2011 ASLA Design Awards

“Vision for Conservation”
Douglas County Open Space Plan
Merit Award
Design Workshop, Aspen

Planning & Urban Design
**VISION FOR CONSERVATION**  
**DOUGLAS COUNTY OPEN SPACE PLAN**  

**OVERVIEW** | The 2011 Douglas County Open Space Priorities Plan provides a framework for decision-making and partnership to target conservation efforts to the most critical lands. Prior to the plan's implementation, these lands were at great risk to become forever altered by development with impending implications for the health of the watershed. The plan is exceptional in its consideration for a comprehensive set of factors: environment, policy, growth trends, feasibility, resource sustainability, visual and cultural amenities, and community values. The plan has brought about a sense of urgency to establish a network of open space that will redirect development patterns to ensure the legacy of the land and critical environmental systems are sustained for future generations.

**PURPOSE** | The Douglas County Open Space Priorities Plan is the result of an innovative process that inventories and synthesizes the land characteristics that make for good open space, citizen values input, and an understanding of future growth pressures. With an annual average of $6.5 million in sales tax revenue dedicated to the open space fund, County Commissioners required a defensible plan with justification for where dollars are spent. Local land trust organizations required a strategic plan for focused partnerships to ensure maximized leveraging of funds. To meet these requirements, Douglas County sought to create a plan that utilizes defensible methods for identifying targeted parcels. The methods employed go a step beyond many open space plans that are problematic in vaguely suggest approximate locations desired for future acquisition without rational as to why those in decision-making positions chose the locations— which their arbitrary selection sometimes leads to legal battles with private property owners. The strategy for the Douglas County Open Space Plan employs parcel specific detail to assess why one parcel of land would be more important to acquire than another. The Douglas County Open Space Priorities Plan advances resource conservation planning with holistic thinking regarding economics, growth potential, scenic value, and quality-of-life, in addition to environmental factors.

Often open space plans do not provide parcel specific detail needed to assess why one parcel of land would be more important to acquire than another. Typically these plans are presented as large bubbles on a map identifying areas for future acquisition which are brought into question due to lack of data on why lands were targeted. With an annual average of $6.5 million in sales tax revenue dedicated to the open space fund, County Commissioners required a defensible plan with justification for where dollars are spent. Local land trust organizations required a strategic plan for focused partnerships to ensure maximized leveraging of funds. The Douglas County Open Space Priorities Plan advances resource conservation planning with holistic thinking regarding economics, growth potential, scenic value, and quality-of-life, in addition to environmental factors.

In 1994, Douglas County, with its population of 88,000 people, was heralded as the fastest growing county in the nation. Popularity took its toll on the County, rendering all privately-held open lands a target for development. Agriculture and ranching were defenseless in the face of 35-acre lots, and continuous strip development was all but a reality along the Interstate 25 corridor, threatening to merge the cities of Denver and Colorado Springs into one large metropolis. Like an army that is surrounded but ceases to surrender, Douglas County, with assistance from a team of conservationists, public officials, private planners, a supportive populace, and ample resources, has set in motion the preservation of valuable open space through a vision for the future that maintains the rural character of this region for generations.

The first conservation plan for the county was developed in 1995 and lead to considerable efforts in preserving 48,000 acres. The effort to conserve land continues today as Douglas County is home to almost 300,000 people and anchored by the fast-growing communities of Highlands Ranch, Franktown, Parker, and Castle Rock. Douglas County is the 10th most populous county in the nation, experiencing 64 percent growth between 2000 and 2009. The acquisition of more open space and conservation of natural areas was ranked as a high or medium priority by 90 percent of participants in the 2010 Douglas County voter opinion poll. However, having accomplished most of the goals of past open space plans, decision-making regarding conservation lacked direction and cohesion.

The 2011 Open Space Priorities Plan provides an ambitious county-wide vision for future conservation. A specific sub-area plan was developed for the Headwaters of the Cherry Creek, a watershed area that represents one of the most important and urgent conservation opportunities in Douglas County. The Cherry Creek watershed is a dominant geographical and cultural feature of the Denver metropolitan area. This vital waterway is also an irreplaceable network of recreational, wildlife, scenic, and natural corridors that link the many diverse communities that comprise the metropolitan area, providing a foundation for the area's quality of life.
In the areas identified for protection, much of the privately owned land is relatively undeveloped and is still managed by ranching families who care deeply about the land and agricultural heritage. However, many of these landowners are aging and their ranches will likely be sold and divided in the years to come. Natural balances, already threatened in this area would be further compromised under this scenario, with downstream consequences. There are a finite number of land conservation opportunities remaining to ensure the long-term sustainability of existing land protection investments. Past and new conservation partners are supportive of the 2011 plan and will use it as a tool for leveraging additional funds.

**SPECIAL FACTORS**

**Innovation and Excellence** | The study utilized pre-existing information from a variety of sources such as the county GIS database, county Comprehensive Master Plan, citizen surveys, and State and Federal natural resource databases, manipulated in a new way to answer questions about where the best lands for future protection are located. The outcome is a plan that describes a vision for open space with a targeted approach for pursuing opportunities. The framework plan was developed from evaluations of the land with criteria based on community values including:

- Water resources
- Critical wildlife habitat
- Quality vegetation
- Agricultural lands
- Historic and archeological resources
- Scenic quality of iconic landscape features
- Visibility of landforms from major roadways
- Community separators
- Opportunity to create a network of preserved open space
- Ability to expand the trails network

Lands that contain these features were prioritized based on the degree of potential growth pressures they might face, as well as the ease of establishing protection measures. The land analysis along with input from stakeholder meetings informed the creation of an overall vision for open space in Douglas County. The vision is representative of citizen values and desire for future open space balanced with an understanding of the feasibility of implementation.

The evaluation of resources, land characteristics, and growth policy had an inherent high degree of complexity requiring intricate computer modeling. However, the graphical materials presented to the Open Space Board, County Commissioners, county and city staff, land trust entities, volunteer board members and general public where appreciated for being comprehensible, logical, and visually interesting. Stakeholders expressed gratitude that their individual perspectives were reflected in the plan and they could see their influence on the plan development. The Open Space Board and local land trust organizations which once had competing interests in acquiring properties now share a vision and have a better understanding of their roles in creating comprehensive open space protection.

**Transferability** | This project received the 2011 Conservation Excellence Grant from Great Outdoors Colorado and the 2011 Colorado American Planning Association Award of Excellence in Sustainability in part due to the transferability of the process developed. Other communities planning for open space and land conservation can develop the input data utilized in this study, such as GIS data layers and citizen survey information. This data could then serve as a basis to tailor an evaluation of place-specific landscape characteristics, policies, regulations, and growth potential.

**The Role of the Landscape Architect** | The landscape architect provided the county with technical assistance including GIS mapping, database creation, environmental resources research, policy analysis, and trends identification. The landscape architect also provided two key leadership roles: partnership building and vision creation. The landscape architect gathered stakeholders and lead them through a process to understand the application of community values and desires. This community input guided the development of a vision that was then communicated through an informational brochure and presentations.

**Significance** | The final product was received with enthusiasm from County Commissioners and natural resources staff for its ability to proactively address planning needs that had gone unmet for years. The many county entities responsible for conservation initiatives are confident that this plan provides a framework and inspiring vision that is most needed for their future efforts. One sign of the plan’s success is the protection of one of the most critical properties identified within it only months following the plan’s completion.