

Horse Gulch Management Plan



Approved by City of Durango Parks and Recreation Advisory Board: May 8, 2013
Approved by City of Durango Natural Lands Preservation Advisory Board:
May 13, 2013

Updated Management Plan Adopted by Natural Lands Preservation Advisory
Board
May 6, 2019



This updated 2019 Horse Gulch Management Plan replaces the 2013 Horse Gulch Management Plan in full.

I. INTRODUCTION

Horse Gulch is part of a large open space and recreational area that includes the City of Durango SkyRidge open space, adjacent to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Skyline and Grandview Ridge properties, as well as trail corridors passing through privately owned lands proposed to become the future Durango Mesa Park and recreation amenities. La Plata County is a 1/3 owner of 240 acres in Horse Gulch. This entire landscape encompasses more than 5,123 acres and is home to the Telegraph and Horse Gulch Trail System—an approximately 60-mile natural surface trail network that is used extensively for non-motorized activities such as hiking, trail running, horseback riding, and mountain biking. While the open space in Horse Gulch and SkyRidge remain open year round to public use, the BLM Grandview Ridge is subject to seasonal closures for big game habitat protection.

City-owned open space in the area, including Horse Gulch, Raider Ridge and SkyRidge encompass 1,518.76 acres and includes approximately 25 miles of natural-surface trails. In total, 705 acres, or approximately 46 percent, is under conservation easement held by the La Plata Open Space Conservancy to protect recreational values and wildlife habitat. The remaining acreage is deed restricted as open space and recreational lands. The 705 acres were acquired through 3 separate phases with the assistance of Great Outdoors Colorado funding. As a result, there are 3 separate conservation easements in place across this acreage. Each easement provides very consistent language to one another, and specifically identifies allowable and prohibited uses. The conservation easements are the basis of this Management Plan and are included in the Horse Gulch Baseline Documentation which is available for review at the City of Durango Parks and Recreation Department and on the City website. A map of lands preserved in Horse Gulch, including those under easement, is attached to this plan.

Working in coordination with the City's Natural Lands Preservation Advisory Board, this plan has been prepared to provide a framework for the sound stewardship of the property, a plan that recognizes the importance of Horse Gulch to the community.

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE AREA

Horse Gulch is located along the eastern boundary of Durango City limits. Adjacent lands along its western boundary are a combination of privately-owned, high-density residential areas and Fort Lewis College property. The northeastern boundary abuts privately-owned, undeveloped lands located in La Plata County. The southern and southeastern boundary abuts privately-owned, undeveloped land proposed to become Durango Mesa Park. From downtown Durango, Raiders Ridge in Horse Gulch provides the City's eastern scenic backdrop. Elevations in Horse Gulch range from 7,400 in the gulch to nearly 8,200 feet at the highest point on the ridge.

The slopes are steep and rocky with vegetation including pinon, juniper and gambel oak with an understory of sagebrush, rabbitbrush and other shrubs. There are scattered Ponderosa Pine throughout the property, and cottonwood pockets along the main Horse Gulch drainage. Groundcover among trees and shrubs and in the open meadow areas include western wheatgrass, Indian ricegrass, broom snakeweed and yarrow.

The Park hosts diverse wildlife habitat, including big game animals; black bear and mountain lion; small predators such as coyote, red and grey fox and bobcat; neotropical songbirds; and birds of prey. Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) has mapped the property as being (1) summer range, winter range, and a winter concentration area for mule deer; (2) summer range, winter range, severe winter range, and a winter concentration area for elk; and (3) winter range for bald eagle, a state-listed threatened species. A CPW radio telemetry study confirmed that the area is a critical migration corridor for big game animals moving between summer range on Missionary Ridge and winter range in the Grandview and Sale Barn Canyon areas.

Lower elevations of the property were historically used for pasturing livestock. Currently the property hosts an extensive natural surface trail system for non-motorized, passive recreation including hikers, cyclists, bird watchers, and horseback riders.

Baseline assessments of the conservation easement parcels have been prepared and are available for review at the City of Durango Parks and Recreation Department.

III. MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

It is the intent of the City of Durango to manage Horse Gulch in a manner that will:

- Maintain the open space as primarily undeveloped and in a natural state for non-motorized recreational uses and wildlife habitat.
- Improve the natural condition of the property by eliminating invasive and noxious weeds and plant species; minimize erosion caused by ongoing trail activities; and conduct wild fire fuels reduction activities as necessary to protect the ecological value of the property.
- Maintain and improve the trail system and ancillary amenities including new trails (to improve connectivity and functionality), trailheads, and signage.
- Ensure compliance with conservation easements held by La Plata Open Space Conservancy.

IV. SPECIFIC MANAGEMENT POLICIES

1. Management activities shall be consistent with this adopted Management Plan. Proposed activities deemed inconsistent with the Management Plan shall be circulated to the appropriate City Departments and Advisory Boards for review and comment prior to any action being taken. Proposed activities on acreage under conservation easement shall also be reviewed by La Plata Open Space Conservancy (LPOSC). Proposed activities on acreage owned in part by La Plata County will be forwarded to the County for their review.
2. Proposed changes to the Management Plan shall be circulated to the appropriate City Departments and Advisory Boards for review and comment prior to any action being taken. Changes proposed for acreage under conservation easement shall also be reviewed by La Plata Open Space Conservancy. Proposed Plan changes on acreage owned in part by La Plata County will be forwarded to the County for their review.
3. The property shall be maintained in its natural state with public recreational use limited to trail-oriented activities consistent with the requirements of this Management Plan and the recorded conservation easements (walking; hiking; jogging; bicycling; cross country skiing; snow shoeing; equestrians, and environmental education).
4. All uses/activities on the property shall be subject to City Park and Open Space rules and regulations. The City shall be responsible for enforcement of all regulations. The following uses/activities shall be specifically prohibited on the property:
 - overnight camping
 - fires of any kind and smoking
 - hunting or discharge of firearms/weapons
 - organized and special events except by permit
 - dogs off leash
 - injury to or molestation of birds, game or wildlife
 - unauthorized motorized vehicles
 - unauthorized construction of trails, berms, jumps, or other recreational structures
 - destruction or removal of soils, rocks, natural vegetation or other materials except for purposes of property maintenance and improvements consistent with this Plan.
 - other resource disturbing activities such as construction of forts, tree houses, seating areas, lean-tos and other man-made structures without prior City approval.
5. Improvements on the property shall be limited to:
 - A. **Trails:** The existing trail system shall be evaluated on a routine basis to determine functionality, appropriateness and sustainability. The maintenance, closing and/or rerouting of existing trails, and the development of new trails, shall be based upon this evaluation and the participation and input of the Natural Lands Preservation Advisory Board. Trail proposals affecting property under conservation easement will also be forwarded to La Plata Open Space Conservancy for consideration.

B. **Trailhead Improvements:** Pedestrian and bicycle access into Horse Gulch is gained from multiple locations and two formalized trailheads with parking areas exist (see attached map). There is no public motor vehicle access allowed into Horse Gulch without permission of the City of Durango. Parking is also available on many City streets adjacent to other trail system access points. Parking accommodations for equestrians and others large vehicles is available at the Bureau of Land Management Sale Barn Trailhead.

C. **Signage** on the property may include:

- rules, regulations, and way finding at trailheads, trail intersections, and other key locations
- Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) recognition
- interpretive and educational signage
- trail markings and, as appropriate, length and degree of difficulty or cautionary signage where visibility of downhill traveling trail users is limited
- temporary, seasonal, or other signage as deemed appropriate for the protection and maintenance of the resource
- identification of perimeter boundaries
- recognition of Trails 2000, La Plata Open Space Conservancy, or other partnering entities

D. **Other Improvements:** Other improvements may include picnic and restroom facilities provided that the installation of such facilities and improvements minimizes disturbance to existing vegetation and are not detrimental to the conservation values of the property or intent of this Plan.

E. **Additional Lands:** The City shall evaluate and consider the acquisition of additional open space lands adjacent to Horse Gulch consistent with the City of Durango Comprehensive Plan.

6. The City will routinely patrol the property, and at its discretion, may elect from time to time to temporarily close the entire property, or selected areas of the property, when it is deemed necessary for the protection of the property's natural resource values, the general public, and/or for rejuvenation of specific resources including wildlife habitat and vegetation.
7. Property assessments may be taken from time to time to determine the specific location, type, and quantities of unique plant and animal habitat/species, and unique natural or archeological features in advance of any stewardship activities consistent with this Management Plan.
8. La Plata Open Space Conservancy shall provide annual monitoring reports of parcels under conservation easement to assist the City with stewardship efforts.
9. Environmental education and research projects may be conducted on the property with advance approval by the City.
10. Special requests for public motor vehicle access along the closed section of Horse Gulch Road to accommodate individuals with special accessibility needs will be considered on a case-by-case basis by the City and La Plata County.

V. AMENDMENT/UPDATE

This Management Plan shall be amended from time to time as necessary due to significant changes in use patterns and/or changes in land use policies on adjacent public lands, provided the Management Plan continues to protect the intent of the original acquisition and the conservation easements, where applicable. Parks and Recreation Department staff will review the Management Plan annually in conjunction with the La Plata Open Space Conservancy monitoring requirements for the Conservation Easements. The City will consult with the Natural Lands Preservation Advisory Board in the amendment and/or update process.

VI. NEAR-TERM STEWARDSHIP GOALS

Trails: The existing trail system will continue to be evaluated for its functionality, appropriateness and sustainability. High priority trail projects include improvements to Down N Out to stabilize trail tread and rehabilitate erosion, maintenance of Rocky Road, and new construction of SkyRaider. Wayfinding signage at trail intersections will be updated, replaced or added with a focus on signage along Raider Ridge. Socially created trails will be closed. Cooperation and consultation with adjacent land management agencies as well as recreational user groups will occur in order to manage an approved trail system that is consistent with the terms of the conservation easements and the management plan, as well as seasonal closures or cultural resource protection regulations.

Management Cooperation: The City will continue cooperative management discussions with the Bureau of Land Management, Colorado Parks and Wildlife, La Plata County, and adjoining private landowners relative to the potential integration of the management and closure policies for Horse Gulch with the existing Grandview Ridge Management Policies.

VII. ONGOING STEWARDSHIP GOALS

Annual Maintenance: Annual and ongoing maintenance will be based on routine inspection and need. Typical ongoing maintenance shall include weed mitigation, fire mitigation, trash removal, erosion control, vandalism repair, trail system repair and improvements, and routine maintenance and improvements required to address normal wear and tear of amenities.

Habitat Protection and Enhancements: Based on the finding of the baseline assessment and other research efforts undertaken from time to time, habitat protection and enhancement efforts consistent with this Management Plan may be undertaken to improve the ecological and biological diversity and health of the property.

Law Enforcement: The City of Durango Police Department serves as the entity responsible for providing law enforcement on the property with the exception of the 2014 acquisition land. The 2014 acquisition land along Horse Gulch Road in the northeastern portion of the Park shall be annexed into the City limits of Durango in order to designate the City of Durango Police Department as the entity responsible for providing law enforcement responsibilities on the property.

Camping Mitigation: City staff will continue to monitor the property for illegal camping activities, and when necessary mitigate camping, trash, and camping-related impacts.

Biological or Cultural Resources Site Assessment: If necessary, a biological or cultural site assessment shall be undertaken to determine the specific location, type, and quantities of unique plant and animal habitat/species, and unique natural or cultural resources to be preserved, in advance of fire mitigation, trail system modification, or other stewardship activities consistent with this Management Plan.

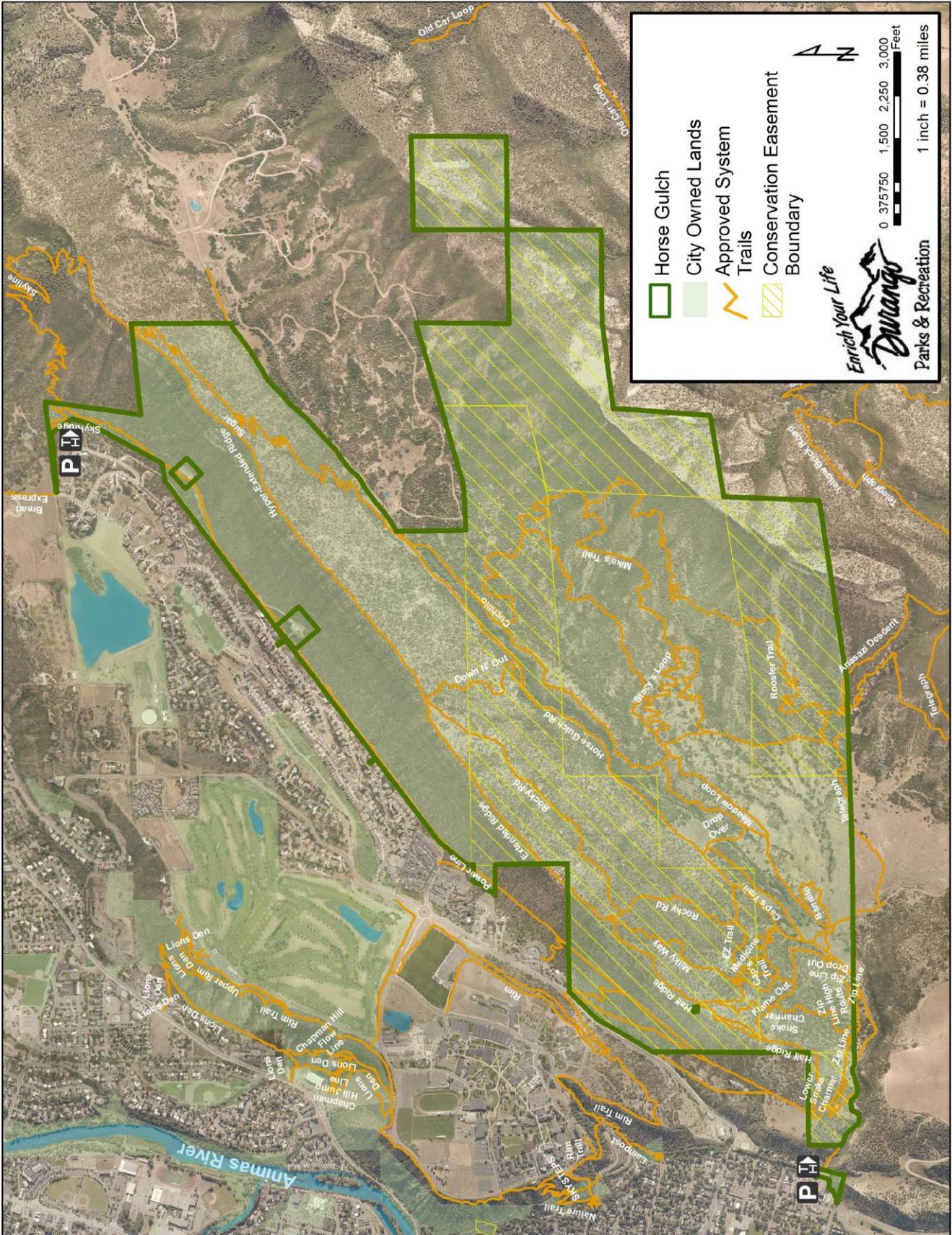
Wildfire Fuels Reduction: The property will be evaluated by City staff and when necessary, appropriate fire authorities, and a wildfire fuels reduction plan will be implemented to reduce hazardous fuels.

Noxious Weed Abatement: The property has been added to the existing weed mitigation program currently administered by the City of Durango Parks and Recreation Department. Weed abatement efforts will occur annually, as needed.

Erosion Control: The property will be evaluated by City staff as needed, and an erosion control plan will be implemented to reduce runoff when and where necessary.

Volunteer Engagement: City staff will continue to engage community volunteers and partner with volunteer-focused organizations in the ongoing stewardship of the property.

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