

Poudre River makeovers to restore recreation, nature

Written by Kevin Duggan

Jul. 13, 2013 |

coloradoan.com

Poudre River makeovers to restore recreation, nature

A series of large construction projects is planned that will transform sections of the river through Fort Collins.



Purchase Image Zoom

Left: A woman walks her dog to the water at the Poudre River right by the Josh Ames Diversion in Fort Collins. The city is removing the diversion, along with other projects along the river through Fort Collins meant to have ecological and recreational impacts. / V. Richard Haro/The Coloradoan

Sections of the Poudre River through Fort Collins are expected to look more like construction zones than natural areas during the next few years.

FTC0714-gg poudre river projects

Fort Collins officials are planning a series of projects aimed at improving the river's ecological health and recreational opportunities. Highly visible work is expected to be done at city-owned natural areas from the North Shields Ponds to Arapaho Bend near Interstate 25.

Part of the work will involve reducing the height of river embankments that were built up over the years through gravel mining and building irrigation ditches to carry away the river's water.

The construction won't be pretty, said John Stokes, the city's director of natural resources. But in time, affected areas are expected to recover as plantings of native grasses, shrubs and trees take root.

"This is going to look like a big mess for a while," Stokes said during a visit to the Sterling Natural Area west of Shields Street.

"In nature, disturbance can help create richer habitat," he said. "This site is highly disturbed from mining activities: We're going to re-disturb it, but in so doing, we are going to hopefully restore some of the functions you would see in a natural river system that are missing now."

Much to do

Intertwined with the work at natural areas in the coming years will be several major construction projects, including building a channel to carry stormwater runoff from the area around West Vine Drive to the river.

The Colorado Department of Transportation is planning to replace the bridge that carries Mulberry Street over the river — a project that is expected to begin this fall and last more than a year — and Larimer County is planning to replace the Shields Street Bridge in 2015.

City departments including natural areas, parks and utilities are coordinating their projects with the other entities to ensure they proceed as efficiently and effectively as possible, Stokes said.

When the Shields Street Bridge work is done, for example, pedestrian access to the river and parking areas will be reconfigured to improve safety.

Restoring and supporting the river's ecology is a major thrust of projects planned at the city's natural areas, Stokes said. But so is enhancing the recreational experiences of residents who bike, walk, fish, watch wildlife and float along the river.

The popular Poudre River Trail will be redesigned and moved in places, including the former site of the Link-n-Greens golf course, where Woodward Inc. is planning to build its world headquarters.

Woodward has donated 31 acres of the 101-acre site to the city for a natural area. The construction site is expected to be fenced off soon with grading work expected to begin in August, said Rick Bachand, environmental program manager for the Natural Areas Department.

By this time next year, about 95 percent of the work in the natural area along the riverbank is expected to be complete, he said. The area along the river will look different than it does now.

The embankment will be lower, allowing the river to spread out during times of high flow and reclaim part of its ecological floodplain. The water would nourish riparian wetlands and a variety of plant life, such as cottonwood forests.

"The goal is to promote biodiversity and habitat availability," Bachand said.

The city's efforts to rehabilitate the river corridor are welcome, stated Gary Wockner, director of the advocacy group Save the Poudre, in an email to the Coloradoan.

"The Poudre River through town has been neglected for far too long: The city's vision for natural habitat restoration is definitely headed in the right direction," he said. "Save the Poudre believes that if more people appreciate and enjoy the river in ecological respectful ways, it will lead to more long-term protection for the river.

"People protect and defend what they love."

Extensive embankment work also is planned at the Sterling Natural Area. Material heaped along the river decades ago will be used to fill in part of Sterling Pond, which is a former gravel pit, to create habitat.

The work is expected to begin this winter if permits can be obtained from regulatory entities including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Stokes said.

At the same time, a massive concrete diversion built to supply the Josh Ames Ditch, which no longer carries irrigation water, will be removed or modified. The structure stretches across river; its drop of roughly 5 feet prevents fish and insects from moving upstream.

"It backs water up and drops sediment out," Stokes said. "That is not a good thing for aquatic life."

The wall in the river prevents boats from moving downstream. Its drop could be used to create pools and waves that would entertain recreationists in rafts, kayaks and tubes.

Plenty of challenges

Another small dam east of College Avenue — the Coy Ditch diversion — also may be removed or modified in the years to come with the goal of improving the river's flow while forming pools and riffles.

Kayakers and other recreationists have been pushing for a kayak park along the river near downtown for years and have grown impatient with the delay in establishing a facility, Stokes said.

But doing anything along the Poudre River is complicated, especially downtown, where the river is crossed in several places by roads and railways. Issues of land ownership, water rights, stormwater management and ecology all have to be addressed.

Any project would need "a lot of permitting and a lot of money" to get accomplished, Stokes said.

As part of the city's focus on the river, its natural areas, stormwater and parks departments are coordinating planning efforts in the area between Shields and Mulberry streets.

The Poudre River Downtown Project is expected to generate ideas for improvements and projects that could be taken to City Council for funding.

Money also could be sought from private donors and Great Outdoors Colorado, or GOCO, which is funded by lottery proceeds. GOCO supports recreation and conservation programs across the state.

Considerable momentum appears to be building across the community to protect the river and boost recreation, Stokes said.

"We certainly have a lot of challenges and opportunities," he said.

"In my view, this is going to unfold over decades; it's not all going to happen over the next three to five years," Stokes said. "But maybe some really important components of it can happen."