

Save the Poudre keeps watchful eye on the river, but critics say group is obstructing development in Fort Collins

Save the Poudre is preparing to dive deeper into its environmental watchdog work.

Long associated with fights against major reservoir projects that would impact the Cache la Poudre River, the organization is launching a new effort aimed at boosting the ecological health of the river through Fort Collins.

It plans to do that through a campaign called "Restore the Corridor" and dogged activism when reviewing development proposals, working to restore wildlife habitat and promoting recreational opportunities, said executive director Gary Wockner.

The group doesn't expect to be the only "voice" for the river when it comes to determining what happens around it, said Mark Easter, Save the Poudre board of directors chairman. But somebody has to speak out when it comes to guarding the river's health, he said, adding many

community groups have an interest in what happens along the Poudre.

"We are one voice," Easter said. "But we just happen to be the one that has the energy, focus and ability to plug in and try to protect the river."

But critics worry the nonprofit will use its political muscle to sink all development projects along the river. Save the Poudre last month filed two appeals of projects that were approved through Fort Collins' planning process.

An appeal takes the issue to City Council, which must decide whether fair hearings were conducted in reaching the decisions and whether the decision makers were presented with accurate evidence.

Appeals slow development and drive up costs, said Gino Campana, owner of Bellissimo Inc., which has proposed a new subdivision on the site of the former riverside Bender Mobile Home Park.

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Save the Poudre has taken issue with Campana’s proposal to build 41 houses on a portion of the 18-acre site. City staff and its planning and zoning board supported the proposal to build beyond the 35 houses allowed by the site’s proposed zoning.

Final plans for the project have not been developed. But if approved by the city, Campana expects the plan also will be contested by Save the Poudre through yet another “frivolous” appeal.

“(Wockner) is saying ‘no’ to everything, across the board,” he said. “I believe there is not a solution we can engineer to satisfy Save the Poudre.”

Conceptual plans for the project call for restoring riparian forest along sections of the property closest to the river. It’s the type of work city officials and Save the Poudre say they support, Campana said.

“We should be on the same side of the table,” he said. “He wants to be on the other side.”

Wockner declined to comment on Campana’s project until its development plans are formally submitted. The only item being contested at the moment is the density issue and its potential impact on wildlife, he said.

The organization, formally known as Save the Poudre: Poudre Waterkeeper, doesn’t plan to automatically say “no” to every development proposal it reviews, Wockner

said. But its criteria for supporting a project are high.

“We are saying ‘yes’ to protecting and restoring the river, which is our mission,” he said. “And we are happy to meet with anybody who wants to talk about how we can achieve that mission together.”

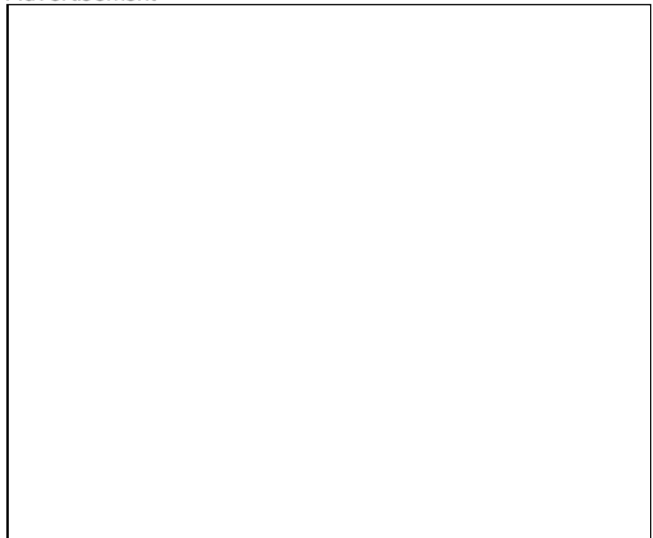
Other projects

Save the Poudre also is appealing approval of the Legacy Senior Residences next to the river on Linden Street.

The project, which would be built by a private developer in partnership with the Fort Collins Housing Authority, calls for a four-story building with 72 dwelling units for low-income seniors on the former industrial site.

The project met environmental standards set by the city and federal department of Housing and Urban Development, said Julie Brewen, executive director of the housing

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authority.

But in its appeal to the city, Save the Poudre claims the development would adversely impact wildlife. It also would be a “four-story, 180-foot-long wall of building,” Wockner said.

“It is completely incompatible with anybody’s vision of what the river corridor should look like and it makes no ecological or environmental sense,” he said.

In addition to appealing the city’s approval of the project development plan, Save the Poudre has filed an appeal with HUD claiming a third-party environmental assessment of the project was “woefully incomplete” and did not adequately seek public input.

Many entities have weighed in on the project since it was initially proposed, Brewen said. The proposed building was scaled down from five to four stories to appease historic preservation advocates.

Making the building shorter meant making it longer, she said. The area is zoned for multifamily housing; city planning staff supported the proposal after working with various entities, although not Save the Poudre.

“It’s really difficult when environmental concerns conflict with the affordable housing needs of our most vulnerable residents,” Brewen said.

Save the Poudre has made arrangements

with the city to be notified of any development proposal for sites within 800 feet of the river. It established itself a neighborhood association, as is allowed under city code, to receive notification.

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The Save the Poudre Coalition formed about six years ago to battle the proposed Northern Integrated Supply Project, or NISP, and Glade Reservoir. Glade would be built north of Ted’s Place and draw water from the Poudre.

NISP is meant to shore up water supplies for about a dozen Front Range communities and water districts. Save the Poudre and other environmental groups contend it would irreparably harm the river in many ways, including cutting its flows through Fort Collins.

Its campaign against Glade has included years of communicating with affected municipalities and the U.S. Army Corps of

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Engineers, which is working on a massive environmental impact statement on the project.

The coalition has 20 organizations as members, Wockner said, and thousands of individuals on its email list.

A prolific writer and activist, Wockner is self-employed as a consultant for environmental organizations. Save the Poudre is one of his clients. Other organizations he is associated with include Clean Water Action and the Save the Colorado campaign sponsored by New Belgium Brewing Co.

Wockner serves as the public face and voice of Save the Poudre, but all of its board members work hard following issues, Easter said. Easter has worked on environmental issues for 30 years.

The group is highly influential because of its passion and expertise, said John Stokes, director of the Fort Collins Natural Areas program. Its members and supporters are active in a number of initiatives dealing with water.

But it is only one of the river's "stakeholders," he said, and the politics of the river is complex with so many interests involved.

A proposal brought forward by the group to remove an abandoned irrigation diversion structure on the river matches up well with the city's efforts to find ways to improve the river's overall condition.

"They do bring forward some positive ideas," Stokes said. "They are very focused on restoring the ecology of the river and improving recreation opportunities. We are on the same page for a lot of things."

But the group's image with some entities is not positive, said Jim Reidhead, a longtime local businessman and community activist. Wockner and Save the Poudre are viewed by some as "arrogant" and prone to "vilifying" those who disagree with them.

Reidhead, former director of UniverCity Connections and board member emeritus of the Poudre River Trust, said relationships matter when it comes to making decisions about the river.

With so many interests involved, including governments, irrigation ditch companies, environmentalists, and farmers and ranchers, reaching consensus may not be possible, he said. But compromise has to be part of the formula for success, he said.

"It's easy to get behind the notion of 'Save

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the Poudre,” he said. “But what troubles me is that any solution regarding the river ... will have to be very inclusive. I don’t know if Gary sees it that way.

“We have a very clear idea of what he is against: But it’s a little more elusive about what he is for.”

What's the vision?

Save the Poudre has a right to express its opinion and take action on any topic, Reidhead said. It is skilled at following legal processes such as appeals in making its case.

But it appears to be determined to obstruct any type of development or water-storage project on the river, especially if it might promote growth.

“That type of attitude won’t get you invited to the table,” he said. “You become an obstacle to overcome rather than someone to work with.”

Easter said Save the Poudre has not taken a position on growth and is not interested in being obstructionist. To suggest otherwise is “name calling” and “easy to fall back on,” he said.

“We realize development is going to happen,” Wockner said. “So we’ll say yes to projects that help protect the amenity and the ecological health and the possibilities to make this a healthy wildlife corridor with habitat.”

The group’s vision for the river corridor includes maintaining wide buffers and promoting more recreational opportunities, such as extending the Poudre River Trail and building a kayaking or tubing park downtown.

What Save the Poudre doesn’t want to see is a corridor that is “walled in” with tall buildings.

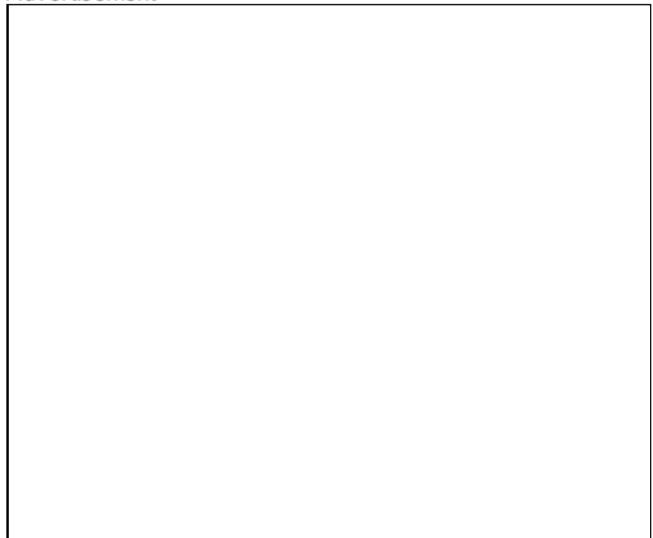
“The river and the corridor have already been severely compromised,” Wockner said. “We are just trying to do our part to restore it and protect it.”

The group is willing to work with others, including cities and private landowners, in achieving that vision, he said.

Fighting for your beliefs is fine, Reidhead said, but the key to finding solutions to problems is flexibility and keeping an open mind.

“What is the alternative? The status quo?” he said. “That doesn’t make for a healthier

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river.

“We need to listen to each other and forget the politics. We just can’t afford the toxicity.”

More

Keeping track

Proposals and concepts within the city of Fort Collins being tracked by Save the Poudre: Poudre Waterkeeper:

- Pateros Creek subdivision, 912 Wood St. (Appeal filed.)
- CSU Engines and Energy Conversion Lab expansion, 430 N. College Ave.
- Legacy Senior Residences Housing, 411 Linden St. (Appeal filed.)
- Encompass Technologies mixed-use building, 418 Linden St.
- Link-N-Greens Golf Course, 777 E. Lincoln Ave.
- Planned Development Overlay District
- Potential river park
- Revisions to Poudre River floodplain regulations

About Save the Poudre

- Started in 2006 as the Save the Poudre Coalition to oppose the proposed Northern Integrated Supply Project, or NISP, and Glade Reservoir
- Registered the trade name Save the Poudre: Poudre Waterkeeper and as an unincorporated nonprofit organization with the Colorado Secretary of State’s Office in 2010
- Received tax exempt status from the Internal Revenue Service in 2010
- Reported \$81,173 in contributions in 2010
- Staff: Gary Wockner, executive director, and Gina Janett, treasurer and volunteer coordinator. Both are paid \$1,500 a month.
- Board of directors: Mark Easter, John Bartholow, Greg Speer and Adrian Glasenapp
- Website: www.savethepoudre.org

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