

## Fountain Creek board's solution almost ready

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THE GAZETTE

FOUNTAIN • For nearly two years, elected officials, environmentalists, farmers and water suppliers from El Paso and Pueblo counties - who have a long history of divergent interests - have been gathering monthly to talk about Fountain Creek.

No fist fights have broken out, and the Fountain Creek Vision Task Force is ready to present its plan for solving flooding, erosion and water quality problems on the creek between Colorado Springs and Pueblo.

The group, which formed in October 2006, reviewed its first draft Friday. Although the recommendations are many, the chief mantra of the plan is cooperation.

The task force proposes an agreement between the two counties to form the Fountain Creek Watershed District, a state-authorized board to manage the creek and its flood plain.

Voters of both counties would have to approve the authority, and the probable tax increase that would be required to fund it, a fact recognized by the task force, which stressed unity among the communities.

"All of us need to come out of this holding hands," said task force member Jeff Chostner, a Pueblo County commissioner.

The intergovernmental agreement to form the district, as presented Friday, takes pains to maintain equality between upstream and downstream interests, with a board of directors made up of both, and a supermajority of votes required to pass measures.

"Folks in El Paso County recognize this needs to be an equal setting. We set this up to be as balanced as we can," Chostner said.

Balance and cooperation haven't been the hallmarks of Fountain Creek's competing interests. Pueblo officials blame flooding and erosion of the creek on runoff from Colorado Springs, and Colorado Springs Utilities' plan to pipe water up from Pueblo Reservoir and send more effluent downstream, known as the Southern Delivery System, has been less than popular for people who live downstream.

A watershed district could raise money through taxes, grants and other contributions, implement improvements to the creek and help creekside property owners do the same. Its main focus would be flood control, but it would also work on projects to improve water quality, combat erosion and build creek-side parks and trails.

The proposed agreement does not say how a tax proposal would be presented, and task force members were vague about the prospect.

Pueblo and El Paso county officials are investigating whether the district would have a role in approving development projects. Its jurisdiction would be Fountain Creek and its 100-year flood plain, in the stretch south of Fountain and north of Pueblo.

Thursday, members of the task force's Consensus Committee presented their concept to U.S. Sen. Ken Salazar.

"When I look at who the members of the Consensus Committee are, I think it is a testament to the communities along the fountain working together," said Salazar, a former water attorney who has followed the Fountain Creek issues.

The task force plans to present the strategic plan at public meetings next month and finalize the document by December. It would have to be signed by county commissioners in both counties - several of whom are on the task force - and would be proposed in the state Legislature next year.

Once approved, its first task could be the hardest: appointing a board of directors.

The makeup of the board led to a sharp discussion Friday, when the member representing the Arkansas Valley Ditch Association, a group of water-rights holders in southeast Colorado, questioned why the association didn't get a seat on the board but the Lower Arkansas Valley Water Conservancy District did.

The task force eventually agreed to leave it up to Pueblo to determine the downriver interest on the board.