

New twists may be in Fountain Creek's future

August 21, 2008

Curves could slow water, boost health, report says

By R. SCOTT RAPPOLD

THE GAZETTE

Fountain Creek just needs to work on its curves.

That's one of the recommendations of the Fountain Creek Master Plan, nearly half completed. Wednesday, Carol Baker, watershed planning manager for Colorado Springs Utilities, gave the city's Utilities Board an update on the plan.

"It's curvy. When the water goes through a curvy path it slows down," said Baker, showing a photo of a healthy stretch of the creek. "When it slows down, there's less erosion that goes on. There's less contamination."

The problem is that only a third of the 44-mile stretch between Colorado Springs and Pueblo is what planners consider "healthy."

The master plan is a joint project between Colorado Springs Utilities and the Lower Arkansas Valley Water Conservancy District, which are splitting the \$600,000 cost. Downstream communities have long complained about flooding and poor water quality on Fountain Creek, and officials here sought to give them a greater voice in charting the creek's future. Colorado Springs Utilities has been the target of the anger in Pueblo County because of a series of sewage spills into Fountain Creek.

The Fountain Creek Vision Task Force, a group of 28 entities from across the region, is looking at many of the same issues.

Neither project carries the weight of the Army Corps of Engineers, the official flood control agency. The Corps has decided against a dam on Fountain Creek, but it will assist in smaller projects identified by the master plan and the task force.

Over the years, Fountain Creek has been straightened, causing water to flow faster, which causes the banks to erode and more sediment to wash downstream. These problems led to flooding along the creek in 1999 in Teller, El Paso and Pueblo counties, which caused millions of dollars in damages to buildings and property.

Erosion problems persist, and whole sections of stream bank frequently crumble away during rainstorms - recent rains caused a section of the Fountain Creek Trail, north of U.S. 85/87, to collapse into the creek.

An engineering firm conducted landowner surveys, field work and overhead flights, then identified about 28 miles of creek where work is needed, including adding curves and bends, establishing wetlands and "minidams" to create detention ponds and stabilizing collapsing stretches of stream bank with trees and rocks.

Jay Winner, general manager of the water conservancy district, called the plan the "holistic approach" to Fountain Creek.

"We're looking at it by the way Mother Nature would look at a river like that, as opposed to a bunch of engineers, who would dump a bunch of cement and (artificial rock barrier) riprap," Winner said.

Planners have identified two spots where they hope to begin demonstration projects, to educate people and get them involved in solutions for the creek. One is in Pueblo County, in Pueblo Springs Ranch, and the other is across Interstate 25 from the World Arena in Colorado Springs.

The planners have also helped establish the Fountain Creek Foundation, a nonprofit group that hopes to build an interpretive center on the creek, near the Piñon exit off Interstate 25 north of Pueblo. Baker said the foundation has gotten a commitment for a donation of land, worth \$1 million, at the site.

Many details of the master plan need to be hammered out, including the cost of the work on the creek and who will pay for it. Since much of the creekside land is privately owned, assistance would have to be made available for property owners, Baker said.

"We have another 14 months we're going to be working on this to get financial support to continue this. We see that there's a lot of excitement from a lot of entities because the creek is what connects our communities. And there's a lot of people that would like to make it an amenity," Baker said.

Contact the writer: 476-1605 or srappold@gazette.com