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Sen. Salazar applauds Fountain Creek discussion

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The senator tells the Vision Task Force to keep working toward a common solution.

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COLORADO SPRINGS - U.S. Sen. Ken Salazar had high praise for the Fountain Creek Vision Task Force and voiced his support for Colorado Springs' stormwater enterprise Thursday.

"I think it is a testament to these communities working together," Salazar said, referring to the diverse membership of the task force. "People are working together, and I find that the most positive thing the group has accomplished. I have all the confidence in the world that if you continue the way you have, you will be successful."

Two years ago, Salazar launched what he called the Fountain Creek Crown Jewel Project. Thursday he checked in with the task force, which has been the driving force toward that goal.

"We've turned our backs on our rivers for too many years," Salazar said.

Salazar applauded the task force for moving toward a model adopted on the Urban Drainage District and the Greenway Foundation that turned an open sewer into an amenity for Denver and its suburbs after the 1965 flood. What's happening now on Fountain Creek parallels that effort, Salazar said. The task force is taking steps toward a two-county authority and a Fountain Creek Foundation formed earlier this year.

There were also reports at Thursday's meeting of the task force of some other efforts by the Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Geological Survey and a partnership between Colorado Springs and the Lower Arkansas Valley Water Conservancy District that is identifying areas that need to be fixed on Fountain Creek.

The task force, which formed two years ago, has tried to sew those various efforts together and is getting close, said El Paso County Commissioner Sallie Clark, who was instrumental in setting up the task force.

"We have a great plan and the challenge now is to find the funding," Clark said. "We're at that junction where we have to move forward with the two counties."

Those sentiments were echoed by Pueblo County Commissioner Jeff Chostner.

"We're coming to the completion of the studies and looking at how to implement those ideas," Chostner said.

Salazar said the plans will take time. "It's not easy. It's not going to take a week. It's not going to take a year. This is the type of project that takes money and years to complete," Salazar said. "We're at 2008. In 2020, we'll look back at what people have done on the creek as a remarkable

achievement.”

Colorado Springs Mayor Lionel Rivera told Salazar the community’s leaders are committed to fighting a citizen’s initiative on the November ballot that would gut a stormwater enterprise that annually funds \$16 million on improvements to drainage into Fountain Creek. The initiative was sponsored by state Rep. Doug Bruce, the author of the Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights.

“I am confident the community will not support that initiative,” Rivera said. “We have an obligation to protect Fountain Creek and an obligation to the communities’ downstream.”

Salazar said the stormwater enterprise was a big step forward and called Bruce’s initiative “misguided.”

Lower Ark General Manager Jay Winner, a central figure in the joint Fountain Creek Master Plan project with Colorado Springs and a member of the task force, recounted a meeting with Salazar last April.

“I got out and felt like I’d been chewed on for 45 minutes by a U.S. senator,” Winner said.

Salazar said it had merely been a bad day, but he was sincere in his insistence on moving quickly toward a solution on Fountain Creek.

“I gave him a hug the next day,” Salazar quipped.

In a more serious mode, Winner said Fountain Creek has drawn the communities that share it closer together.

“Fountain Creek is generating a lot of support - support people never thought was possible,” Winner said.

Salazar agreed.

“This transcends the differences between Colorado Springs and Pueblo,” Salazar said.