



Parks & Open Space

5201 St. Vrain Road • Longmont, CO 80503
303-678-6200 • POSinfo@bouldercounty.org
www.BoulderCountyOpenSpace.org

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS MEETING

Time/Date of Meeting: July 19, 2022

Location: Virtual Meeting

FROM:	Jeff Moline, Senior Planner Conrad Lattes, Senior Assistant County Attorney
AGENDA ITEM:	Revised and Updated Management Plan for Little Gaynor Lake
ACTION REQUESTED:	Approval

Summary

The county and developer approved and signed an initial management plan for the county's open space parcels in the Wildview/Hillcrest Heights subdivision in 1997 at the time of the property acquisition. The goal of the plan at that time was to maintain the current environment of the lake and wetlands including water levels. Since that time, a variety of factors have changed the conditions that supported those natural features. Additionally, the county is not able to control or manage the water levels with the water rights identified in the management plan due to a restriction to agricultural uses. Consequently, the management plan should be revised to reflect the new conditions and to recognize the county's role as the sole entity in planning and managing this group of associated properties.

Background

The county recognized the importance of Little Gaynor Lake as early as 1977, highlighting the area as a wildlife habitat at the time in the Report on the Environmental Resources of Boulder County, the precursor to the Environmental Resource Element of the Boulder County Comprehensive Plan (BCCP). By 1983, the county had designated Little Gaynor Lake as part of Critical Wildlife Habitat #16 and indicated that it had 30 acres of open water. It has retained that status in the BCCP ever since, including the timeframe when the county reviewed and approved the plans for the Wildview/Hillcrest Heights subdivision in the mid-1990s.

While the county received the property and lake in a condition that seemed sustainable in terms of baseline conditions for water levels, wetlands coverage, and vegetative cover, the last 25 years have illustrated a number of challenges to that assumption in this system. First, the county does not have the legal rights that would allow for the permanent storage of agricultural water in this playa lake. Second, as adjacent agricultural properties have converted to more efficient pivot irrigation systems, ditch runoff from those fields reaching the lake/playa has been reduced. Third, the changing climate that is warming and drying the region has had a role in lowering the playa's overall water depth. Lastly, stormwater runoff from all of the adjacent properties could be affecting water quality, particularly since over 50% of the playa's surface area is in private ownership.

The original Little Gaynor Management plan included direction that, subject to state water court and availability of irrigation water, the county was to provide two shares of Boulder and Left Hand ditch water to utilize to perform management of the site. This included during

spring and fall migration as well as the summer breeding season to augment the wildlife habitat values of the site. With no natural or artificial outlet (a characteristic emblematic of playas) and no ability to supply water to the area, the county lacks the resources to maintain the lake levels and conditions found on the property in the past. Subsequently, the character of the playa has changed and dried significantly in the last several years. Staff has consulted with various research scientists about the situation at the site. The results of those inquiries have led staff to conclude that this system is functioning as can be expected given the circumstances. But, staff acknowledges, this is different than previously expected where the playa retained water year-round. As the amount of open water has dwindled, researchers with the Playa Lakes Joint Venture suspected that the shallow water fostered heavy growth of algae and other vegetation which then reduced oxygen levels in the lake creating an anaerobic system that resulted in malodorous impacts on neighbors.

In the past, staff installed solar bee agitators to reduce anaerobic conditions. However, in the last year or two, water levels have dropped even further to the point the playa has dried up at times. Staff notes that this drying phenomenon this is happening regionally to other natural water and wetland bodies as well such as Sombrero Marsh east of Boulder.

At this time, BCPOS biologists are not ready to remove the area's CWH designation noting that although the site has changed, it does still harbor birds at various times of the year, albeit now more as a mud and alkali flats habitat than open water. As climatic and weather conditions change in the future, the playa will respond accordingly. Given the constraints on the property, staff recommends continuing to manage the site as a natural area with few interventions at this time other than the removal of unnatural equipment (e.g. solar bee water agitators) and the seeding of vegetation appropriate for alkali mud flats.

Discussion

BCPOS staff has revised and updated the Little Gaynor Lake Management Plan to accurately reflect what the county is capable of doing at the site in terms of land and water management. Additionally, the plan recognizes that the playa system has changed due to a variety of factors but the goal remains to manage the area with few interventions and as naturally as possible; staff feel that large scale interventions or changes to the site would be neither sustainable or effective in the long-term.

<u>BOCC Action Requested</u>

Approval of the Revised and Updated Little Gaynor Lake Management Plan.

Attachments

1. Revised and Updated Little Gaynor Lake Management Plan
2. Original 1997 Little Gaynor Lake Management Plan