

City of Aurora  
**OPEN SPACE ADVISORY BOARD**  
Morrison Nature Center  
April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023

MEMBERS PRESENT: Wayne Gallagher, Bob Hunchberger, Brad Stratton, Jason Amaya, Mark Christopher, Vicky Samuel, Bob Gemmill, Joy DeMots, Dennis Roy.

MEMBERS ABSENT: None.

STAFF PRESENT: Brian Green, Acting OSNR Division Manager; Lauren Morales, Management Assistant.

VISITORS PRESENT: None.

- I. CALL TO ORDER: Brad Stratton called the meeting to order at 5:31 PM.
- II. WELCOME: Brad Stratton welcomed everyone to the April OSB meeting and noted that Bob G, Joy, and Dennis are now officially OSB members.
- III. ADOPTION OF AGENDA: Brad Stratton suggested switching items 9 and 10 to discuss Reports prior to Chair Remarks. Bob Gemmill moved to approve the agenda as amended. Bob Hunchberger seconded the motion. Motion carried.
- IV. APPROVAL OF MINUTES: Wayne Gallagher moved to approve the minutes from the March OSB meeting. Bob Hunchberger seconded the motion. Motion carried.
- V. MANAGEMENT REMARKS: Brian Green asked the OSB members for suggestions on guest speakers. Brian, Brad, and Wayne met about a week ago and noted there have not been many guest speakers in a while. Vicky suggested a guest speaker from the Aurora History Museum, which is currently promoting a fantastic program about the outdoors. Bob G. asked who the OSB could speak to about acquiring new properties. Brian responded that no one like that currently exists and that no acquisition is currently happening as there aren't any funds for it. Bob G. asked if new properties are acquired on an ad hoc basis then. Brian said yes, many of the city's newest properties were dedicated when areas nearby developed, and staff also looks for opportunities as they arise. There is currently no mechanism in place to acquire new land. The last project like that was the Buckley Buffer project, which was initiated by the federal government. Most of the funds to acquire the Buckley Buffer property were from the federal government and the Air Force. Bob G. asked if Brian saw that changing in the future, and Brian replied that it is possible but that acquiring new property is expensive and there is no funding mechanism at this time. Bob G. said he had someone from the Nature Conservancy to recommend and asked if the city partners with them. Brian said he did not believe so. Bob G. said he would like to suggest such a partnership. Vicky mentioned that she would like to hear from a guest speaker for the Highline Canal Conservancy. Dennis added that he would like to hear from a guest speaker for the Sand Creek Regional Greenway Partnership. Dennis added that he was at the Quincy Reservoir recently, and the water level was the lowest he had ever seen it, but the water at Cherry Creek Reservoir was high. He suggested hearing from a guest speaker for Aurora Water. Brian shared that the city reservoirs are for drinking water before it goes out, while the Cherry Creek Reservoir is a dumping ground from Cherry Creek Basin. Other reservoirs have water piped in from the mountains for holding before distribution. Brad asked the OSB members to keep in mind other suggestions for guest speakers and to let him or Brian know if they had anyone else to suggest. The new board members were introduced and invited to share a little bit about themselves with any of the OSB members who had not met them yet.

VI. NEW BUSINESS: Brad Stratton explained the basics of the Conservation Easement monitoring program to the new OSB members. The board members have committed to monitoring their assigned properties at least once per quarter. They are asked to report issues through Access Aurora, interesting flora and fauna finds through iNaturalist, and to take monitoring photos at the posts that have been set up on each property. The whole parcel does not need to be covered each time. Brad mentioned he will send out the packet on the Conservation Easement monitoring program to the new members and will need to get sizes from the new members for vests. Vicky shared that one post near the Aurora Sports Park is difficult to access at times. The sports park is closed in the winter and the river is also hard to cross at that time. Brad suggested that everyone have the ranger phone number handy in case members ever needed to call. He also reminded everyone to do their quarter 2 monitoring.

CE Monitoring Assignments:

- Buckley Buffer- Brad and Dennis
- Coal Senac- Bob H, Bob G, and Joy
- Star K- Wayne and Jason
- Triple Creek- Vicky and Mark

Brad explained the process of sending bullet points to city council members and the mayor and new assignments were made:

- Joy- CM Curtis Gardner
- Bob G- CM Dustin Zvonek
- Dennis- CM Crystal Murillo
- Brad- Mayor Mike Coffman and CM Ruben Medina
- Vicky- CM Steve Sundberg
- Jason- CM Juan Marcano
- Wayne- CM Alison Coombs and CM Angela Lawson
- Mark- CM Francoise Bergan
- Bob H- CM Danielle Jurinsky

The OSB members discussed the board bylaws for suggested edits. Brad opened the floor for feedback on how to proceed and encouraged OSB members to share anything they found interesting or confusing during the bylaw review process. Mark pointed out Section V Article II, assist in identifying funding opportunities, and asked if the board has ever done that. Brian stated that the bylaws date back some time, and it has been kept in the bylaws in case there is ever an opportunity to do so. Joy mentioned that in some of her volunteer work, she was always on the lookout for funding or grant opportunities, and asked if board members could search for such opportunities on their own. Brian said yes, that is always welcome. Brad added that he is all for the board pursuing anything they can to help get more open space. Bob H. asked about the long-term plan for easements. How long-term are the plans and where does funding come from? Is it from capital improvement funds? If not, then where does the money come from to make projects or trails happen? Brian responded that trails are usually planned along existing creeks. Sometimes there are gaps. Some properties cannot be considered until the surrounding area is developed and land is then dedicated to the city. Things change a lot of the time. A planned trail connection from the Aurora Sports Park to E-470 is the next section with available funding. This trail connection could happen in the next year and will connect to the Plains trail that runs parallel to E-470. Bob H asked if it is mostly an issue of funding. Brian said that is part of the issue, but the other part is that land use must happen first. Once funding is acquired, there are often time limits as well. Bob G. shared that he spent most of his life writing grants. While he hates them, he has learned that defined projects are needed to write good applications. He asked if the city could expand its limits. Brian said it cannot. There are some organizations that oversee city expansions, such as DRCOG (Denver Regional Council of Governments). Around 25 years ago, the city of Aurora expanded to Watkins. There is a Master Plan for the city on the city website, as well as some over-arching planning documents. The Parks department has also been working on a new Master Plan for over a year now. Bob G. asked if there are any ideas regarding wildlife corridors. Dennis asked if that is what Triple Creek is, or at least what the initial idea for it was. Brian responded that

larger regional planning efforts are often geared towards things like that, but that some property in those planned areas is still private. Floodplains often go to the city, so the city often focuses on those areas. Vicky asked if this was an older version of the bylaws, as it says they were last ratified in 2017. Brian responded that it is likely the most recent version, as the bylaws do not have to be ratified annually. Vicky also pointed out Article VIII and asked if it should be updated to say WebEx will be used in events of inclement weather. Brad said that Article I stuck out to him, as that is not the mission of the board. The mission statement is different. Brad said that the Chair and Vice Chair can vet suggestions and bring back proposed amendments for a vote. Dennis mentioned Article II and suggested adding a seventh section to call out the conservation easement commitment. He also pointed out that Article VI states that a quorum must be present, but a quorum is not defined in the bylaws itself. Brad said that Article IV regarding the secretary of the board needs to be updated. Bob G. pointed out that some articles are very specific, while others seem very nebulous. Wayne said that he believes this was done intentionally. When he first joined the board, meetings did not mean much. Now staff have allowed the board members to have opportunities to help, make suggestions, and ask questions. The vague nature of some articles allows flexibility to do what is needed in the timeframe it can be done in. OSB members pointed out that the bylaws state that a 2/3rds vote is all that is needed to amend the bylaws and asked if this is true. Lauren will follow up with the City Clerk's office to confirm. Brad asked the board members to continue sending him comments and feedback. The bylaws review will be put under unfinished business for the May OSB meeting to check in on the status.

#### VII. UNFINISHED BUSINESS:

Brad gave an update on the status of the 2023 Action Plan. Steve Kennedy did much of the work on it. Wayne and Brad met and have the most recent draft. Each year, the Action Plan is supposed to be done in December for the following year. Brad asked if the board members would like to adopt the 2023 Action Plan now or if they would like more time to review. He noted that the 2022 Action Plan was not voted on until June 2022 and asked how people were feeling about the 2023 Action Plan. Vicky pointed out a stylistic change to the bullet points in the first section. Bob G. asked if the plan could be changed throughout the year. Brad answered that it can. Bob H. asked if the items are listed in order of priority. Brad answered that they are not in priority order, and that most of the changes were to consolidate similar points. Bob H. asked what the priorities are for Brian and the OSNR team, and what priorities are most important to the board. Brad responded that the overriding goal for this year is outreach. Brian responded that things that the board has committed to, such as the conservation easement monitoring and the policy committee report in October are the most important to city staff. Brad stated that even if an item is not a current priority, he doesn't believe anything should be removed. Mark added that the Action Plan can be used as a living document or guidepost. Brad suggested that the Action Plan could serve to highlight the most important points. Bob H. agreed. Bob G. suggested that the board should have a way to evaluate how well the Action Plan matches the priorities of the Parks department and the Open Space division. The OSB members agreed. Mark Christopher motioned to approve the 2023 Action Plan. Vicky Samuel seconded the motion. Motion carried.

#### VIII. REPORTS:

The first outreach education presentation was held at a ward meeting on April 5<sup>th</sup>. Bob H. shared that it was a good experience, and he was really pleased that the technology was there to make it work. The young lady working with CM Medina helped everything run smoothly. Bob H. thanked Brad for writing the presentation. The guy who presented after had a clicker, which may be a good idea for future presentations. Attendance was good and the presentation went well, though the audio-visual piece for the eagles was a slight struggle. There was not a lot of feedback from the public, but Brian did get a few questions at the end. Vicky asked about the demographic of the audience. Bob H. responded that it was a very mixed background, very diverse. Dennis asked how many people came. Bob H. answered that CM Medina had everyone sit in a circle to interact, and it was maybe 30 people, mostly older folks. Mark asked what the general questions or concerns were. Brian answered that the biggest concern was dogs being off leash and when that could be made illegal. The response was that dogs being off leash already is illegal, and that peer pressure is one of the most effective forms of

management. Vicky added that this doesn't even have to take place in the moment and can be as simple as having conversations with co-workers about issues like this. OSB members asked how many people had been to a listed open space site? Bob H. replied that about 80% said they had. Brian added that the question could be re-phrased to ask if anyone hadn't been to a listed open space site. Vicky asked if there were many changes. Bob H. shared that there were not many changes and that he could send the new members the pdf of the presentation. Brad added that Bob H. did an excellent job presenting and that having someone who had worked on the presentation share it was important. Bob H. thanked the photographers on the OSB for their photo contributions. Wayne also thanked Vicky for her expertise in putting the presentation together. The presentation works well for all audiences. There is no need to put in a slide specific to the ward and changing the talking points accordingly is enough. Brad sent a thank you email to CM Medina afterwards. CM Medina replied, thanking the OSB members and inviting them to present on the Star K Ranch Nature Play Area project when it is further underway.

Bob G. shared information on the prairie restoration experiment he is helping city staff with. The city of Aurora has approximately 102,000 acres of land, and 8,000 acres of open space. About 8% of city land is open space, which is remarkably high. Looking at these areas, they are green, but the green is mostly from invasive species that have choked out native plants. No native plants mean there are no native insects, and no native insects mean there is no food for the birds. City staff member Fendi Despres began a project several years back to attempt to eradicate some of the most invasive species. The first area was a 20-acre site at the Plains Conservation Center (PCC), and the same was done again last year. There was a visible, positive change in the landscape. Fendi then suggested reintroducing some of the native plants that should be there to these sites. There were very few native plants in these areas that are not grasses or trees. Fendi and volunteers set aside 7 plots of land to re-seed with native species and collected native seeds from other sites. The native seeds were spread around the plots and left to germinate. About 2-3 months ago, Fendi reached out to Bob G. Someone had suggested that if this experiment is done properly, it could be published. Bob G. agreed but pointed out that the experiment, as it currently stands, is problematic for publishing. The plots of land are set up in a very non-scientific way and need fewer variables and more controls. Fendi, Bob G, and other volunteers have been meeting every Thursday to brainstorm. The big picture is to restore 11,000 acres at PCC to its natural state with natural flora and fauna. The volunteers looked at the existing literature and found a journal published four times per year by the Society for Ecological Restoration. Bob G. joined and found a special edition on grassland restoration. There was a published study in Eastern Europe that documented restoration "hot spots". The grass in the area was removed and about 40 native seeds were planted in the area, which was then monitored for 5 years. The study showed that the native plants began to grow beyond the original boundaries of the "hot spots", indicating that the entire area marked for restoration does not necessarily need to be plowed if "hot spots" are utilized. This study will be the model for the efforts at PCC. Bob G. shared a diagram of the project. The areas that have been worked on for the last two years have already been manipulated, so new sites have been identified for the experiment. In total, there will be six experimental plots and 480 data points, as well as several control sites where no seeds were sown. Some details are still being worked out, but the project will be starting tomorrow. Bob H. asked how plants were chosen for the sites. Bob G. responded that Fendi has a long list of plants that are all indigenous to the area. Last year volunteers collected 38 species of seeds. Mark asked if any of the hot spots would be re-seeded if the initial efforts were not working. Bob G. responded that they are less concerned with which seeds will sprout and which will not, but rather the spread. The hope is to measure if there will be a reduction of the invasive species that currently occupy the space. Bob H. asked if the land was sterilized first, and theorized there could be some residual allelochemicals from competitors. Bob G. responded that these biodiversity sites will be naked, raked down three inches, disturbed, and volunteers will weed and water over time. Tumbleweeds are a nightmare, as they are invasive and can roll around a site and drop thousands of seeds. Bob H. asked if the volunteers are trying to give native plants a leg up to outcompete the invasive species. Brad confirmed that is the case, and that they are trying to see if this can be done in other places. Brian added that the hard part is trying to figure out which question to ask and focus on. Bob G. added that too many variables at once often gets you nowhere. Mark asked what

would happen if only one native plant does well. Would only that plant be re-seeded, or would they attempt to re-seed all the others as well? Bob G. answered that the success of the native species may be documented as an observation, but that the complexity of the ecosystem must also be considered. Some species may do better in wetter seasons while others prefer drier conditions. Some seeds may lie dormant until the conditions are right for them to grow. Other species are dependent on nitrogen and will not grow well in nitrogen-poor soil but will grow if another species grows that can fix the soil. A seed that may initially fail on its own may succeed once other native species are around. Another complexity is the herbivores all over the prairie. It is not always clear what they are feeding on. Fendi has motion-activated cameras to monitor what is feeding. Brad said that the project is very exciting and a great opportunity. The discussions over the last couple of weeks have been fantastic.

IX. CHAIR REMARKS:

Brad reminded the board that the annual presentation to the Parks, Foundations, and Quality of Life (PFQL) policy committee will take place in October. This presentation will focus on what the board has accomplished with the 2023 Action Plan. He asked the board members to please take photos of what the board is working on and send them to him as they are taken. It is important to start thinking about this now. Brad shared that at 8:00am on Friday a work group is going to do some volunteer work at Pronghorn Natural Area. They will be putting up a couple more photo posts, some motion-activated cameras, and doing a general cleanup of the area. Others are welcome to join and there is lot of trash to clean up there from nearby construction sites. Brad added that Saturday is Earth Day cleanup. A group is planning to meet at the Centre Hills golf course and follow Toll Creek to do trash cleanup in the area. They are expecting maybe 100 people to show up to help. Vicky asked if the cleanup area included the area across from Chambers. Brad replied that it did not include that area. Brad also asked the OSB members where they would like to meet for the May OSB meeting, as well as future meetings. The board members discussed potential sites and came up with a schedule for the summer. Vicky suggested that OSB members could do some trash cleanup at each meeting.

Meeting Schedule:

- May- Jewell Wetlands
- June- Pronghorn Natural Area
- July- ACRE Site
- August- Confluence Natural Area

X. MEMBER COMMENTS & DISCUSSION:

- Jason- Asked if drones are allowed for photo collection. Brian replied that they are prohibited in Aurora parks and open space.
- Bob G- Commented that this was a great meeting.
- Wayne- This will be his last year on the OSB. He suggested everyone think about where to put the city's fourth nature center. Led a bird watch and saw 147 birds and 14 unique species. Wayne asked if the tail of the windmill is new and commented that it looks off. Brad added that the brake is not working on it. Wayne mentioned the upcoming Aurora History Museum feature on open space. May 7<sup>th</sup> will feature an exhibit presentation, but attendance may be limited. Wayne will have a featured booth/table. He is looking for trail maps, QR codes, and other things to display. The booth/table will also feature his nature photography. The exhibit will open May 1<sup>st</sup>.
- Mark- Wanted to ask about a bill the governor signed to cut down green space in metro areas. Denver is opposing this bill. Brian asked if that was regarding irrigated green space. Mark said he didn't believe so, and said the bill was sponsored by builders for housing efforts.
- Vicky- Wanted to mention the site assessment documents. Brad responded that those are not being used anymore, and iNaturalist and Access Aurora are now being used instead. Vicky is also helping with the Aurora History Museum exhibition. Vicky also mentioned a piece of Aurora land that Denver water was working on when staff plowed over two fox dens. Brian responded that foxes are not protected, and developers are allowed to do as they decide. He is

not sure what happened in this instance, it may have been a sewer issue. They are not sure if any foxes were in the den at the time of the incident.

- Joy- Commented that she is taking everything in and is glad to be on the board. She is looking forward to going out to some of the open space sites.
- Dennis- Commented that there has been an interesting mood and tactics at work lately. He recently went out to Quincy Reservoir. Wayne asked if he saw any Ruddy ducks there. Dennis said he had not seen any.
- Bob H- Shared that a rescued porcupine is scheduled to be released at Coal Senac at 2:00pm on Monday. Anyone who is interested may come see the release.

XI. BULLET POINTS:

- The Board welcomed 3 new members to their first official meeting
- The Board reviewed and discussed the Open Space Advisory Board by-laws
- The Board approved the 2023 Action Plan
- The members involved reported to the board on the April 5 Outreach Presentation at the Ward III meeting
- Member Robert Gemmill reported to the board on the prairie restoration experiment that has begun at Plains Conservation Center

XII. ADJOURN: Wayne Gallagher moved to adjourn. Vicky Samuel seconded the motion. Motion carried and meeting adjourned at 7:55pm.

The next meeting will be on May 17<sup>th</sup> at 5:30 PM at Jewell Wetlands.

  
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Brad Stratton, Chair

  
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Lauren Morales, Recording Secretary