



Fountain Creek teeming with good things

Corridor Master Plan, water quality study and a conservation effort are quickly moving ahead.

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Things are happening on Fountain Creek.

And they're good for a change.

Presentations this week at the Lower Arkansas Valley Water Conservancy District monthly meeting and at the Pueblo City Council work session have underscored increased efforts to improve the creek which links Pueblo and El Paso County and has an impact on water quality in the Arkansas River downstream of Pueblo.

On Wednesday, the Lower Ark board heard presentations from Corridor Master Plan consultant Kevin Shanks and the Colorado State University-Pueblo team studying water quality on Fountain Creek. Shanks is heading up a team under a two-year, \$600,000 joint project of Colorado Springs and the Lower Ark district. So far, that plan has developed four projects along the creek that will begin to address stretches of the creek that are out of shape by restoring natural curves and wetlands. At the same time, the projects will decrease the erosion that daily dumps tons of sediment into the creek.

"What are we going to do to improve Fountain Creek? We're going to emulate nature wherever possible. It's that simple," Shanks said.

He said about 60 percent of Fountain Creek already is in excellent shape, but the rest needs work.

The projects along the creek include an EcoFit Education Park near an El Pomar Foundation recreational complex south of Colorado Springs, development of trails and wetlands at Clear Springs Ranch on the west side of Interstate 25 near the Ray Nixon Power Plant, an interpretive center at Pinon that could be part of the Pueblo Springs Ranch development and a Confluence Park in Pueblo. Each has spurred interest in its own way, and could generate support from diverse sources. The final piece is the development of an agency to administer funds, and that's coming through the district envisioned in SB141, Shanks said.

Shanks explained the purpose of each project:

The EcoFit Center is a way of fighting "apathy" about Fountain Creek for the average person in Colorado Springs. Families using the El Pomar recreation facilities would gravitate to the creek activities. Fitness grants, stormwater enterprise funds and foundation grants could be used.

Clear Springs Ranch is on the list of possible projects under the stimulus bill and is listed among commitments to Pueblo County if the Southern Delivery System is built from Pueblo Dam.

The Pueblo Springs project is supported by the Fountain Creek Foundation and could receive support from the developer of the proposed housing and commercial center north of Pueblo, although the time frame has become less certain.

The Confluence Park is generating increasing interest with the city of Pueblo and East Side groups. It would use sediment in the creek to build a park that could replace aging unsightly levees on the Lower East Side.

“You guys should pat yourselves on the back,” Shanks told the Lower Ark board. “Colorado Springs Utilities is looking at putting the whole thing (Clear Springs Ranch) into a conservation easement. That’s something that wouldn’t have happened 12-14 months ago.”

The CSU-Pueblo study of Fountain Creek has identified both sources and non-point areas of selenium loading on Fountain Creek, said Jason Turner, a graduate student who has taken the lead on that portion of the study.

The study, started three years ago, also is looking at other metals, E. coli bacteria sources and other water quality issues on Fountain Creek.

“We’re moving into the next phase: what is it doing? We’ll be testing invertebrates and fish,” Turner said. “We’re moving past the water analysis and into the ecosystem analysis.”

On Tuesday, Pueblo City Council heard from Juniper Katz of Colorado Open Lands.

The group has received a \$4.75 million grant for its Peak to Prairie Project, which is creating an open space corridor from Pikes Peak to the Eastern Plains, largely through conservation easements. Colorado Open Lands is also helping development of a plan for the Front Range Trail through Fountain Creek.

“Your support made it happen,” Katz told the council.

The grant specifies spending \$3.75 million in the Fountain Creek corridor, and that hinges in part on \$200,000 over two years from Pueblo City Council and \$100,000 over three years from Pueblo County. The project is on a list of possible budget cuts by council this year, and Katz urged them to retain funding.

She said two new properties in Pueblo County - one just north of Colorado 47 and the other a few miles north of town - have been added to the project.

Council is also considering signing an intergovernmental agreement that could lead to the Fountain Creek district, and would be the last major player to sign on. An interim steering committee for the district, formed to promote passage of state legislation, will meet at noon Friday at Fountain City Hall.