

## Open Lands Property Evaluation

**Property Name: Three Bell I and Three Bell II Conservation Easements**

**PROJECT IS BEING EVALUATED FOR THE FOLLOWING SHADED VALUES:**

<b>Scenic</b>	<b>Significant Plants/Natural Communities</b>	<b>Geological</b>
<b>Buffer</b>	<b>Outdoor Recreational</b>	<b>Paleontological</b>
<b>Wildlife Habitat</b>	<b>Historical/Archaeological</b>	<b>Educational</b>
<b>Wetlands</b>	<b>Agricultural</b>	<b>Other (explain)</b>

### EVALUATION CRITERIA

These criteria establish evaluation strategies that can be applied to properties proposed for acquisition under the Open Lands Program. These criteria are guidelines and will be used as a tool in determining properties that may be suitable and appropriate for acquisition.

*This scoring system is an index, not a precise measurement, and is used as a guideline for setting priorities and making recommendations.*

**High (H), Medium (M), Low (L), Not Rated (NR)**

#### I. Context

Rating:

**High**

1. To what extent is the property located adjacent to or near other protected lands or open space?
  - The properties are adjacent to each other and adjacent to River Bluffs Open Space and the Frank State Wildlife Area.
2. Is there potential that surrounding property may be protected with this property's protection?
  - Yes, the Open Lands Program has recognized the neighboring Poudre River corridor as a priority protection area in the 2001 Open Lands Master Plan.
3. Does this property add to a more sustainable whole?
  - This property will be managed as part of the continuous Poudre River corridor, a greenway corridor for wildlife and public recreation.
4. Is protecting this property a strategic move to protect a larger area?
  - Timnath and Windsor have listed these properties and neighboring riparian properties as open spaces on their Comprehensive Land Use Plans, and their Trail Plans highlight this area as an extension of the Poudre River Trail.
5. What is the potential that the property will be developed or changed in land use?
  - Very high. It is owned by a development company and was bought for residential development.
6. How compatible are the adjacent land uses with this proposed protection and use of this property?

- The properties are zoned FA-1 and are either estate homes, gravel mining areas, ranches or suburban developments.

**II. Environment/Ecology**

**Rating:**

<b>High</b>
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1. How important are the wildlife habitat qualities and plant communities?
  - The property contains over 1.5 miles of river frontage and 95 acres of wetlands and riparian woodlands. The properties are known to provide habitat for many wading birds and waterfowl, nesting raptors including a pair of bald eagles, mammals, fish and amphibians. Other than the State Special Concern status of the bald eagle, no known rare or endangered plants or animals are known to occur here.
2. To what extent does the property provide a buffer to minimize the disruption of ecological processes on already protected land?
  - Three Bell I and II are located adjacent to and upstream of River Bluffs Open Space and will help reduce stormwater pollution, trash, noise and other abiotic impacts to River Bluffs Open Space.
3. To what extent are there important and/or sustainable wetland or riparian areas (note also water rights availability)?
  - There are no water rights associated with these properties. Based on a county-wide wetland study conducted in 1996, the wetlands located on the Property have the highest rating for importance, meaning they are highly functional and relatively large. These wetlands also have the highest rating for quality, meaning they are pristine, show little signs of human impact and are important regionally. Sensitivity also ranks high suggesting the likelihood of the presence of sensitive species is high.
4. How manageable are any exotic plant/animal species on the property?
  - Exotic plants such as leafy spurge, musk thistle and Russian olive are common on these properties, but with adequate weed control, they are manageable.
5. If applicable, what is the potential for habitat restoration?
  - The landowners are interested in improving habitat within the riparian woodlands, including developing a grazing plan, weed control plan and planting native plants where appropriate. The Three Bell II property is an active gravel mining operation and the landowners are interested in reclaiming future gravel pits and restoring them for waterfowl habitat.

**III. Scenic/Aesthetic/Sense of Place**

**Rating:**

<b>Medium</b>
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1. Does the property provide vistas or important scenic backdrop?
  - The highest scenic values are the active ranchland, riparian woodland and Poudre River channel.
2. What is the property’s visual exposure from roads, trails or other prominent locations?
  - Visual exposure is high, this property is visible from I-25 (65,000 motorists a day), CR 32E (900 motorists a day) and the Poudre River Trail once it is built.
3. Does this property serve as a community buffer or separator?
  - Three Bell I and II serve as a community separator between the rapidly developing small towns of Windsor and Timnath.

**IV. Outdoor Recreation/Public Use**

**Rating:**

**High**

1. What is the potential for public use on this property?
  - A trail easement will be donated along the eastern side of these conservation easements and the Poudre River Trail, a concrete public trail, will be built when funds are available.
2. To what extent does this property provide opportunity to integrate public use into a larger recreation network?
  - These properties are instrumental in completing the Poudre River Trail from Bellvue to Greeley, over 40 miles in length. This trail segment will also tie into Timnath's trail network and Windsor's trail network to provide dozens of miles of trail and recreation options.
3. What opportunities for outdoor recreation does this property provide?
  - Due to raptor nests, other sensitive resources and the interests of the landowners, public access will be limited to the Poudre River Trail and guided hikes approved by the landowners.

**V. Historical/Archaeological**

**Rating:**

**Medium**

1. Does the property contain significant archaeological or historic resources based upon State Historic Preservation Office criteria or National Register of Historic Places standards?
  - The site has not been surveyed for historic or prehistoric resources. Based on available reports, this site was first settled by European Americans in the 1850s. Prehistoric artifacts have been found near the sites including ceramic sherds, projectile points, hearths and bone awls. Therefore, it is likely that Three Bell I and II were also used by Native Americans.
2. Does the property contain other significant archaeological or historic resources of concern to local research institutions, professionals, interest groups or other agencies?
  - Not that has been documented.

**VI. Agricultural**

**Rating:**

**Low**

1. Is agricultural use of the land suitable and sustainable within the context of surrounding land use?
  - The surrounding land use is combination of gravel mining areas, suburban development and low density (rural) development. Farming and ranching is still a suitable land use, but the composition of land uses began to change in the last decade.
2. Does the property help maintain a sense of agricultural tradition and rural character?
  - Yes, the properties are currently used for ranching and the land is leased to a local cow and horse rancher. These properties, combined with adjacent ranching properties help maintain the rural and agricultural character of the area.

3. Is operation and management (lease, leaseback, etc.) of the property for continued agricultural use by the County economically acceptable/feasible?
  - No, these properties will be privately held and the landowners will ranch or lease the properties for ranching themselves.
4. What crops are grown?
  - Hay only.
5. What is the irrigation status and associated water rights?
  - There are no water rights associated with the property. Occasionally the lessee will divert water from their property to irrigate hay fields.

**VII. Geological/Paleontological**

Rating:

**Not Rated**

1. Does the property contain significant paleontological sites?
2. Does the property contain significant geologic features such as faults, synclines, anticlines, etc.?

**VIII. Environmental Education**

Rating:

**Medium**

1. Are there environmental, historical and/or cultural education opportunities?
  - Education opportunities related to the historical use of the ranch land, the Poudre River and active bald eagle nest are the best subjects for guided hikes and interpretative signs. The trail easement allows for an interpretative area on the Three Bell I site.

**IX. Political Factors**

Rating:

**High**

1. Is this a high profile acquisition from the public perspective?
  - This project is a high profile project in Fort Collins, Windsor and Timnath especially.
2. Will acquisition of this property serve as a catalyst for other acquisitions?
  - This project creates momentum and support to continue the Poudre River Trail north into Timnath.
3. Will acquisition of this property in the manner proposed serve as a positive example for other landowners?
  - The landowners of Three Bell I and II are in good graces with many landowners in the area and will assist the county in developing a strong, cooperative relationship with other landowners.
4. Does the project contribute to the Open Lands Program geographic balance?

- This project will serve the eastern Larimer County population, including the Town of Windsor and Timnath primarily. Once the trail is complete, it will be regional in scope and serve the communities of Fort Collins, Bellvue and LaPorte too.

**X. Price**

**Rating:**

<b>Medium</b>
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1. Is the price reasonable given current supply and demand and net present value?
  - Based on the completed appraisal reviewed by GOCO, we are paying below fair market value due to the donations made by the landowner.
3. Is the landowner willing to reduce the cost to the county for charitable or tax purposes?
  - The landowner has donated \$294,243 towards the purchase of these conservation easements.
4. Is cost sharing with partners significant?
  - Fort Collins, Windsor and GOCO have contributed more than \$2.3 million towards this acquisition. Larimer County is contributing only 20.2% of the total cost of these two conservation easements.
5. Can the goals of the Open Lands Program be achieved with less than fee acquisition?
  - Yes, conservation easements and a donated trail easement will be secured.
6. Will the property become more expensive or unavailable if not acquired now?
  - Yes, an offer by another party of \$4 million has already been made to purchase this property, presumably for development.
7. Are the projected annual management and maintenance costs acceptable and reasonable?
  - The only maintenance costs borne by Larimer County are associated with the trail easement. The Help Preserve Open Lands sales tax will pay for the maintenance of the trail easement and will cover the costs to monitor the conservation easements.

**Scoring System**

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The scoring system is used by Larimer County Parks and Open Lands Department staff with input from appropriate professionals and/or experts to evaluate various properties against the evaluation criteria so that the Open Lands Advisory Board can make reasoned decisions for recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners. The scoring system is an index, not a precise measurement, and is used as a guideline for setting priorities and making recommendations.

The process shall consist of an index of a high, medium, or low ranking for each of the criteria applicable to the property in question. There may be situations on some properties where a particular evaluation criterion is not applicable and therefore not ranked.

Adopted by the Open Lands Advisory Board, August 22, 2000  
 Adopted by the Board of County Commissioners, August 28, 2000