms and ranches)"

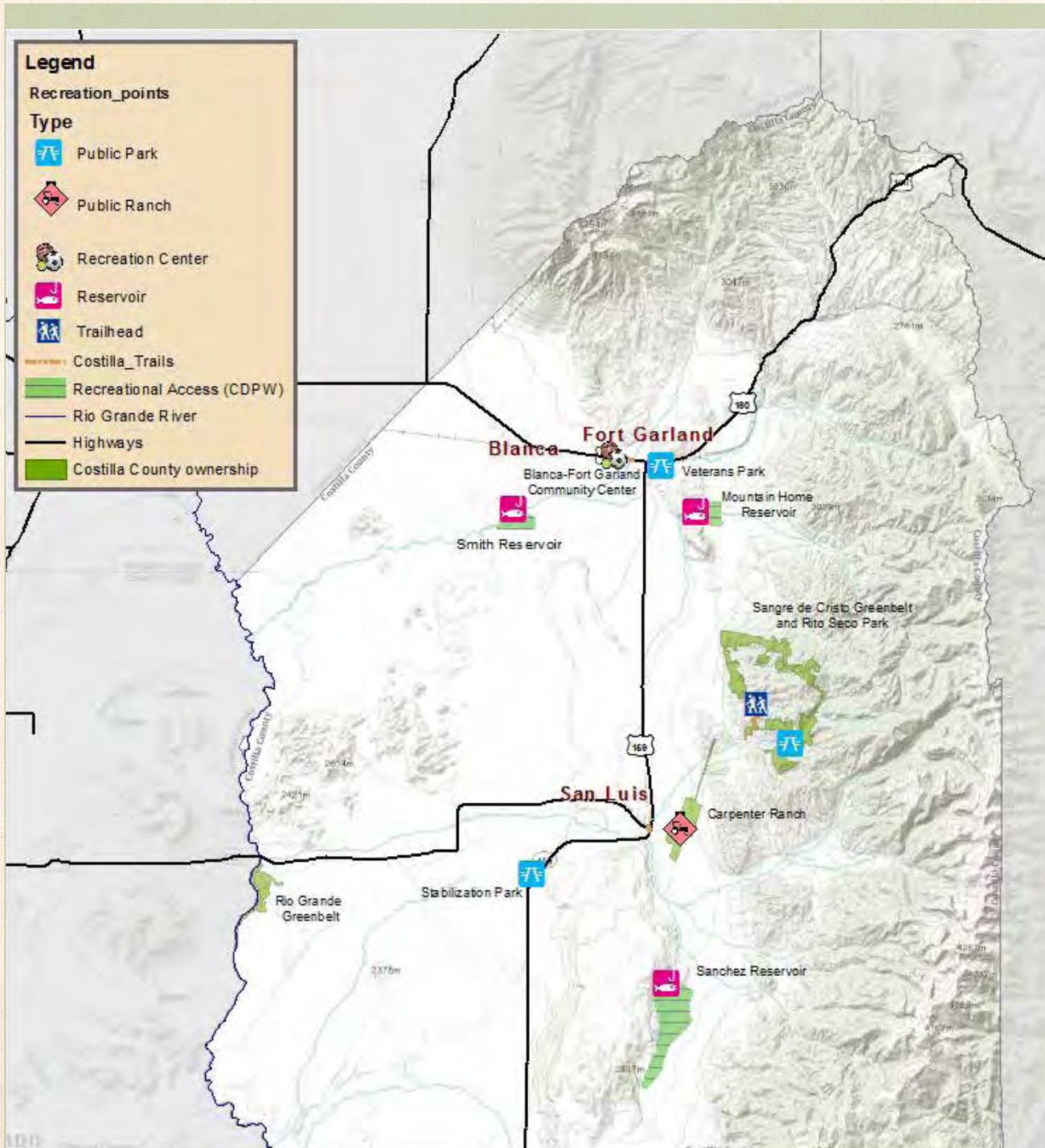
32% felt that the project should "Serve as an example for other projects"

There are many techniques available for both public and private entities to protect critical conservation values of the County that will contribute to the mission and goals of this Plan; consequently, in this section we discuss public protection, private conservation, and regulatory approaches.

EXISTING OPEN SPACE RESOURCES

Approximately 133,000 acres in Costilla County are currently open space – some in public ownership, but most in permanently protected private conservation easements. Costilla County has several existing conservation easements that have been protected by Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust, Colorado Open Lands, Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust, and Colorado Parks and Wildlife. In addition, Costilla County has two designated greenbelts which serve as important open space and recreation areas (these are discussed further in the Trails section of the plan).

The Carpenter Ranch, an open space that was purchased by Costilla County and also has a conservation easement



Costilla County Trails, Recreation, and Open Space Plan
County Recreation Resources and Opportunities Map

Data Sources: Colorado Ownership Management and Protection (COMaPv8), San Luis Valley GIS Authority, Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), Colorado Open Lands (COL)



on it, provides a great illustration of all of the things that an open space can be. In 2004, the County was able to purchase this 1,227 acre property, located approximately 2 miles east of the town of San Luis. Historically, this was a ranch property with senior water rights on the Cerro Ditch (an acequia). Currently, the County manages the property for limited livestock grazing, determined on a lottery basis. The availability of this property for grazing for residents provides great economic benefit to the community. The property is also available for low impact recreational use, such as bird watching and provides an accessible space for community events, such as the Get Outdoors Costilla County! event that was hosted by the Trails, Recreation, and Open Space working advisory group in October 2011. Furthermore, the protection of this property prevented subdivision and possible loss of water rights, which would have negatively impacted the rural and open character of the area and could have injured other irrigators on the acequia.

COSTILLA COUNTY OPEN SPACE: RECOMMENDATIONS AND STRATEGIES

REGULATORY STRATEGIES

Zoning

Scenic Conservation Overlay District is a special district that is superimposed on all or part of an existing district; it imposes additional requirements intended to protect critical scenic resources. Often this is determined using a buffer from a particular line of view, such as a roadway. In Huerfano County, a Scenic Conservation Overlay District was created to protect the Highway of Legends Scenic Byway. Scenic overlay districts commonly include provisions related to:

- Allowed/prohibited uses
- Density and clustering
- Building and site design
- Roads and utilities
- Vegetation and screening

Requirements may include additional setback from roadways (for example: a requirement that a building must be set back one foot for each foot of vertical height), use of building materials that blend into the landscape, or use of visual screens, such as trees.

This type of overlay district could also be created for sensitive natural resources, such as river corridors.

INCENTIVE PROGRAMS

Using Density Bonuses to Protect Critical Resources

Density bonuses use a carrot, rather than stick, approach to protecting resources by rewarding land developers for certain actions such as clustering development, or avoiding developing in and around sensitive resources (such as riparian areas). For example, if a developer buys a piece of property with zoning that allows one home per two acres, but half of the landholding is Southwest Willow Flycatcher habitat, the County may offer to allow a higher density on the non-sensitive portion of the property if the owner agrees not to build on the flycatcher habitat.

REGULATORY RECOMMENDATIONS

1) The Planning and Zoning Department considers a Scenic Conservation Overlay District and a Rio Grande River Conservation Overlay District with additional building restrictions designed to protect the Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway and the Rio Grande River. The proposed districts would be subject to all applicable County policies regarding public hearings. Please see the appendix for useful references for overlay districts.

2) The Planning and Zoning Department considers a policy of allowing density bonuses for development that meets established criteria for protecting critical scenic, natural, cultural, or archaeological resources. The policy could be implemented on a case by case basis, depending on the resources within the development proposal. Please see the appendix for useful references for density bonus considerations.

STRATEGIES FOR FEE LAND ACQUISITION (PUBLIC OWNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC USE)

County acquisition through tax liens on parcels.

Costilla County is unique in that although it is one of the most platted counties in Colorado, it is the least dense. With the majority of its subdivision lots having never been developed, Costilla County has the most vacant subdivision lots in the state. Many owners of these lots live outside of Costilla County (and many live outside of the

United States). Many have never seen the land that they own and have difficulty locating their parcel if they do ever try to find it. Consequently, many owners decide to simply stop paying their annual property taxes.

The tax lien sale is the final step in the Treasurer's efforts to collect property taxes. A tax lien is placed on each property in the county on January 1 each year and remains until the property taxes are paid. If the property owner does not pay the taxes on their property by late October, the county sells the tax lien at the yearly tax lien sale. The tax lien is auctioned to the highest bidder, who then becomes the tax lien certificate holder. Tax liens not sold at the sale are "struck off" to the county. County-held certificates are available for purchase for the cost of the value of the certificate plus an assignment fee. Certificates are eligible for a Treasurer's Deed application after the lien has remained unpaid for three years from the date of the original sale.

In this way, Costilla County has acquired several thousand parcels of land. Rather than placing all of these parcels up for sale, the County may strategically choose which parcels to retain and which parcels to dispose of through sale or trade.

County acquisition through trade

The County can choose to retain ownership of parcels for public use, but it can also maintain a portfolio of attractive parcels that do not make sense for public use, but may be offered as land swaps for parcels that: 1) have sensitive archaeological, cultural, or natural resources, or 2) are attractive for public use. In this way, the County can acquire fee parcels without expending cash resources.

County acquisition through purchase

For very high priority acquisition projects, the County may consider a purchase or bargain purchase of parcels. Ideally, funding can be leveraged from different sources and where appropriate, the land may be first encumbered with a conservation easement to reduce the development potential. The County may also try to leverage a donation component from the landowner, so that the County may purchase the price for less than full market value.

FEE ACQUISITION RECOMMENDATIONS

Maintain an updated database of County-owned parcels and tax delinquent parcels and utilize GIS data to determine whether to keep or dispose of parcels. Consider keeping parcels that: 1) are suitable for public access (or buffer or expand publicly accessible places), 2) protect sensitive

natural, cultural, or archaeological sites, or 3) may be kept in a portfolio for future trade to obtain lands that do meet criteria 1 or 2.

County ownership of land does take that land off of the tax rolls, thus reducing revenue to the County and this should be kept in mind. There may be instances where the county can, either through tax lien or land trade, acquire a block of subdivision parcels. The county may then consolidate the parcels back into a single ownership and re-sell with development restrictions (or a conservation easement).

For high priority acquisitions, particularly those that increase or improve public access, the County should consider utilizing partnerships to seek funding to acquire key parcels.

FEE ACQUISITION FUNDING SOURCES

Great Outdoors Colorado – Local Government Program

A grant program that allows cities, counties, and park and recreation districts with funds to acquire, expand, and improve local parks, outdoor recreation amenities, and environmental education facilities.

U.S. Forest Service – Community Forest Program

The Community Forest Program is a grant program that authorizes the Forest Service to provide financial assistance to local governments and nonprofit entities in order to establish community forests that provide continuing and accessible community benefits.

Colorado Conservation Trust Fund

These are lottery proceeds which are directed to local governments for the acquisition, development, and maintenance of new conservation sites or for capital improvements or maintenance for recreational purposes on any public site.

PRIORITY PROJECTS FOR FEE ACQUISITION AND/OR TRADE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESOURCE PROTECTION

Description: Costilla County has a long and interesting history and traces of that history can still be found. In order to protect critical archaeological and historic resources and

sites, parcels with unique resources have been identified. The Planning and Zoning Department should check any incoming proposals for development against this list. The County could then consider whether to try to offer a parcel trade in order to acquire the sensitive parcel.

**SANGRE DE CRISTO GREENBELT
EXPANSION – BATENBURG MEADOWS
ADDITION**

Description: The County was deeded a greenbelt when the Sangre de Cristo Ranches subdivision was first platted; for several years Colorado Parks and Wildlife has hosted a summer youth camp on the greenbelt area, and for some time used an area known as the Batenburg Meadows, until it was discovered that the meadow was privately owned. The meadow area and associated wetlands are actually three privately-owned parcels within the subdivision. The meadows would be a fantastic addition to the existing greenbelt area, as they contain a series of beaver ponds, which support excellent fishing. Colorado Parks and Wildlife would prefer a total acquisition of 11 parcels totaling 106 acres; however, acquisition of three parcels (25.34 acres) have been identified as top priorities. The Sangre de Cristo Greenbelt is the only publicly-accessible forested land in the County. This forested land is utilized by the community, not only for recreation, but also as a place where the community can harvest firewood and gather piñon nuts. These specific parcels are critical, as they provide a unique area in which CPW can teach youth hunting and fishing skills. *(Refer to Appendix 3 - Sangre de Cristo Ranches Subdivision)*

Acreage: Tier One priority is 25.34 acres; Tier Two priority is additional 81 acres

Location: west of the town of San Luis, located in the Sangre de Cristo Ranches Subdivision

Partners: Costilla County and Colorado Open Lands

Estimated Cost: \$100,000*

**This project may be a good fit for the USFS Community Forest Program*

**RIO GRANDE RANCHOS GREENBELT
EXPANSION – BRAUN ADDITION**

Description: Costilla County owns a “Greenbelt” along the Rio Grande that is 862 acres. There is a 47-acre privately

owned parcel adjacent to the Greenbelt to the north, which provides access to it known as the “Braun Property”. While there is an existing access easement across the Braun Property to the Greenbelt, Costilla County would like to purchase fee title to the Braun Property to secure access and ultimately use that parcel to create infrastructure such as parking, signage, possibly a boat ramp, etc.

South of the Greenbelt in “Rio Grande Ranches” there are numerous five acre lots between the Greenbelt and the main access road to the greenbelt. The vast majority of these lots have no structures. The County is seeking funds to purchase the lots to secure access to and expand the southern stretch of the Greenbelt. *(Refer to Appendix 4 - Rio Grande Ranchos and Rio Grande River Ranchos Subdivision)*

Acreage: Tier One priority is 47 acres; Tier Two priority is 215 acres

Location: on the Rio Grande, adjacent to Highway 142 (south side)

Partner(s): Costilla County, Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust (RiGHT), Colorado Open Lands (COL)

Estimated Cost = \$50,000 (for Braun parcel only)

RIO GRANDE RIVER BUFFER

Description: In 2006, the U.S. Congress designated the Rio Grande Natural Area as a one-quarter mile buffer on either side of the Rio Grande River. The purpose of the area was to establish a management plan across land ownerships (voluntary for private land) in order to conserve, restore, and protect the natural, historic, cultural, scientific, scenic, wildlife, and recreational resources of the area. If taxes become delinquent within this area, the County should seek to acquire to keep or consolidate parcels before re-sale with restrictions limiting development to protect the Rio Grande River (See Appendix 4 for lists of parcels).

Partners: Costilla County, Rio Grande Natural Area Commission

STEGER RANCH

Description: Located just north of the village of San Francisco and twelve miles south and east of the town of San Luis, the 971 acre Steger property has been identified by Costilla County as a potential priority acquisition parcel. The property lies within the San Francisco and Vallejos Watersheds and is surrounded by pinion juniper

woodlands on the western edge, agricultural lands on the northern and southern edges while the eastern edge is flanked by brush prairie.

The property is vital in the migratory pattern of elk from upper pastures in the east to lower pastures in the west providing critical winter pasture and serving as a holding area to prevent elk influx into nearby agricultural lands. Costilla County believes that a conservation easement on the property in conjunction with county ownership would be appropriate.

Costilla County has concerns that the property is at risk of being purchased and partitioned for small parcel development through the creation of a new subdivision.

Acreage: 971

Location: 12 miles south and east of the town of San Luis, near the town of San Francisco

Partner(s): Costilla County

Estimated Cost = \$283,000

VISTA GRANDE ESTATES SUBDIVISION

Description: Located just north of Highway 142 and east of the Rio Grande and east of a section of the Rio Grande Ranchos Subdivision, the Vista Grande Subdivision is 100% vacant and 92% of the lots are currently owned by Costilla County. Although this subdivision does not border the Rio Grande it is located just east of the river and close to the Rio Grande Greenbelt area. The county should consider strategies and funding sources to obtain the remaining lots in the subdivision and consider vacating roads, consolidating parcels and make the area a public use park.

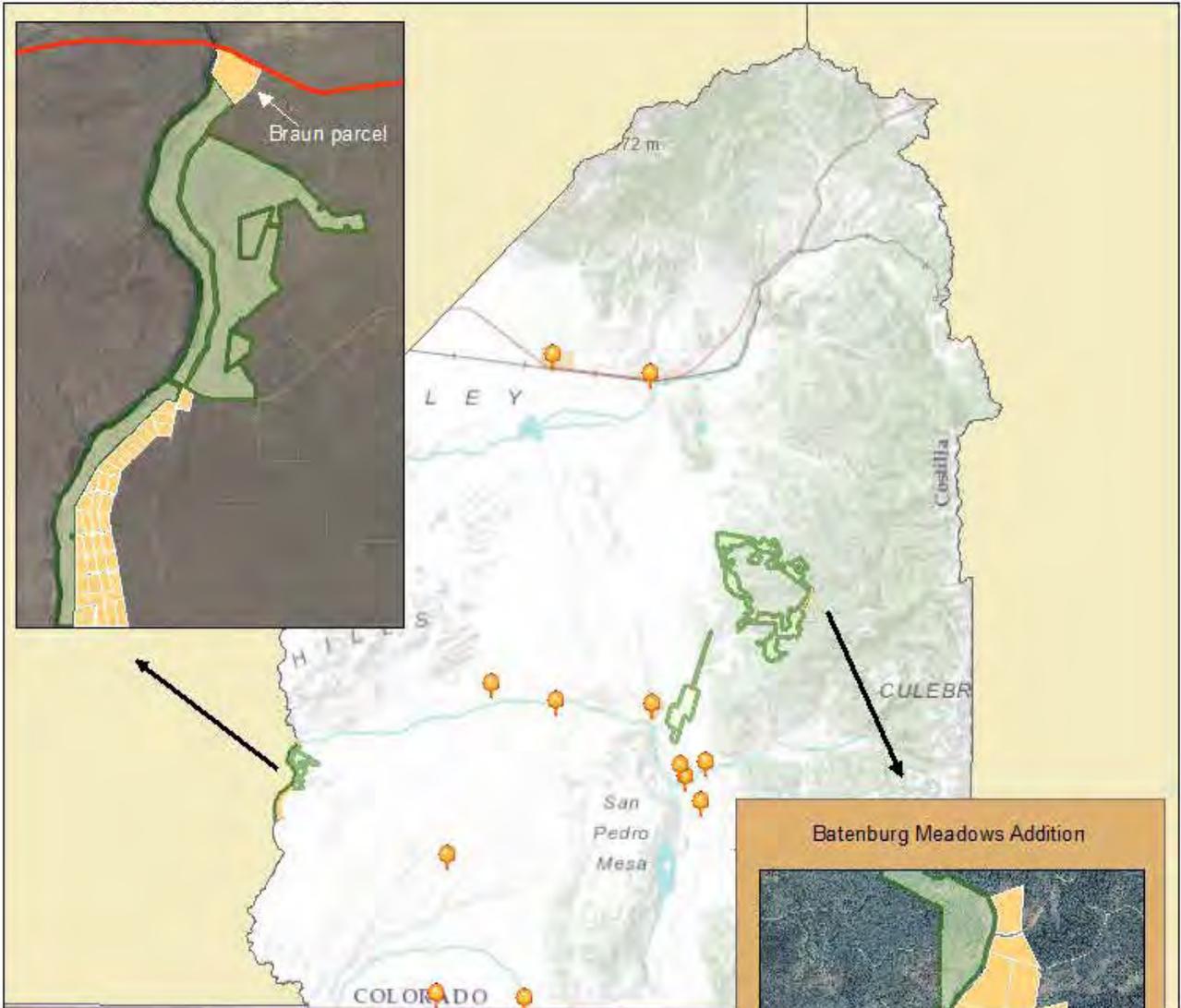
CONSERVATION EASEMENTS (PRIVATE OWNERSHIP WITH PRIVATE USE WITH PUBLIC BENEFIT)

A conservation easement is a voluntary restriction, placed by a landowner, on the use of his or her property to protect significant natural areas, agricultural lands, open spaces, wildlife corridors, or historic structures on that property. The owner retains title to the property and donates the easement to a qualified conservation organization such as a



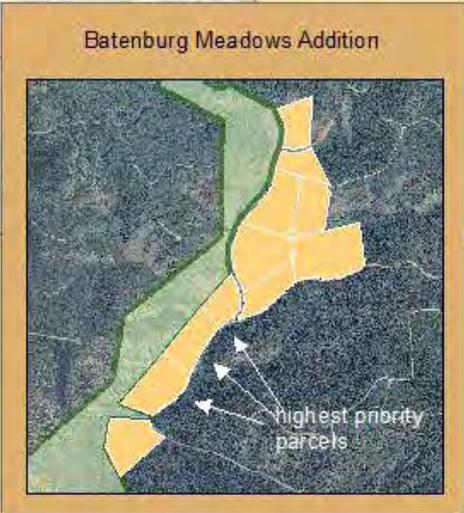
View of Braun Property

Rio Grande Ranchos Addition



Rio Grande Ranchos Addition
 261 acres total
 Braun Parcel = 46 acres
 41 parcels of 4-7 acres each

Batenburg Meadows Addition
 105 acres total
 11 parcels of 5 - 13 acres each



Fee Acquisition Priorities

Data Sources:
 San Luis Valley GIS Authority,
 Colorado Open Lands (COL)

- Priority Parcels
- County-owned property
- Costilla towns



land trust, thus ensuring that future owners of the land can only use the property for the purposes specified in the easement by the landowner. Conservation easements in Colorado range in size from a few acres to thousands of acres.

Conservation easements can be held by qualified entities, including land trusts (which are 501(c)3 entities) and certain government entities. In addition to the federal qualifications for conservation easement holders, the state of Colorado has a certification program for land trusts and government entities that want to hold conservation easements.

Landowners who donate a conservation easement to a qualified entity in Colorado are eligible for federal and state tax benefits. For more information, contact Colorado Open Lands, Rio Grande Headwaters Land Trust, or the Colorado Coalition of Land Trusts.

Benefits to communities and local governments of using conservation easements to protect working lands include: protection is achieved but land stays on the tax role, the county does not have to spend money on maintaining the land, and the operation continues to provide a stream of benefits to the local economy such as agricultural jobs.

PRIORITY PROJECTS FOR CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

Identifying Priority Conservation Easement

Parcels

Protecting water resources was the highest priority for Costilla County residents, followed by public access, wildlife habitat, ecological resources, agricultural land, and scenic viewsheds.

Working with a class at the University of Colorado Denver, Colorado Open Lands compiled spatial data to try to capture these protection priorities (please see Appendix 6 for a list of data and sources). Colorado Open Lands created a model that compiled, weighted, and analyzed conservation values in a Geographic Information System (GIS). Conservation values are divided into four categories: Habitat, Riparian, Agricultural, and Scenic. As shown in the model below, each category is comprised of several different data layers and the Habitat category contains three sub-layers: Ecologically Important [wildlife] Species, Economically Important [wildlife] Species, and Rare Plants. In the model, the four main categories are weighted according to their priority within

the public survey. Although riparian areas ranked the highest, many riparian areas were captured within the Habitat data, so Habitat received a weighting of .3 and Riparian received a weighting of .2. Agriculture received a weighting of .3 because it is linked to protection of surface water rights, which received a high level of support in the survey. Scenic received a lower weighting of .2 to reflect the lower priority placed on it by county residents.

This model was then used to produce a composite raster map (a raster is a grid of cells and a composite of multiple raster layers). This map shows the areas within the county that contain the highest concentration of conservation values (see Conservation Priorities Map). For example, areas that contain a river, a rare plant species, and provide habitat for an economically important species, such as elk, will score higher (and look darker) than areas which only contain rare plant species.

Parcel data was then overlaid on this map, to determine which properties should be the highest priority for conservation (for privacy purposes, this parcel map is not shown). The priority property matrix ranks each identified property by showing which conservation values the property possesses and the quantity or quality of that conservation value within the entire parcel. Additionally, the matrix considers two different values not included in the spatial analysis: 1) the size of the property (is it a significant intact parcel?) and 2) does the property provide a buffer to adjacent public land or private protected land. For each conservation value, the property was given a score of low (1 point), medium (3 points), or high (5 points). Each property was then given an overall conservation score. Each property is described here. Inclusion in this plan does NOT imply that any action will be taken by any public entity – not the County or any federal agency. Rather, it simply suggests that this is where partner entities may focus their outreach efforts. If a landowner is interested in any voluntary conservation options and requests funding, this is a tool with which the County or any potential funders may evaluate the project and see its context within all potential conservation projects.

PRIORITY PROJECTS FOR PRIVATE CONSERVATION (CONSERVATION EASEMENTS)

VARA STRIPS (EXTENSIONES) ASSOCIATED WITH ACEQUIAS

Vara strips are the often long and narrow parcels of land that run perpendicular to the acequia ditches; because of

the small acreage and large number of parcels, these parcels have not been ranked individually, but collectively, varas are a very high priority for protection.

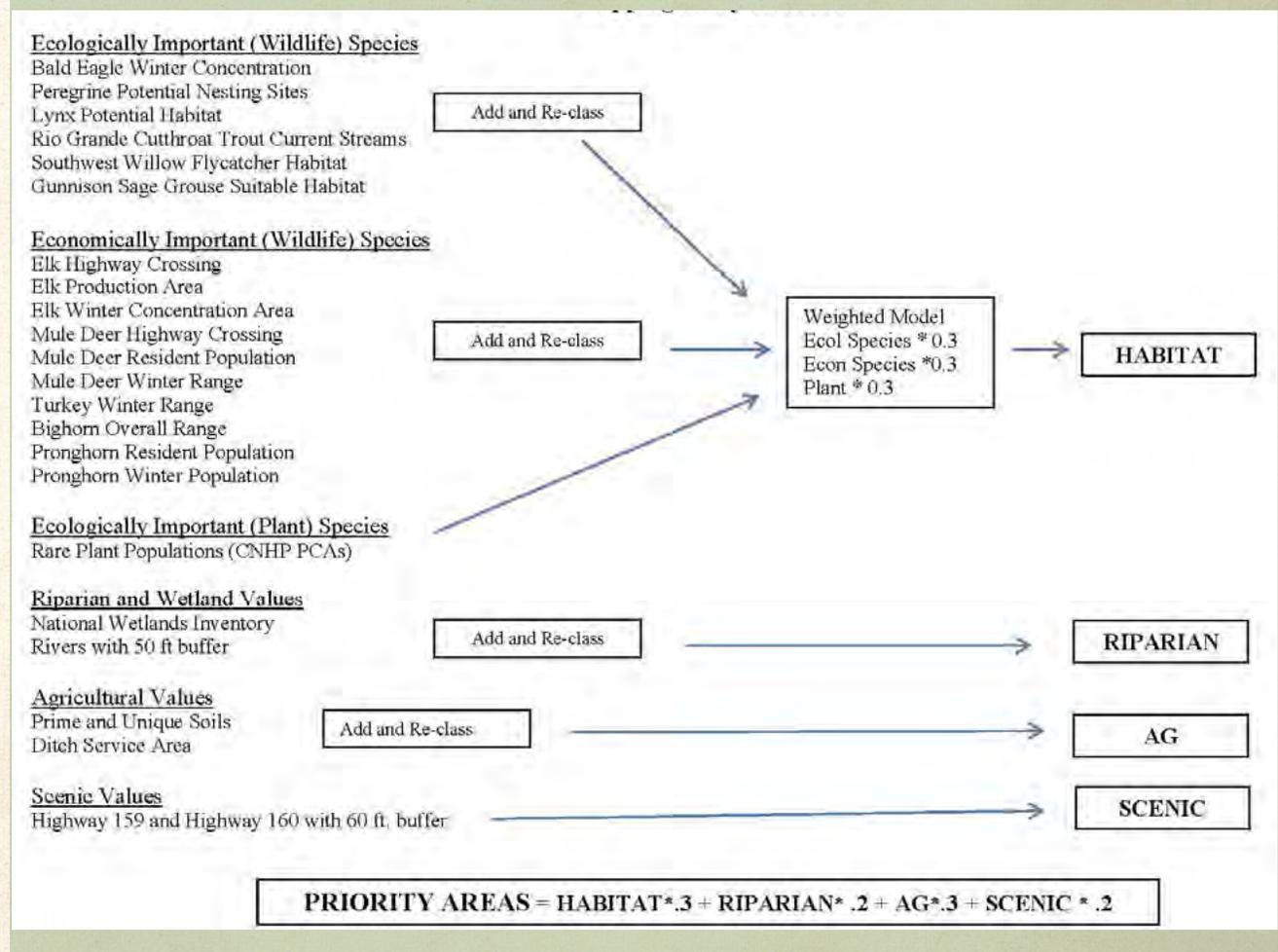
Conservation Values: Despite the fact that they are agricultural parcels, and thus not entirely natural lands, varas mimic natural systems and support outstanding wildlife and ecological values. Because they utilize gravity-fed irrigation systems, these lands tend to follow natural contours, in contrast with most pivot-irrigated farms which need to be flattened for the sprinklers to work effectively. Additionally, because the majority of the ditches are unlined, they often create riparian habitat that mirrors the natural waterways and provide important return flows to the shallow aquifer. Additionally, many of the vara strips are located in areas with very rich soils that have been identified as prime or as having statewide significance. Finally, the surface water rights used to irrigate the varas

are some of the oldest in the state and therefore are under pressure for use as augmentation.

At the time of this plan, the challenge in using conservation easements to protect these lands and water rights is parcel size, with conservation easement costs being prohibitive relative to the monetary value and appraised value of the conservation easement. Currently, the Sangre de Cristo Acequia Association is working to explore other means of strengthening the water rights of acequias.

Acreage: 12,000 acres

PRIORITY CONSERVATION AREAS MAPPING ANALYSIS MODEL



BLANCA PARCEL OF THE TRINCHERA RANCH

The Trinchera Ranch is comprised of two very large parcels, which are not contiguous. The southern portion of the ranch was protected with a conservation easement held by Colorado Open Lands. In June, 2012, the owner of the Trinchera Ranch committed to donating a conservation easement on the Blanca Parcel of the Trinchera Ranch to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, if the proposed Sangre de Cristo Conservation Area is approved.

Conservation Values: The conservation values on the northern part of the ranch (known as the Blanca parcel) are quite extraordinary. The Property includes spectacular mountains, including the ridge line and substantial portions of Little Bear Peak, Blanca Peak, the Sierra Massif, and Mount Lindsey. The Property offers spectacular views of snow-capped peaks, vast expanses of conifer forest interspersed in autumn with golden aspen and cottonwoods, and broad river valleys of grasses and piñon-juniper. The Property's size and visual dominance make it the local and regional landscape.

The Property's size, elevation, and climate create a rich diversity of ecotypes. Subalpine Forest, Aspen, Piñon-Juniper and Sagebrush are dominant ecosystems. Alpine, Douglas Fir, Lodgepole Pine, Gambel Oak, High Elevation Riparian and Cottonwood Riparian ecosystems are also present. Alpine lakes, including the Winchell Lakes, are located on the ranch, including Ute Creek, Cottonwood Creek, Sangre de Cristo Creek and their tributaries. The size, diversity and defensibility of these ecosystems offers excellent habitat for a variety of plants, fish, and wildlife.

As noted, much of the Property consists of a variety of forest types, the most abundant being the Spruce-Fir and Ponderosa Pine-Douglas Fir. The forest cover ranges from young stands to stands in full maturity and decline. The Alpine vegetative community is very healthy and virtually unaltered. Portions of the Sagebrush, Piñon-Juniper and low elevation Riparian ecosystems contain a diversity of grass, forbs and other browse species. The Property is well-irrigated, including irrigated meadows covering a significant amount of acres, producing predominantly brome, orchard grass, timothy and alfalfa. Current grass and sage management promote a visually diverse and lush viewscape.

In addition to the variety of timber and vegetation present, wildlife is also abundant. Major species inhabiting the Property include elk, mule deer, black bear, bighorn sheep, bald and golden eagle, rainbow, brook, cutthroat and

brown trout, turkey, geese, band-tailed pigeon, snowshoe hare, cottontail and jack rabbit, mountain lion and coyote.

Acreage: 88,000 acres

KESTER FARMS

Conservation Values: Kester Farms consists of several parcels just to the south and west of Fort Garland. The farms provide habitat for bald eagles and serve as potential habitat for Southwest Willow flycatcher. The property encompasses elk and mule deer highway crossings and is home to a resident mule deer population. It also contains part of a Potential Habitat Area designated by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program and contains a significant portion of riparian area and a small amount of wetlands near the Smith Reservoir. The farms contain some prime soils and have significant surface water rights. The Kester properties provide quite a bit of frontage to the Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway and some of the parcels are adjacent to the Smith Reservoir, providing an important buffer. The protection of all parcels offers an opportunity for landscape-level conservation.

Acreage: 2,300 acres

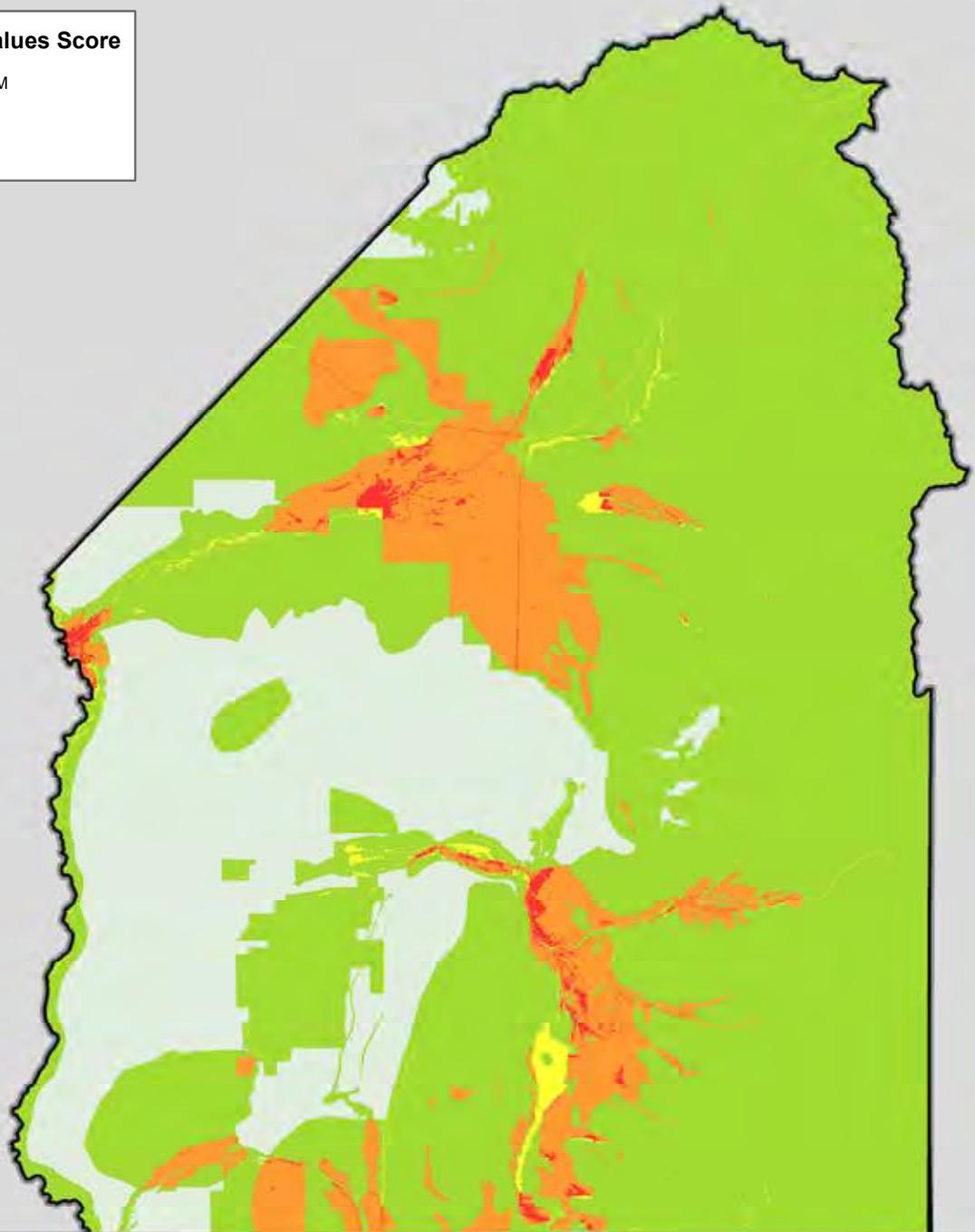
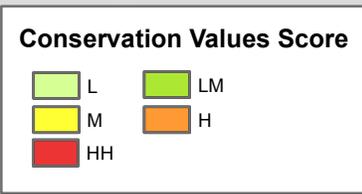
DOS HERMANOS RANCH (APPROXIMATELY 6,000)

Conservation Values: The Dos Hermanos Ranch is a very large parcel which offers an opportunity for large-scale protection in the south-central portion of the county. The ranch provides critical winter habitat for mule deer and contains a portion of a resident mule deer population. The property provides potential habitat for lynx and Rio Grande cutthroat trout. The majority of the property contains a Potential Habitat Area designated by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program. Aside from its natural conservation values, the ranch is visible from Highway 159, just before it enters New Mexico and it contains prime irrigated soils, supporting Costilla County's agricultural economy. Finally, the ranch provides an important buffer to privately protected lands.

Acreage: 6,000 acres

MEADOWLARK RANCH/SAN LUIS HILLS FARM

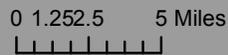
Conservation Values: The Meadowlark Ranch and San Luis Hills Farm were purchased by a single owner in 2010 and together, they are the largest undivided property on the



Costilla County Trails, Recreation, and Open Space Plan

Conservation Priority Analysis Map

Data Sources: Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW), US Fish and Wildlife Service (US FWS), Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP), Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT)



valley floor. The Meadowlark Ranch contains approximately 5 miles of the Rio Grande River. Consequently, the western property boundary is within the Rio Grande Natural Area. The Meadowlark also contains significant wetlands as the Trinchera Creek flows through the property and into the Rio Grande. The property provides bald eagle habitat and a portion of it provides habitat for a resident mule deer population. It serves as potential habitat for the Southwest Willow Flycatcher. It contains the largest block of irrigated circles in the County and a portion of that farmland is prime soil.

Acreage: approximately 18,800 acres

COLUMBIAN RANCH/ROCKY MOUNTAIN FARM (FAUCETTE FARM)

Conservation Values: This farm, purchased by the Faucette family in the late 1990s is a certified organic farm comprised of 18 center pivot circles with significant prime irrigated soils and sagebrush habitat edges. It provides open viewshed of agricultural lands on both sides of the Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway and provides extremely important winter range for one of Colorado's largest elk herds (leased for forage by the Colorado Parks and Wildlife). The farm contains a segment of the Old Spanish Trail National Historic Trail.

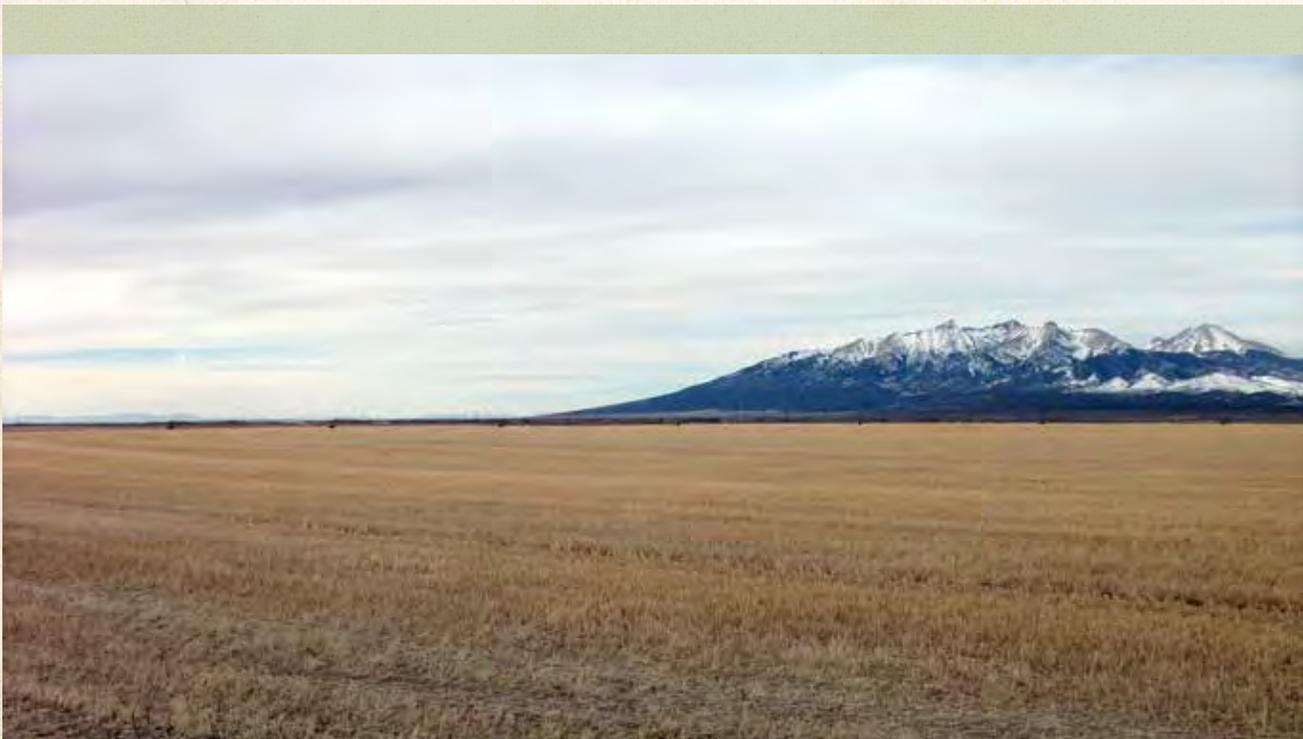
The landowner is willing to provide opportunities to link land conservation and stewardship with agricultural education and outreach; he is interested in getting students and other farmers in the field.

Acreage: 3,400 acres

PINEY VALLEY TRUST RANCH

Conservation Values: This ranch is another one of the incredibly large properties that contains approximately 4 miles of the Rio Grande River and managed to escape subdivision to date. The property provides excellent winter range for pronghorn and provides a portion of the habitat for a resident mule deer population and potential habitat for the Southwest Willow Flycatcher. This property is a high priority for protection as it provides a unique opportunity for very large scale protection and buffers BLM land on the other side of the Rio Grande. Like the Meadowlark Ranch, western property boundary is within the Rio Grande Natural Area.

Acreage: 14,000 acres



Faucette Farm looking towards Blanca Peak (© Sarah Parmar)

GRIMWOOD FARMS

Conservation Values: The farms provide habitat for bald eagle, a resident mule deer population, pronghorn winter range, and potential habitat for the Southwest Willow Flycatcher. The farm is irrigated with significant prime soils and would buffer an existing conservation easement.

Acreage: 600 acres

MACKINNON PROPERTY

Conservation Values: The MacKinnon property is significant in terms of size and contains wetlands. The property is mapped habitat for Lynx, suitable habitat for Gunnison Sage Grouse, and a large portion of the property provides winter range for both mule deer and pronghorn.

Acreage: 3,800 acres

WEST FARMS

Conservation Values: West farms is located on the southern boundary of the county and is bisected by a string of wetlands. The farm contains an elk winter concentration area and provides habitat for a resident pronghorn population. The farm is irrigated and has prime soils.

Acreage: 1,800 acres

KUNUGI FARMS

Conservation Values: Parts of the farm are adjacent to both Highways 159 and 160, which not only provides a buffer to the Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway, but also provides open areas for two documented crossing points for elk and deer. The farm also contains significant soils of statewide importance.

Acreage: 1,500 acres

SKINKLE FARMS

Conservation Values: The Skinkle properties contain habitat for the Southwest Willow Flycatcher and provide habitat for a resident mule deer population. The farms contain some prime soils and a portion of the farm is adjacent to the Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway.

Acreage: 1,300 acres

NAKASAWA PROPERTY

Conservation Values: This farm is highly visible from the Los Caminos Antiguos Scenic and Historic Byway and contains some prime soils. The size of this parcel makes it attractive for a conservation easement.

Acreage: 2,130 acres

CONSERVATION FUNDING SOURCES

Great Outdoors Colorado – Open Space Program

This program provides funds to local governments and eligible nonprofit entities to acquire conservation easements on parcels of land that provide significant benefit to the state. This is a competitive source and those projects with multiple strong conservation values that rise to the level of regional and statewide significance have the best chance of success. GOCO is willing to be the “first funder” in a project but requires a 25% identified cash match.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

NRCS has three programs that offer funding for conservation easements: Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), and Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP). The first (WRP) is a program designed to protect wetlands and other riparian areas. Aside from quiet enjoyment to the property, many other property uses are restricted by easement under this program. The easement must be held by NRCS, but may be for a limited term. GRP easements may also be for a limited term and are meant to protect working grassland properties. Under the FRPP, landowners must have matching funds in hand, but may work with other entities such as land trusts. Lands must contain at least 20% prime or unique soils to qualify as ranchland and 50% prime or unique soils to qualify as farmland. Under this program, a land trust may actually hold the conservation easement.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife – Colorado Wildlife Habitat Protection Program

Colorado’s Wildlife Habitat Protection Program is designed to accept proposals from private property owners, local government open space programs, land trusts or other conservation organizations that address one or more of the following priorities (in no particular order): Sage-grouse and lesser prairie-chicken habitat; parcels that provide

public recreational access themselves or otherwise increase access to public hunting and/or fishing opportunities; riparian areas that connect important protected habitats (protected habitats may include State Wildlife Areas; other Conservation Easements on private property; BLM or U.S. Forest Service lands); big game winter range and migration corridors.

US Fish and Wildlife Service

If the proposed San Luis Valley Conservation Area is approved by the Department of the Interior, the US Fish and Wildlife Service can apply for funding to acquire conservation easements to protect habitat of key threatened and endangered species identified in the conservation area plan. These conservation easements would be held by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

North American Wetlands Conservation Act

The U. S. Standard Grants Program is a competitive, matching grants program that supports public-private partnerships carrying out projects in the United States that further the goals of the North American Wetlands Conservation Act. These projects must involve long-term protection, restoration, and/or enhancement of wetlands and associated uplands habitats for the benefit of all wetlands-associated migratory birds.

COSTILLA COUNTY CONSERVATION PRIORITY MATRIX

Priority Parcel Evaluation Matrix

Scoring:
 Low (1 point)
 Medium (3 points)
 High (5 points)

	Habitat for Ecologically Important Species	Bald Eagle	Peregrine	Lynx	Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout	SW Willow Flycatcher	Gunnison Sage Grouse	Habitat for Economically Important Species	Elk Highway Crossing	Elk Production Area	Elk Winter Concentration Area	Mule Deer Highway Crossing	Mule Deer Resident Population	Mule Deer Winter Range	Turkey Winter Range	Big Horn Overall Range	Pronghorn Resident Population	Pronghorn Winter Range	Habitat for Rare Plant Species	Contains habitat designated by CNHP	Riparian and Wetland Values	Contains portion of river, creek	Contains wetlands	Agricultural Values	Contains prime and unique soils	Acequia or Ditch service area	Scenic Values	Adjacent to Highway 159 or 160	Potential for landscape scale conservation	Large parcel size	Buffer to private conserved land or public land	Overall Conservation Score
Blanca Parcel, Trinchera Ranch		3	0	5	5	5	3		5	5	5	5	0	5	3	1	0	0		5	5	5	1	1	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	80
Kester Farms		5	0	0	0	5	0		5	0	0	5	5	0	0	0	0	0		3	3	3	0	1	3	5	5	5	5	5	46	
Dos Hermanos Ranch		1	0	5	5	0	0		0	0	0	0	3	5	0	0	0	0		5	0	1	3	3	3	0	0	0	5	5	44	
Meadowlark Ranch		5	0	0	0	3	0		0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0		5	5	5	5	0	3	0	0	0	5	5	37	
Columbia n Ranch/Rocky Mtn Farm		0	0	0	0	0	1		3	0	5	3	0	0	0	0	3	0		0	1	0	1	5	3	5	5	0	5	0	34	
PineyValley Trust (Blue Bonnet Ranch?)		5	0	0	0	1	0		0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	5		1	5	1	5	0	0	0	0	0	5	5	29	
Grimwood Farms		3	0	0	0	3	0		0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	3		1	0	0	0	3	3	3	0	3	1	3	28	
MacKinnon		0	0	3	0	0	1		0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	5		3	0	1	0	0	3	0	0	5	0	0	26	
West Farms		0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	5	0		0	3	3	3	3	3	0	0	1	3	0	24	
Kunugi Farms		0	0	0	0	0	0		3	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	1		0	0	0	0	3	3	3	3	1	0	0	19	
Skinkle Farms		0	0	0	0	3	0		0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0		0	1	0	1	1	3	1	1	1	0	0	13	
Nakasawa		0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0	1	1	5	5	0	0	0	12	
San Luis Hills Farm		0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	5	0	10	
Smith/Wakasugi Farms																																
Vara strips*																																

*Vara strips or extensiones are associated with the acequia system and there are hundreds of vara strips that have been owned by the same families since the establishment of the Sangre de Cristo land grant. These lands are a high priority for conservation and their conservation values are generally described in the Priority Projects for Private Land Conservation section; however, because there are so many unique parcels of small size, they are not ranked in this matrix.



Park Assessments & Recommendations

PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITIES

Parks and other indoor/outdoor recreational facilities are an essential resource for families to safely enjoy in their neighborhoods. Studies show that communities with parks increase their appeal and the quality of life for community residents. Recreational facilities vary from small neighborhood parks to larger open space parks, community centers, and even memorial parks that offer residents and visitors space for reflection. They can be managed by a sole entity or by a variety of community organizations and local government entities. Costilla County has a variety of recreational resources that offer a variety of recreational opportunities for residents and visitors however, existing resources are under utilized or require small to large repairs and improvements. Currently, Costilla County provides visitors and residents access to recreational amenities for overnight camping, fishing, picnic areas, access to hiking trails, and indoor sports such as basketball, volleyball, and swimming. Neighborhood park amenities range from playground equipment, open fields for outdoor sports, outdoor recreational courts, picnic areas, and walking paths. Some parks are maintained on a routine basis in partnership with local organizations while others have been neglected.

With the guidance of the National Park Service, the county developed a series of public surveys and organized public forums to hear community concerns and ideas for increasing use of park resources and identifying new ideas for recreational amenities. During a series of community meetings, the residents and visitors of Costilla County were given the opportunity to voice their opinions on what they would like to see improved and/or developed. During the first set of meetings in April 2011 in Fort Garland and San Luis, members of the community were asked to rank their top three choices for “types of parks and recreation facilities that they are most interested in seeing developed/further

improved”. There was strong support for developing a Community Center followed by improving and/or further developing community parks and neighborhood parks. They voiced concerns of not having available resources for the younger residents and the elder community to enjoy. Responses were mainly focused on enhancing already existing park resources while also creating physical links to schools, community centers, and other parks.

Another survey was mailed to all county residents in August 2011 to further identify what priorities they were interested in the county working towards. The surveys revealed that residents of the county are interested in enhancing facilities at the Rito Seco Park, Stabilization Park, Sanchez and Smith Reservoirs, and developing a community center in the Town of San Luis Park. Most importantly, the community would support projects that are partially funded and that share responsibilities between the county and other community partners in maintenance and improvements of facilities.

The ideas developed by county residents and visitors were integral to the identification of park improvements and development of new facilities. The following section outlines the county’s current inventory of park resources, provides recommendations for improvements and development of recreational amenities. The county recognizes that these improvements and development of new facilities should be satisfied with the help of partnerships and funding, therefore, a list of funding sources and partnerships is also included in this section. In summary, the county strongly believes that investing in recreational resources that interest residents and visitors will increase the use of these parks by area residents who have little to no alternatives for outdoor or indoor recreation.

RITO SECO PARK

Rito Seco Park is located within the Sangre de Cristo Greenbelt Area at the dead end of Rito Seco Road in the Sangre de Cristo Ranches Subdivision. It is one of a few park resources that offer visitors overnight amenities for camping and picnicking. The park is nestled within shaded piñon, juniper, aspen and ponderosa pine forests adjacent to Rito Seco Creek. Its secluded location and unique natural environment make it a popular location for a variety of recreational users.

PARK AMENITIES:

- 5 BBQ facilities (with informal fire rings)
- 21 Picnic tables
- Creek Access
- Campground sites
- Trails and connections at end of road across creek
- One Restroom facility for men and women

ISSUES / CONSTRAINTS:

There is no road signage on Hwy 159 or within the Sangre de Cristo Ranches Subdivision directing visitors to the park. With the lack of signage the destination is difficult to find by public users. There is no safety or informational signage within the park identifying acceptable recreational uses or approved rules and regulations. This lack of signage invites a variety of incompatible uses. The restroom facilities aren't maintained and are suffering from neglect. The lack of public facilities on-site means an increase in unsanitary conditions and litter. The lack of trash receptacles means that there is large amount of trash collecting along the creek and within the parking lot and camping areas. There are safety concerns with BBQ facilities that were disassembled, covered with concrete, or replaced with informal fire rings. The lack of designated trails means an increase in informal trails that may not be compatible within sensitive areas along the creek. The picnic tables and public restroom suffer from vandalism such as graffiti. Some access points to the creek are steep and multiple areas along the creek suffer from erosion as a result of users creating new access points.

OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

An investment in road signage along Hwy 159 and at major intersections within the subdivision directing visitors to the park would increase visitation and appreciation of one of a few outdoor recreational resources that residents and visitors could safely enjoy. Informational and interpretive signage directing visitors how to safely utilize the park would help decrease incompatible recreational activities. The county should consider replacing the existing restroom facility with a compost toilet and place trash containers near the restroom facility and by picnic tables. To enhance recreational facilities along the creek, the county should invest in safe access points such as fishing docks or surface grading along embankments. The county could request the assistance of the Southwest Conservation Corps to disassemble illegal campsites and fire pits. The county should consider applying for grants that can financially assist with developing tent pads, informational signage, and new picnic tables. With the help of the National Park Service, identify clear trail routes that are within the county owned boundaries for historical uses for wood gathering. The County Road and Bridge Department could employ seasonal help to maintain the facilities during high



Rito Seco Park

visitation in the summer and hunting seasons. Since the park is located within a unique natural environment, it offers local school districts and non-profit organizations an opportunity for outdoor educational programs. In partnership with local school districts, an educational curriculum could be developed to fit within lesson plans to meet Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) standards.

Funding Sources:

Directional and Informational Signage: Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area, American Trails Association;

Tent pads, picnic tables, BBQ facilities: GOCO, private donations

Restroom facilities and trash cans: Costilla County, American Trails Association

Creek Access: Division of Parks and Wildlife

Partnerships:

National Park Service, GOCO, Colorado Open Lands, Centennial School District, Costilla County Road and Bridge Department, Southwest Conservation Corps, Sierra Grande School District, CO Division of Parks and Wildlife

VETERANS PARK

The Veterans Park, erected in 2007, serves as a memorial to county residents who served in the Armed Forces. The park is managed by the county in partnership with the American Legion. The park offers county residents and visitors an opportunity to walk along a paved sidewalk to the memorial and a viewing area to a T33A Shooting Star jet aircraft on loan by the U.S. Air Force. The park's landscape is well-maintained with colorful plants and flowers surrounded by a backdrop of flags and native trees. The memorial and airplane are well lit at night and visible from Hwy. 160. With its close proximity to Hwy. 160, this park also offers visitors driving through an opportunity to experience a memorial that is a source of pride for the county.

PARK AMENITIES:

- Memorial honoring Armed Forces Veterans from Costilla County
- Parking lot

- Accessible paved walking paths
- U.S. Air Force T-33 Shooting Star
- Five Flag poles and flags

ISSUES / CONSTRAINTS:

The park is maintained by the County Road and Bridge Department and the local American Legion. Though landscape improvements are needed, one major concern is the lack of trash receptacles at the parking lot and the lack of signage along Hwy 160 to direct traffic to the park.

OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The county should provide one trash receptacle at the parking to avoid the site being littered. In partnership with the American Legion, the County Road and Bridge Department maintains a sprinkler system for the surrounding landscape. The American Legion hosts a Family Day at the park the first weekend in August. The County, the Legion and the VFW could consider Veterans Day, or Memorial Day events at the park, as the county hosts no other events for these holidays. The American Legion, the VFW and the county can also work with the Department of Transportation to identify proper directional signage from Highway 160 to the park.

Funding Sources: Grants from state and federal Veterans Offices and fundraising by local Veterans Organizations

Partnerships: Fort Garland Revitalization Committee, Costilla County Road and Bridge, American Legion and VFW and Sierra Grande School District

TOWN OF FORT GARLAND **NEIGHBORHOOD PARK (AKA LEVI AND HELEN GONZALEZ PARK)**

The Town of Fort Garland Neighborhood Park offers a variety of outdoor recreational activities for the local community of Fort Garland to utilize. Half of the park is an open field offering space for a variety of outdoor sports such as soccer, baseball, football, and Frisbee, to name a few. The other half of the park offers space for passive recreation, as well as a playground and a full size basketball court. The park is surrounded by shade trees and a landscaped lawn with shrubs and flowers at the entrance of the park. The park is located adjacent to the Holy Family Catholic



Veterans Park

Church within a residential neighborhood making it a very visible and utilized park. A partnership between the Fort Garland Revitalization Committee and Costilla County maintains the park.

PARK AMENITIES

- A full size basketball court
- Open Field
- Playground equipment with 12 pieces of new equipment (plastic and metal materials) including 8 swings and 2 larger equipment pieces with slides and climbing bars and 2 older pieces of equipment;
- 1 pavilion with 6 picnic tables
- 3 covered picnic areas with 1 table at each picnic area on concrete slabs with grills
- 1 shaded picnic table; 2 non-shaded picnic tables
- 3 wooden benches
- 3 outdoor BBQ grills
- Memorial at entrance signs

ISSUES / CONSTRAINTS

The park landscape is well-maintained and it has recently received a GOCO grant for the development of a covered pavilion. However, the paint on the picnic tables is chipping and the wood is splintering.

There is evidence of vandalism on the bottom of the playground slides. The basketball court is experiencing neglect and there is evidence of cracks in the foundation and grass growing through the cracks. Park signage needs to be more visible and clearly state the hours of operations and park restrictions.

OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The park's location provides an opportunity for a trail/walking path connecting the residential community to the Safe Routes to School walking path located along Hwy. 160. Minor renovations to the pavilion and picnic areas are low cost and therefore a top priority amongst the list of recommendations. Supplies and labor can be provided by the County Road and Bridge staff maintaining the park. High school students participating in the Southwest

Conservation Corps (SCC) Costilla County Day Crew Program could lend a hand with some of the minor park improvements. The resurfacing of the basketball court and replacing the hoops and basket are also of top priority. Repairs to the court will significantly increase the safety of players utilizing the court. Also, the county should look to its partners for donations of supplies and labor or work with non-profit community groups to organize fundraising events to pay for park improvements. The county should continue to maintain the landscaping and trash removal at the park.

Funding Sources:

Pavilion and picnic area improvements: Southwest Conservation Corp Day Crew Members, Costilla County Road and Bridge Department, Fort Garland Revitalization Committee

Basketball Court repairs: Fort Garland Revitalization Committee, Costilla County Road and Bridge Department

Trail connecting residential community to Safe Routes to School Walking Path: Safe Routes to School

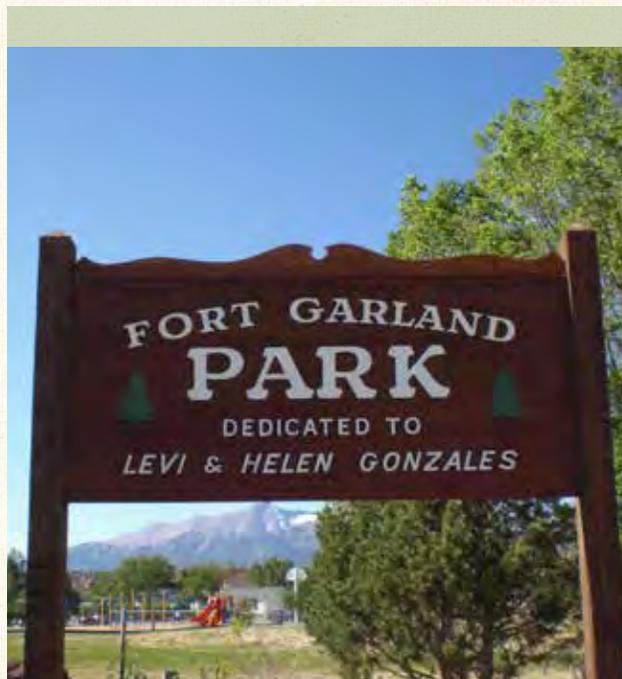
Partnerships: Sierra Grande School District, Fort Garland Revitalization Committee, Southwest Conservation Corps, Blanca/Fort Garland Community Center, Costilla County Road and Bridge Department

TOWN OF SAN LUIS PARK

In cooperation with the Town of San Luis, the county is interested in improving areas of the Town of San Luis Park that are of interest to the community and the Town Council. There have been past efforts to improve landscaping and existing recreational amenities while also developing a community center in the abandoned old school gym located within the park boundaries. (See Proposed/Potential Community Center section at the end of this chapter for more information.) The Town of San Luis Park is owned and managed by the Town. The county is interested in continuing to partner to resurrect a communal space of importance to San Luis and other county residents.

PARK AMENITIES:

- Shaded trees, sparse shrubs and grass
- Parking lot



Fort Garland Park

- Full court concrete basketball court with 2 hoops and 1 net
- 1 play area with 3 rocking horses, 1 swing set with 6 swings
- Sidewalk leading to old gym and play area and basketball court
- 7 park benches
- 2 yellow picnic tables
- 2 trash cans with lids and trash bags
- Flag pole (no flag)
- Old gym
- Bell tower

ISSUES / CONSTRAINTS

Some of the park amenities are deteriorating which makes it difficult for residents to safely use the park. The park benches located in the park have chipped paint and unstable seats or no seats at all. One of the two picnic tables is missing parts and therefore not functional. Small amounts of litter around the perimeter of the park were noticeable. The old gym and bell tower pose the biggest safety concerns since there are broken windows that are partially boarded up. This increases the risk of animals inhabiting the structure and causing deterioration and irreversible damage.

OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

In cooperation with the Town of San Luis, the county can apply for GOCO grants to purchase picnic tables, benches, and upgrade the playground equipment to include a shade structure. Through community partnerships, the town and county can organize park clean-up days and landscaping days to improve the landscape. The town and county can seek donations for seeds, trees, and other vegetative cover to beautify the park. The following amenities should be taken into consideration when applying for grants to beautify and improve the landscape of the park:

- Gazebo
- Outdoor stage for musical events and other performances

Funding Sources: GOCO, donations from non-profit community organizations

Partnerships: Sembrando Semillas, Costilla County, Centennial School

TOWN OF BLANCA NEIGHBORHOOD PARK

The Town of Blanca Neighborhood Park offers passive open space and a limited amount of recreational activities. Within the passive open space, there is a combination of shade trees and grass with four park benches around the perimeter of the park. The other half of the park is designated for a basketball court and playground area. The park serves the community of Blanca and is situated adjacent to an alley off of 7th and Broadway in a residential area next to a local church. The landscaping within the passive open space is well maintained while the playground area and basketball court are in need of minor repairs to ensure safety for park visitors. The park is managed and maintained by the Town of Blanca.

PARK AMENITIES:

- One full size basketball court
- Playground with 9 pieces of equipment including 2 metal slides; monkey bars; merry-go-round, see-saw, and 4 swings.
- 4 park benches (2 shaded)
- 1 covered picnic area with 2 picnic tables
- 3 trash cans with lids

- 5 large oak trees
- Park signage

ISSUES / CONSTRAINTS

Improvements to the basketball court and playground equipment are recommended to ensure health and safety of park visitors. The concrete basketball court is cracked and uneven and is missing nets around the hoops. The metal slides and merry-go-round have rusted hardware and visible bent parts on the slide stairs or graffiti under the slide. The paint on the see-saw is chipped and requires a new paint finish to withstand the sun exposure. Though there were trash cans with trash bags and lids available for visitors to dispose of litter, the trash cans were overflowing and small amounts of litter were present around the perimeter of the park.

OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The park's location, central to the local church and residential community of Blanca, as well as the well-



Blanca Park

maintained passive open space area and picnic areas, provide many opportunities for safe community gatherings. Trail connections could be created as safe routes to other points of interest within the Town of Blanca or the surrounding community of Fort Garland. Investing in minor improvements to make the playground safer and providing a shade structure upon completion of minor improvements could ensure the playground equipment's longevity. Working with community members who have knowledge in concrete slab work to resurface the basketball court will ensure the safety of park visitors.

Funding Sources:

Playground improvements: Shade Structure Grant by the American Academy of Dermatology;

Basketball court resurfacing repairs: Complete an assessment of all cracks before determining which treatment to consider. The costs for repair vary greatly and will therefore affect which grants or fundraising techniques to select. Consider fundraising techniques or community events.

Partnerships:

Town of Blanca, Blanca/Fort Garland Community Center, Blanca Community Church, Sierra Grande School District, Costilla County Road and Bridge Department

OLD HEADSTART PLAYGROUND

Located immediately east of the county office building on Gaspar Street is the Old Headstart Playground. The area is owned and maintained by the county. The area is fenced with well-maintained grass. The playground equipment on site includes six swings, five spring animals, a metal slide and monkey bars. This area is used by children in the community and the county has received comments from parents and grandparents that they like the area because of the well maintained grass field and the fencing provides security that children will not be able to easily wander off into adjacent streets and parking lots. Another comment from residents is that they would like to see the metal playground equipment upgraded because the slides, monkey bars and swings get very hot in the summer months. The county should consider a funding proposal to Great Outdoors Colorado, or other appropriate foundations and agencies to upgrade existing playground equipment and add additional equipment stations, shade pavilions, or picnic tables due to the large amount of unused space within the fenced grass field.

FORT GARLAND ENTRADA VISITORS CENTER

At the southwest corner of the intersection of state highways 160 and 159 is the Fort Garland Entrada Visitors Center. The building and property are owned by the county and managed through a partnership with the Fort Garland



Old Headstart Playground



Fort Garland Entrada Visitors Center

Revitalization Committee. The well maintained building includes men's and woman's restrooms, information on local attractions and events and free coffee and is staffed by volunteers of the Revitalization Committee. The building's grounds include six large flower pots, a wood pavilion with picnic table and an additional table and bench. A very large and attractive sign just off the intersection to the highways advertises the Visitors Center and gives directions to the Fort Garland Museum, the town of San Luis and Taos, New Mexico. The Fort Garland Revitalization Committee has expressed an interest in working with the county to pursue funding for an improved parking lot, additional landscaping in the area and the development of walkways in and around the building and grounds. The Committee has had some preliminary drawings of concepts for these improvements. The Colorado Garden Show, Inc. provides grants for landscaping projects.

PROPOSED PARKS

OUTDOOR FITNESS AND EXERCISE PARK

The Costilla County Public Health Agency is proposing a grant funded park project for an Outdoor Fitness and Exercise Park to be located in the courtyard of the county's Health and Human Services building on Main Street in San Luis. The proposed park would have at least six fitness stations. Each fitness area would be covered by a pavilion.

The proposed idea also includes a picnic table with a pavilion as well as a concrete sidewalk through the middle of the park. Trees and shrubs would be landscaped and artificial turf would be installed in open areas surrounding the fitness equipment, benches and picnic tables. Outdoor lighting will also be installed. This project is being proposed in order to provide more options for people in the community to stay active and healthy.

Due to the local and national trend of increased rates of obesity and its associated health problems, it is important to provide the community with a way to decrease these rates as well as to prevent other diseases and health conditions. This park proposal is unique because it will be the only outdoor fitness center in the county. Currently the southern part of Costilla County does not have a recreation center to utilize and there are very few recreation and outdoor fitness opportunities available in the county.

Currently the residents of southern Costilla County have to travel approximately 20 miles to use the Blanca/Fort Garland Community Center and pay a usage fee for any type of organized and social exercise and fitness activities. The nearest private health clubs and gyms are in Alamosa County which is over 40 miles away for residents in the San Luis area. Creating an outdoor fitness center and exercise park is an opportunity to expand fitness and recreation opportunities to residents by creating a new high quality and user friendly park centrally located in the town of San Luis.



Exercise Park

Costilla County has a diagnosed diabetes rate of 13.3%, compared to Colorado's rate of 5.6% and an obesity rate of 25.4%, compared to Colorado's rate of 20.1%. The percentage of people overweight in Costilla County is 41.0% compared with 36.4% for Colorado. These statistics are from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. The outdoor fitness center and exercise park is an opportunity to incorporate the health and fitness needs of different segments of the population that has a growing need for exercise and activity.

RIO GRANDE GREENBELT PARK

Costilla County has 862 acres of deeded land along the Rio Grande corridor beginning just south of Highway 142 within the Rio Grande Ranchos subdivision. The Greenbelt is characterized by two distinct areas. The northern half has canyons and cliff walls and creates dramatic scenery. The southern half has gentle slopes of grass and shrubs extending to the riverbank. A jeep trail set back from the riverbank parallels the southern section. Rock art can be found within the Greenbelt. Much of the perimeter of the area has been fenced at one time and there are cattle guards at the northern and southern ends of the Greenbelt Area. No other amenities or signage is in the area.

Costilla County would like to explore more formal development of a county park for this area similar to what was developed in the Rito Seco Park. Signage, designated parking areas and picnic tables are potential first steps to improve the experience for the visitor at the park. Further development potential would include designated camping and fishing areas, a boat put-in and restrooms. The development of a hiking trail along the rim of the canyon in the northern half of the Greenbelt is also under consideration.

Community surveys that asked residents to prioritize potential projects and amenities for the proposed park ranked camping facilities as the number one priority for this area. A day use picnic area scored number two. Fishing access was number three followed by hiking trails as number four. Mountain bike trails and raft/kayak access ranked five and six. Other comments included cleaning and rehabilitating the area around the old rock dam and removing the old diversion structure as it has become a magnet for graffiti and littering.

In addition to developing the current 862-acres as a county park, the county would like to explore acquiring additional subdivision parcels adjacent to the current greenbelt to add acres of publicly accessible space in the area. The county is also interested in acquiring, or working with partners to preserve parcels of historical significance such as the de Vargas crossing site, areas with prominent rock art and other areas of archeological significance along the Rio Grande corridor. The county is also interested in pursuing acquisition, or securing a public easement for a proper boat/raft take-out in the box canyon area just north of the New Mexico state line. The county also has deeded open space areas on the north and south boundaries of the Rio Grande River Ranches subdivision just north of the Lobato Bridge. This subdivision contains ¼-acre lots and the county would like to pursue acquisition of lots adjacent to the open space to increase publicly accessible land in this area. Appendix 4 lists parcels numbers adjacent to county greenbelt space.





Stabilization Reservoir

STABILIZATION RESERVOIR

The stabilization reservoir, fed by Culebra Canal, is located 4 miles southwest of San Luis on Hwy 159. It's a popular area for trout fishing. The park is maintained by the County Road and Bridge Department and leased by the CO Division of Parks and Wildlife from adjacent owners. It's a perfect example of collaborative partnerships offering recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.

PARK AMENITIES:

- Accessible shore for fishing
- 1 M/W restroom
- Gravel roads to access various points around the reservoir
- 9 picnic tables
- Trash can (seasonal)

ISSUES / CONSTRAINTS

There are a few informal fire pits with litter. Since there are often no trash receptacles, the area has large amounts of litter around the exterior. The trash receptacles and restrooms are occasionally maintained by the county, but the area is heavily used and litter can accumulate in the area. The county should create a more formal maintenance schedule. It's unclear if overnight recreational uses are allowed. The lack of formal fire pits, trash cans, lighting, and signage are of concern.

OPPORTUNITIES & RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop informational signage for visitors to understand acceptable recreational uses. There is a great potential for

trails traversing the reservoir boundaries to promote more hiking and less informal driving trails caused by vehicular traffic. Apply for grants to repair or replace picnic tables. Use volunteer work by the Southwest Conservation Corps Community Crews to create formal fire pits. The county should place this location on a routine maintenance schedule for trash and restroom maintenance.

Funding Sources:

Informational signage and repair picnic tables: Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area, CO Division of Parks and Wildlife

Trails development: National Park Service (complete trail design); American Trails Association

Create fire pits: Southwest Conservation Corps

Partnerships:

National Park Service, Costilla County, Southwest Conservation Corps, Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area, CO Division of Parks and Wildlife, Sanchez Ditch and Reservoir Company

COSTILLA COUNTY RESERVOIRS - SMITH, SANCHEZ, AND MOUNTAIN HOME RESERVOIRS

SMITH RESERVOIR

Costilla County is fortunate to have a unique partnership with the CO Parks and Wildlife Division to lease and manage three reservoirs located in northern and southern Costilla County. The Smith Reservoir is located 5 miles outside of Blanca, off of Hwy 160 south on County Road 12. The location offers great views of the Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range and provides excellent trout fishing. The two boat ramps and the rules prohibiting waterskiing make this a perfect spot for fisherman. Public access is prohibited from February 15 through July 15 on the north and east shore areas. Fishing is prohibited from November 1 through the last day of waterfowl season except within 200 yards of the dam. Vehicles are prohibited within 50 feet of the water. Motorized and non-motorized boats are allowed as well as hunting and fishing.

AMENITIES:

- 2 Boat Ramps
- Primitive Campsites

- Dump station
- 1 M/W Restroom
- Primitive roads around reservoir

ISSUES / CONSTRAINTS

This reservoir's close proximity to Hwy. 160 makes it a popular destination for local trout fisherman. However, signage after the turn-off from Hwy. 160, make it difficult for visitors to locate. Signage within the reservoir doesn't clearly state the seasonal restrictions for public access and vehicle accessibility along the shores of the reservoir. Camping is allowed but there is no clear guidance on where the public can camp.

OPPORTUNITIES & RECOMMENDATIONS

With the potential for waterfowl viewing areas for bird enthusiasts when fishing is prohibited, the county can work with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to obtain guidance on developing viewing docks or identifying access points for the best viewing areas. The county can work in collaboration with the Division of Parks and Wildlife and/or Southwest Conservation Corps to identify primitive campsites to reduce resource damage and increase overnight recreational amenities. The Division of Parks and Wildlife can provide clearer guidance on camping, fishing, and seasonal restrictions in more visible areas to avoid illegal activity.



Smith Reservoir

Funding Sources:

Signage: CO Division of Parks and Wildlife;

Campgrounds: CO Division of Parks and Wildlife, Southwest Conservation Corps

Partnerships:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, CO Division of Parks and Wildlife, Southwest Conservation Corps, Costilla County

SANCHEZ RESERVOIR

Sanchez reservoir is located a few miles south and east of San Luis. The reservoir is ideal for pike, perch, and walleye as well as boating, hiking, and camping, and wildlife viewing. All boats are allowed but waterskiing and bowfishing are prohibited. Campsites are allowed east of the boat ramp in designated areas and prohibited in the boat ramp parking area.

AMENITIES:

- Boat ramp
- Primitive campsites
- M/W restroom

ISSUES / CONSTRAINTS

There is no clear signage detailing restrictions and recreational opportunities. There are trails within the reservoir boundaries but there is no signage detailing length and use restrictions.

OPPORTUNITIES & RECOMMENDATIONS

Work with the Division of Parks and Wildlife to update signage to include restrictions and all recreational opportunities. Continue to maintain restroom facilities to reduce litter and unsanitary conditions.

Funding Sources:

CO Division of Parks and Wildlife

Partnerships:

CO Division of Parks and Wildlife, Costilla County



Sanchez Reservoir

MOUNTAIN HOME RESERVOIR

AMENITIES:

- Boat ramp
- M/W restroom
- Primitive campsites

ISSUES / CONSTRAINTS

There is one directional sign to the reservoir which is misleading. There is no additional signage once you get into the Sangre de Cristo Ranches Subdivision to locate the entrance of the reservoir. There is no clear signage for recreational uses or clear locations of legal campgrounds.

OPPORTUNITIES & RECOMMENDATIONS

Work with the Division of Parks and Wildlife to update signage to include restrictions and all recreational opportunities. Work with the Southwest Conservation Corps Community Crews to disassemble illegal campsites and develop safe primitive campgrounds. Continue to maintain restroom facilities to reduce litter and unsanitary conditions.

Funding Sources:

CO Division of Parks and Wildlife

Partnerships:

CO Division of Parks and Wildlife, Costilla County, Southwest Conservation Corps

BLANCA/FORT GARLAND COMMUNITY CENTER

The only community center with indoor recreational facilities is located just west of Fort Garland on State Highway 160. The Blanca/Fort Garland Community Center offers indoor courts and indoor pool plus classrooms and a library. Located adjacent to the Sierra Grande School District, the community center serves as a safe meeting place for students and their families. The center offers a few classes for pottery making, dance, and other classes depending on available instructors. Since it has affordable meeting room rentals, the community also utilizes this facility for private events. Its accessible by the Safe Routes to School trail that connects the community of Fort Garland to the school and community center.

AMENITIES:

- Indoor pool
- Indoor Basketball court
- Recreational room with pool table
- Library
- Classrooms
- Weight Room

OPPORTUNITIES & RECOMMENDATIONS

With the assistance of community partnerships, the center can expand its schedule of fitness classes to provide indoor cardiovascular exercise classes for students and adults at a low rate for residents. Upgrading the weight room to include a variety of workout equipment could increase the visitation and provide a more comfortable atmosphere for a variety of fitness levels. The community center can also work in collaboration with Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve to organize after school educational programs offered at the center for students who participate in the center's after school program. The community center could also invest in marketing and advertisement to promote recreational opportunities at the center. The

center could also expand its class schedule to include more heritage based art classes.

Funding Sources:

Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area, GOCO

Partnerships:

Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, Fort Garland Revitalization Committee, Sierra Grande School District, Division of Parks and Wildlife, Costilla County

CULEBRA COMMUNITY RECREATION CENTER

The recommendations listed below include and expand on past efforts identified by the Culebra Community Recreation Center, Inc. in 2002.

Reintroduce a Service Plan to construct, operate, and maintain a community recreation center for the southern communities of Costilla County utilizing the old gym and other open spaces within the Town of San Luis Park. This facility can consist of a gym, indoor swimming pool, weight room, exercise area, indoor track, kitchen, computer room, lobby, meeting rooms, related public and support facilities (offices, restrooms, storage rooms, maintenance facility rooms, etc.). This type of facility could support organized sports, fitness classes, and educational classes for all ages. This facility could provide connections to other areas of interest through safe sidewalks and a focus on connections to Sanchez Reservoir or the Greenbelt Area. Funding for the overall construction and operation of the center should be a decision made by tax payers, community members and the Town Council of San Luis.

The following summary for initial operations has been taken from the 2002 Culebra Community Recreation Center Inc. report submitted to the Board of County Commissioners. Notice that the construction of the facility will occur in phases:

- Land survey, soil tests, permits
- Engineering/Architectural Design Services
- Construction

Other fees to consider:

- Administrative fees
- Legal fees
- Schematic design fees



Blanca/Fort Garland Community Center

Expenditures to operate and maintain facility:

- Director
- Maintenance Employees
- Part-time staff (instructors, etc.)
- Building maintenance/supplies
- Organizing new activities, programs
- Maintaining pool/supplies
- Office expenses
- Utilities
- Security
- Insurance
- Legal fees
- Administrative (bookkeeping, payroll, etc.)

Funding Sources:

GOCO, El Pomar Foundation, Gates Foundation, Boettcher Foundation

The county and the town should come to an agreement on how to best use resources to construct, operate and maintain the facility.

Partnerships:

Centennial School District, Costilla County, Town of San Luis, Costilla County Economic Development Council



Trails

TRAIL INVENTORY AND CONDITION

Costilla County has only a few existing publicly accessible trails for residents and visitors to enjoy. These trails vary from one single track hiking trail within a greenbelt area to a few paved and graveled trails connecting communities to public spaces for work, play, and spiritual reflection.

In 2011 a trails, recreation and open space survey was distributed to county residents at various meetings, public events and public buildings and a comment card was sent to all box holders. This community survey process and survey questions identified the project ideas described in the master plan. Extending the Sangre de Cristo Greenbelt Trail and Fort Garland Safe Routes to School Trail were identified as the two highest community priorities for trail projects

SANGRE DE CRISTO GREENBELT TRAIL:

Costilla County has one developed hiking trail in the county, the Sangre de Cristo Greenbelt Trail. This trail is located in the Greenbelt Open Space within the Sangre de Cristo Ranches subdivision. The trail is a little less than three miles long. Its northern terminus is along Balleroy Road about .75 miles east of Battersea Road and the southern terminus is a short distance south and east of the dead end of Hidalgo Road. It is unknown exactly when this trail was constructed though it appears to have been built sometime in the late 1970s, or early 1980s. There are two picnic benches at the Balleroy Road trailhead that are the same style as benches found in Rito Seco Park and at Stabilization Reservoir. There is no directional or interpretive signage at either trailhead.

The Sangre de Cristo Greenbelt trail received maintenance work from a Southwest Community Corps crew in 2006 along the northern half of the trail and from a Southwest Conservation Corps camping crew along the southern half of the trail in 2011. The Conservation Corps camping crew worked at the project site from October 17-25, 2011 and

camped at Rito Seco Park during the length of the project. The crew of nine consisted of three crew leaders and six crew members. A total of 660 project hours were worked on improving and maintaining the trail and cleaning up areas of Rito Seco Park. The crew constructed 78' of new trail and maintained 4,900' of existing trail. Ten rock steps were installed along the trail while seven switchbacks were maintained and an additional switchback was installed. Seven rock cairns were built to better identify the direction of the trail. Twelve bags of trash were collected from the park and trail area.



Stations of the Cross Trail (© Sarah Parmar)

Due to these maintenance activities, the Sangre de Cristo Greenbelt trail is in good condition and easy to follow in most areas. The trail has numerous switchbacks and rock steps in several places. About halfway along the trail, the trail it gets a little difficult to follow along a grassy ridge top where the faint traces of a road have been established likely to access firewood.

STATIONS OF THE CROSS SHRINE TRAIL:

There are two other public use trails in the county. The Stations of the Cross Shrine trail is a 1.4 mile trail starting near the intersection of Main Street and Colorado Highway 142 in San Luis. The Sangre de Cristo Parish Church, built in 1886, was instrumental in creating San Luis' main visitor attraction, the Stations of the Cross Shrine, as part of its centennial celebration in 1986.

The Stations of the Cross Shrine was conceived under the leadership of Father Patrick Valdez of the Sangre de Cristo Parish. The trail leads up to the Shrine along the mesa known as "La Mesa de la Piedad y de la Misericordia," or The Hill of Piety and Mercy. The Stations of the Cross are a series of graphic meditations of the last hours of Christ's life – His judgment, suffering and death. Included is the "Resurrection", the 15th Station. The creation of local

sculpture, Huberto Maestas, the Shrine consists of 2/3 life-size bronze sculptures.

"La Capilla de Todos Los Santos," The Chapel of All Saints, was built to compliment the Stations. The Capilla is a place for worship and a beautiful reflection of religious architecture and tradition. The trail and adjacent grounds are maintained by the Sangre de Cristo parish and the local Knights of Columbus. The trail and capilla are visited frequently by state, national, and international visitors. The trail and capilla are an example of the rich heritage that is preserved in the county.

FORT GARLAND SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL WALKING PATH:

The Fort Garland Safe Routes to School Walking Path is a one-mile paved path that runs parallel to Highway 160 and connects the town of Fort Garland to the Blanca/Fort Garland Community Center and to the Sierra Grande School. It was constructed in 2003 through a collaboration with the Costilla County Commissioner's Office, the Blanca/Fort Garland Community Center and the Colorado Department of Transportation. The trail is great example of linking local communities to public spaces such as community centers and schools.



Sangre de Cristo Greenbelt Trail

RECOMMENDATIONS AND STRATEGIES

PROPOSED PROJECT: ESTABLISHING THE RITO SECO PARK TRAIL SYSTEM

Rito Seco Park is located within the Sangre de Cristo Ranches subdivision. The road to access Rito Seco Park crosses the Rito Seco at the east end of the park just past the established campsites and picnic areas. Rito Seco Park does not have an official established trail system but a series of user-created trails that lead the user around various beaver ponds and access to the creek, but to no specific destination points. The current trail system east of the park has no established uses but it appears that some users access it for firewood cutting, hunting and recreational ATV use. You can access these trails upon crossing the creek. The trail branches to the north and south soon after the creek. The north branch of the trail passes old cabin ruins and generally follows the route of the Rito Seco. Seeps, springs and beaver dams are also prevalent within the area. This entire area is within the Sangre de Cristo Ranches Greenbelt.

Recommendation: Although the terrain is steep and rugged in places, the trail can be extended to the Battenburg Meadows area staying on Greenbelt property the entire way.

Strategies: The County could utilize the expertise of the Southwest Conservation Corps Los Valles District and Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve to identify trail maintenance needs and lay out a trail system that protects natural resources and considers the historical uses of the spurs along the trails. Mapping technologies will be used when conducting field surveys and will be distributed to the county for use in applying for funding or recruiting volunteer trail groups.

Total Mileage of Proposed Project: 2.0 miles

Partnerships: Costilla County, SCC Los Valles District, Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve

Funding Sources: American Trails Association, GOCO, IMBA

PROPOSED PROJECT: GREENBELT TRAIL EXTENSION TO RITO SECO PARK

With the close proximity of portions of the Greenbelt Trail to Rito Seco Park, the county has identified additional trail linkages to connect the trail to the park. This project would

provide additional hiking opportunities for campers at the park or hikers on the greenbelt trail.

Recommendation: Extending the existing Sangre de Cristo Greenbelt Trail from its southern terminus to Rito Seco Park would provide additional recreational opportunities. It appears as though this connection may have once existed, however, property belonging to the Battle Mountain Gold mine currently sits between the southern terminus of the trail and the park.

Strategies: The opportunity exists for a trail to follow the ridge top to the east and north of the mine property and eventually drop down into the park area. The County should consult with the County Assessor's Office to identify property boundaries and to discuss the possible trail that has been identified. Eventually, the County would want to consult with the National Park Service and SCC to determine sustainable trail practices and routes to the park.

Total Mileage of Proposed Project: 1.9 miles

Partnerships: Costilla County, National Park Service, SCC

Funding Sources: American Trails Association, IMBA, GOCO

PROPOSED PROJECT: DEVELOP THE SANGRE DE CRISTO GREENBELT TRAIL LOOP

Being one of only two publicly accessible greenbelt areas in the county, the Sangre de Cristo Greenbelt has the potential to expand its recreational opportunities. The Greenbelt Area currently has one single track trail that can be accessed at two different locations but lacks adequate signage outlining visitor information. To increase use by county residents and promote the site to visitors, the County has identified recommendations and strategies to design a trail that circumnavigates the entire Sangre de Cristo Greenbelt Area. To increase the area's usability with the development of the Trail Loop, the County will also consider proper signage and trail advocacy strategies.

Recommendation: The idea is to take the existing linear trail and create a loop trail and provide multiple access points at various locations for user accessibility while also adding variety to the visitor's experience. The Greenbelt is essentially a circle shaped area encompassing 3,968-acres. A trail could, depending on the exact topography of the area, follow the Greenbelt northeast out of Rito Seco Park, to access the northern most part of the area and then

connect the trail to the southern portions of the Greenbelt at Balleroy Road trailhead.

Strategies: Due to the varying topography in the area, a reconnaissance survey will need to be completed to identify access points and trail issues and outline a trail layout.

Total Mileage of Proposed Project: 12.0 miles

Partnerships: BLM, Rio Grande Natural Area Commission, NPS, SCC, Costilla County

Funding Sources: American Trails Association, IMBA, GOCO





Fort Garland Safe Route to School

PROPOSED PROJECT: ESTABLISH THE RIO GRANDE GREENBELT RECREATION AREA

Costilla County was deeded an 862-acre parcel of greenbelt space within the Rio Grande Ranchos subdivision. The Rio Grande Greenbelt extends north to south along the river corridor. The northern section starts just a little south of Highway 142 and is characterized by canyon walls which extend to the site of the old rock dam. South of the old dam the landscape flattens-out and the area is characterized by grasses and shrubs that lead to the riverbank. The southern terminus of the Greenbelt area is at La Jara Trail Road. There is a cattle guard on the north side of La Jara Trail Road that leads into the Greenbelt property. A two-track trail heads north from the cattle guard to the old dam site.

Recommendations: The greenbelt area along the Rio Grande provides multiple opportunities to develop a trail and recreational amenities to provide county residents and visitors safe river recreational opportunities – fishing, camping, hiking, and possibly boating. Examining the current condition and the historical uses of the two track trail that leads to the old dam site will give the county a better idea of how to expand and/or improve the trail. The trail direction needs to be examined closer as it gets faint as it climbs to the canyon rim. The trail has the potential to be extended to follow the canyon rim to the north end of the Greenbelt property where a second cattle guard leads into the Greenbelt property from Rio Grande Road. The area just past the cattle guard is also well suited for a potential parking area and the establishment of an overnight camping and a day use picnic area.

Strategies: Because this area is within the Rio Grande Natural Area which is led by a commission of local residents and resource experts to establish a management plan, the County should work closely to ensure any

plans and designs are compatible with the Commission’s recommendations. The County should use the Bureau of Land Management to identify recreational amenities and compatible uses within the Greenbelt Area that complement the recreational resources on the west side of the river. The County should also consult with the National Park Service and SCC to discuss trail layout and sustainable designs for trail extensions or trail improvements.

Total Mileage of Proposed Project: 4.0 miles

Partnerships: BLM, Rio Grande Natural Area Commission, NPS, SCC, Costilla County

Funding Sources: American Trails Association, IMBA, GOCO

PROPOSED PROJECT: EXTENDING THE FORT GARLAND SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL WALKING PATH

The possibility has been proposed to extend the Safe Routes to School Walking Path from Fort Garland to Blanca and from Fort Garland to the Veterans Park. The trail extension would provide additional communities the ability to use a safe walking path to access various points of interest within the Fort Garland-Blanca Area including walking to school, accessing the Veterans Park and the Blanca/Fort Garland Community Center.

Recommendation: Extend the existing Fort Garland walking path west to the town of Blanca (an approximate 3 mile extension) and east to the Veteran’s Park (approximately .8 miles).

Strategies: The Safe Routes to School grant program is the best funding source to apply for assistance in extending the walking path. The County, the Town of Blanca and the Fort Garland Revitalization Committee could work together to identify the best location for the route to extend to in the Town of Blanca and the best directional route to get to the Veterans Park.

Total Mileage of Proposed Project: 3.8 miles

Partnerships: Costilla County, Town of Fort Garland and Blanca Revitalization Committee, Sierra Grande School District, The Blanca/Fort Garland Community Center.

Funding Sources: National Center for Safe Routes to School; CDOT Transportation, Planning Regions

PROPOSED PROJECT: SAN LUIS HERITAGE WALKING TOUR

Another proposed project, though not a trail in the traditional sense, is the creation of a walking tour of the town of San Luis' historic and cultural sites. The tour is a response to the community's desire to promote its heritage resources. In August 2011, the Costilla County Economic Development Council in collaboration with the National Park Service designed a walking tour that takes into account areas of high significant value within the town of San Luis while also limiting access to culturally sensitive areas. Locations of signage and stopping points along the walking tour will emphasize points of interest while also respecting private property, and limiting access to culturally sensitive areas.

A Main Street walking tour of San Luis could include the following stops:

Sangre de Cristo Parish Church:

Although Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Conejos is said to be the first Catholic Church in Colorado, built in 1856, oral accounts state that places of worship were first constructed in Costilla County in the early 1850s. Early accounts state that the first church was located 200 yards



Sangre de Cristo Parish Church, San Luis



San Luis Heritage Tours

east of the current church. The first church likely had a flat roof, deeply indented entryway and massive buttresses. By the 1880s the first church in San Luis was in disrepair. In 1886 the current structure was completed. Adobe masons laid 16-inch long adobe blocks to form a 27-foot wide nave. Under the direction of Father Garcia from 1913-1917 transepts, stucco, ornate wooden lattices, impressive central and side altars and plaster statues were added to give the church its contemporary look.

Costilla County Courthouse:

The Costilla County Courthouse is a rare example of Territorial Style architecture and it is one of only two intact adobe courthouses in Colorado. Territorial architecture can generally be described as a mix between Pueblo and Victorian building styles. As the name suggests, it was developed in the Old West's territorial pre-statehood days, when this vast region was populated by European and American settlers who brought with them Victorian two and three story building traditions, but often found pueblo building techniques to be more practical. The methods and materials used to build the courthouse are a unique blend of Anglo-European masonry and the traditional adobe materials used by the area's Hispano settlers. This combination resulted in the production of smaller than usual adobe blocks laid up in a common bond brick pattern. The Courthouse was first built in 1883 with a series of additions and renovations as depicted on the interpretive sign. After a serious flood and continuing drainage issues, the building was condemned in 2002. The Costilla County Commissioners received a \$10,000 assessment grant from the Colorado Historical Society and from then on the County Commissioners dedicated significant time and resources to restore the building with substantial



R&R Market

additional funding provided by the Colorado Historical Society. Many local residents view the courthouse as the heart and soul of the town and integral to the character of San Luis' Main Street. Rehabilitation of the building was complete in 2008.

San Luis People's Ditch:

The San Luis People's Ditch is the first adjudicated water right in Colorado. The waterways or ditches that irrigate the local farms and ranches are called acequias, an Arabic term meaning "the water conduit." There are currently 64 acequias in the local area. This Spanish/Mexican tradition originated during the Moors' occupation of Spain which occurred between 710-1490. Acequias are man-made earthen channels, or concrete lined ditches, which carry snow runoff and river water to distant agricultural fields. Acequias follow the contours of the land and utilize gravity to aid in irrigation. In many villages, both past and present, the acequia association with its commission and mayordomo constitute the only regulatory body or government of any sort. Each landowner along an acequia is called a parciante and the allocation and distribution of irrigated water among the parciantes is governed by an acequia commission including one person who is selected as steward, or mayordomo, of the ditch. The mayordomo is in charge of water allocation and distribution and directs all work performed on the ditch and its structures. Everyone who irrigates with the system has an obligation to help maintain the ditch. The annual

spring limpieza or ditch cleaning is when all the parciantes gather to clear accumulated silt and other debris from the temporarily dried ditch to prepare the ditch for the upcoming irrigation season.

La Vega:

La Vega is the only Mexican-Era land grant commons in Colorado.

Although land grants in New Mexico include commons lands utilized in a traditional manner, those tracts were established during the period of Mexican jurisdiction. By contrast La Vega was established after the US took possession of the area from Mexico. Continuing to serve its original purpose of communal grazing, La Vega was designated by an 1863 covenant for villagers living in the Culebra Basin. Allocated for use by residents of seven villages, the commons includes 633-acres and is maintained and managed by local descendants that still use the pasture for grazing. A 1916 court case formally delineated the extent of La Vega.

Huberto Maestas' Sculpture Studio:

Huberto Maestas is a sculptor living in San Luis, Colorado. His notable works include the life-sized Stations of the Cross located in San Luis, Colorado, miniatures of which are in the Vatican collection, the statue of Padre Martinez in Taos, New Mexico and the statue of Jack Dempsey in Manassa, Colorado. Huberto's Sculpture Studio specializes

in high quality limited edition bronze works. Diversified in his work albeit sculpting the human form, wildlife, or inanimate objects, Maestas couples his artistic vision with technical skill. His works of art in bronze range from small table top pieces to public monuments.

R&R Market:

The R&R Market is the oldest continuously operating store in Colorado, first established in 1857. The store was founded by Dario Gallegos and it has been operated by members of the same family ever since. Dario would get his supplies from Saint Louis, Missouri, a nine month trip.

Recommendation: A self-guided walking tour will be complimented with interpretive signage and brochures for visitors to use to learn more about these points of interest. The brochures will emphasize rules to consider when participating in the tour such as respect private property, stay on designated walkways, etiquette on photography. The brochure will also include a listing of local accommodations – lodging, restaurants, camping, stores, gas stations, and other recreational opportunities in the county.

Strategy: Costilla County, the Costilla County Economic Development Council, and the National Park Service will work in partnership to develop a self-guided walking tour interpretive media product such as a pamphlet, booklet, or brochure for use by the visitor on the tour. Occasional paid guided tours could be offered by docents trained by the National Park Service. The Sangre de Cristo Heritage Center will make the brochures available and be the informational center for questions on the tour.

Several other trails in Costilla County have been proposed in the Great San Luis Valley Trails and Recreation Master Plan from 1996. Very few details of these proposed trails were presented in the 1996 Master Plan and most of these trails travel through private property. However, since the time was taken in 1996 to catalogue and include these trail ideas in the Great San Luis Valley Trails and Recreation Master Plan, it is hoped that we can learn more about these trail opportunities, who are the proponents of each trail and evaluate the likelihood of developing these trails.

Partnerships: NPS, Costilla County, Costilla County Economic Development Council

Funding Source: NPS, Sangre de Cristo National Heritage Area, and State Historical Funds.

Listed below are some of the highlights of proposed trails in Costilla County from the 1996 Master Plan.

Old Spanish Trail - The North Branch of the Old Spanish Trail proceeded due north from Santa Fe, New Mexico into Colorado's San Luis Valley and crossed west over Cochetopa Pass to follow the Gunnison and Colorado rivers to meet the Southern Branch of the Old Spanish Trail near Green River. The East Fork of the North Branch traverses the east side of the San Luis Valley, east of Wild Horse Mesa, along Sanchez Reservoir, through the towns of San Luis and Blanca in Costilla County, and along the Great Sand Dunes National Park, north to Crestone, before turning west across the valley.

Smith Trail - is a proposed connection from the town of Blanca to Smith Reservoir following county roads.

Trinchera Trail - is a proposed trail that would follow Trinchera Creek from Smith Reservoir to the Alamosa Wildlife Refuge.

West Indian Creek Interpretative Loop - is listed in the 1996 Master Plan, but with no other information available about the trail project

Rattlesnake Canyon Loop Trail - is listed in the 1996 Master Plan, but with no other information available about the trail project

American Gulch Trail - is listed in the 1996 Master Plan, but with no other information available about the trail project

Chama Pilgrim Loop Trail – a roadside walk from the church in Chama to the Stations of the Cross Shrine in San Luis

San Francisco Pilgrim Loop Trail – a roadside walk from the church in San Francisco to the Stations of the Cross Shrine in San Luis

San Pedro Mesa Trail – is listed in the 1996 Master Plan, but with no other information available about the trail project

Costilla Creek Trail – is listed in the 1996 Master Plan, but with no other information available about the trail project

Sangre de Cristo Trail – is a proposed trail that would connect Mountain Home Reservoir and Smith Reservoir.

