

June 12, 2020

Improvements to NIVER NATURE HERITAGE TRAIL in Niver Open Space

Thornton is in the process of planning and designing improvements along the *Niver Nature Heritage Trail*. A public outreach webinar was held on June 1, 2020 to discuss the project with city residents. There were many questions with suggestions and input about the proposed project. Thornton is committed to listening to the community to develop this project, and to evaluating suggested improvements for future projects at Niver Open Space. For the purposes of clarifying the scope of the project and addressing the comments from the webinar, the following questions and answers have been compiled before the next steps are taken in the project.

What is a Heritage Trail?

The city's Parks and Open Space Master Plan describes the Heritage Trail system as "a series of loops that traverse culturally significant zones within the city and create special educational and interpretive experiences for users. Multiple loops, each with a distinct historical, cultural, or environmental theme were identified." The Heritage Trail plan was introduced in the 2007 Thornton Comprehensive Plan and approved by City Council in 2012.

The purpose of the Heritage Trail is to convey Thornton's spirit, character, and uniqueness by integrating a diverse spectrum of themes, or stories, which pertain to our history, culture, and environment. The Niver Nature Heritage Trail's theme is primarily about open space native plants and animal life, but also includes content about the creek and its tributaries, the history of flood control engineering in the area, land development dating back to early settlements, and other related material. The Niver Nature Heritage Trail extends beyond the boundaries of Niver Open Space, up to Pecos Park, about 1.5 miles to the north.

There are a number of designated Heritage Trails in the city including Eastlake Heritage Trail and Angler Heritage Trail, and other Heritage Trail loops are proposed, including Original Thornton, Lambertson Lakes, Big Dry Creek, Signal Ditch and Vista View trail. For additional information, click <https://www.thorntonco.gov/thornton-parks/Pages/open-space-master-plan.aspx>

What is proposed in the project's scope of work?

The scope of the project is to add Niver Nature Heritage Trail amenities along the trail loop segment south of Thornton Parkway, which includes Niver Open Space.

- A nature play area would provide an opportunity for children to experience play in a natural setting, and is proposed to be located just north of Niver Creek Tributary M, about 700 feet east of Huron Street.
- Three (3) story node seating areas are proposed along the ADA concrete trail that will provide seating and interpretive signage about the area.

The **proposed site plan** in the presentation PDF indicates areas for the nature play space and the story nodes.

Where is the project location?

Niver Open Space is bounded by I-25, Huron Street, 88th Avenue and 91st Circle. A trail easement through private property allows the Niver Nature Heritage Trail to reach Thornton Parkway. See the **Proposed Site Plan** on the first page of the presentation PDF. Funding for trail amenities along this segment of the Heritage Trail was approved in 2017.

Traditional park vs. open space trail amenities?

Some meeting participants expressed desire for additional park-like amenities within Niver Open Space. While it is easy to understand why a 'park' and an 'open space' can be seen in similar terms, they serve different purposes. Dedicated city open space is undeveloped land preserved as natural areas for wildlife and habitat, floodplains and wetlands, view corridors and land use buffers. Traditional parkland with turfgrass supports active play and team sports.

The design intention, which guides the segment's concept plan, is to provide environmental, historical, cultural information with natural play elements that enhance the passive open space qualities of Niver Open Space while minimizing environmental disturbance. The amenities have been sites specifically to avoid the 100-year floodplain or the spillway. See the attached GIS map / aerial which shows these areas comprise a significant portion of the site. The Heritage Trail amenities are clustered along the main walking trail near the trail lights for all-ages and physical abilities to access. However, as requested in the public meeting, the design team will take another look at additional or alternative locations for the trail amenities.

What is 'nature play'? Why is it proposed here?

A nature play area typically consists of natural elements and textures such as tree logs and stumps, boulders, dry creek beds, hills and gullies, etc. to be used for play. This is in sharp contrast to metal or plastic playground structures that include manufactured swings, slides and climbers. Nature play is unstructured and meant to enhance creativity and brain development. All the play material within the nature play area will be natural open space elements such as boulders, cobble stones, logs, gravel and mulch.

Nature play is increasingly recognized as an important form of children's recreation. This project would be one of the first such nature play projects in Thornton. The setting, close to the Niver riparian corridor, with visible wildlife and nearby trees, lends itself to this type of natural amenity.

The specific location was chosen because it is not in the floodplain or flood hazard area, is outside the Niver Creek Detention Reservoir dam and spillway, is relatively close to the traditional North Creek Park playground allowing children an opportunity to use both play facilities, has high visibility from nearby residences with proximity to a trail light and is a flat area that minimizes grading. With ease of emergency vehicle access from Huron Street, the site is the safest location within Niver Open Space.

What is a story node?

A story node is small informal seating area with a double-sided educational sign with informative content about Niver Creek and Niver Open Space. Visit the Niver Nature Heritage Trail story node in Pecos Park to see an example. Several story nodes have also been installed on the Eastlake Heritage Trail.

Story node 1 is proposed along the walkway just south of North Creek Park. The location would allow visitors to see both the North Creek playground and still enjoy the quiet open space.

Story node 2 is proposed south of the pedestrian bridge shown on the presentation PROPOSED SITE PLAN. While this location is within the 100-year floodplain, the improvements are minimal and will need review by civil engineers.

Story node 3 is proposed within the nature play area.

What type of public outreach has occurred for this project?

A public Zoom Webinar was held on Monday evening June 1st. Postcard invitations to the webinar were sent to surrounding residents. The meeting invitation was posted to Thornton Community Calendar, Thornton Parks Facebook page and the city's Open Space & Project Management web page.

Outreach began in 2013 with public meeting input and questions on planned renovations to Pecos Park, and installation of the first Niver Nature Heritage Trail story node. Outreach continued with 2015 meetings of STEM Launch 5th grade students and proposed improvements to the trail between Pecos Park and Anythink Library. In 2017, public input was gathered on three planned improvements to the area 1) conversion of the Niver Open Space trail from asphalt to concrete between Thornton Parkway and the RTD park-n-ride, 2) installation of trail lighting along the central Niver Open Space trail to 88th Avenue and 3) installation of a pedestrian activated crossing signal at Huron Street.

Please stay in touch for future outreach efforts.

What is the timeline for this project?

Thornton hired Valerian LLC, the landscape architecture design firm, in early 2020. It is hoped to complete design drawings late this summer with construction beginning towards the end of 2020 and project completion in 2021.

What is the budget for this project?

The budget for this project is approximately \$375,000 including design, planning, engineering, construction, and contingencies.

Will Niver Open Space maintenance be upgraded or enhanced with this project?

There were several comments regarding maintenance at Niver Open Space. We appreciate the community's interest and efforts in keeping this area clean. This year has been challenging due to COVID and resulting staffing shortages. Thornton will continue to make maintenance a priority. Parks recently had a crew cleaning underbrush and hiding places along the creek and will continue to be attentive to the changes at Niver Open Space and adjust as needed.

Will parking or access be enhanced as part of this project?

Several residents expressed desire for additional parking. Parking is not included as part of the Heritage Trail scope, but opportunities for nearby parking will be assessed and the request added to the Capital Improvement Project budget request list for annual funding. Developing parking within the existing Niver Open Space area is difficult due to access and limiting site conditions. Currently, public parking is available for Niver Open Space at the RTD park-n-ride lot on 88th Avenue, connected by a signaled pedestrian crosswalk. There is limited parking in the surrounding neighborhoods, along 91st Avenue, 91st Circle and at North Creek Park.

Will there be additional lighting as part of this project?

Additional lighting is not proposed as part of this project. Trail lights were very recently installed from 88th Avenue to the pedestrian bridge and existing trail lighting is in place adjacent to I-25 and along the trail to Huron St. The proposed nature play location is approximately 60 feet from a trail light. While safety is always a priority, use of the nature play area at night is not encouraged. The proposed shade shelter is not planned to include lighting. Except for safety lights along the paths, the city's intention is to minimize open space lighting due to its impact on birds, other wildlife and night sky viewing, and to discourage use of open space areas late into the night.

Could the project include installation of musical instrument play pieces?

They will be considered for other city project locations and added to the Capital Improvement Project budget request list for annual funding. At this open space location, the 'music' of the sounds of the birds is desired.

Can more picnic tables be added?

The design team will research adding more picnic tables. Tables must be outside the floodplain, flood hazard and dam spillway zones. Adding more benches will also be evaluated.

Could the proposed shade shelter be larger?

The shelter proposed in the concept plan is approximately 120 SF. At this size, it fits the appropriate scale of the nature play area while accommodating an ADA accessible picnic table. Given that this is natural open space, an effort has been made to minimize the hardscape cover.

Could the project have a zip-line at Niver Open Space?

An active play zip-line is planned for the new park at 88th Avenue and Santa Fe Drive, with planned opening in 2021.

Can we get a copy the presentation?

A PDF of the presentation is below is included in this message/post.

Can we get a copy of the trails that link up with Niver Nature Heritage Trail?

Yes. Follow the link to A GUIDE TO THE CITY'S PARKS, OPEN SPACE & TRAILS. Please visit any city building or call or email for a paper copy.

https://www.cityofthornton.net/thornton-parks/Documents/open-space/post_user_map.pdf

Are the proposed improvements ADA accessible?

Yes, the proposed improvements will be ADA accessible. The story nodes and shelter at the nature play area will have a surface of compacted crusher fines that meet ADA requirements. The shelter's picnic table will be accessible as well. The nature play area includes an accessible loop with ADA compliant surfacing that allows wheelchair access through much of the play area.

Will the dam be cleaned and aesthetically improved?

The dam itself and detention space are not part of the Heritage Trail project scope. However, the city's Infrastructure Department is actively working with Mile High Flood District (MHFD) to reconstruct the dam outlet. That project is presently in design with construction tentatively planned in late 2020. Work will involve repairing/replacing the last one or two sections of pipe, and constructing a new outlet grate structure.

The area immediately upstream of the grate will likely be re-graded to be made accessible for maintenance and restored with wetland plantings. Thornton's Infrastructure Engineering Manager, Jim Kaiser who can be contacted at 720-977-6266 or Jim.Kaiser@ThorntonCO.gov will administer this work.

Can we get the stream to flow clearly?

Changes to Niver Creek and its tributaries are outside the scope of the Niver Nature Heritage Trail. Mile High Flood District in partnership with the city's Infrastructure Department, is examining long-term solutions to erosion along the creek. Opportunities for public input and questions will be a part of any project that proceeds. Parks Maintenance has been clearing brush along the creek to improve visibility and discourage homeless encampments.

Are there water fountains and restrooms available?

There are not water fountains or restrooms available at Niver Open Space. The amount of open space visitors currently does not warrant a restroom facility or port-o-let toilet, but could be considered in the future.

Is it necessary to build another playground, when one is already at North Creek Park?

Nature play is an entirely different play concept from the traditional North Creek Park playground. This is a new type of play facility for Thornton. This location, in a natural setting and in close proximity to dense residential areas, provides a unique play environment for local children. The North Creek Park playground is scheduled for replacement this year and public meetings will be held separately for that project.

Why not preserve the open space for wildlife?

The total size of Niver Open Space is 63 acres. The impact of this very low impact project to wildlife will be minimal. No trees will be removed as part of the project. This area is to remain very natural.

Will there be pollinator habitats and plants to attract them?

New plantings were not originally included in the scope of the project. That said, Thornton is looking into grant funding for 'pollinator gardens' and Niver Open Space would be a preferred location.

Can the improvements be spread out through the entire open space?

Several factors limit the placement of the proposed Heritage Trail improvements.

- To limit risk, improvements must not be built in the 100-year floodplain, detention area or dam spillway. These flood-related 'no-build' areas take up a very large share of the Niver Open Space. Please see attached map showing the floodplain and spillway, where new construction is to be avoided.

- Colorado Department of Highways (CDOT) has future plans to expand I-25 travel lanes onto the east side of Niver Open Space. The proposed site plan avoids placing any of the improvements near future construction.
- Mile High Flood District has tentative plans for erosion mitigation (re-grading) along Niver Creek Tributary M. This plan avoids areas that may be disrupted by construction.
- Areas in the northern part of Niver Open Space were originally considered. From 91st Circle to Thornton Parkway is private property, with an overlaying trail easement. Given the expressed requests for ‘spread out’ amenities, the design team will consider including an additional story node or seating area farther north.

Can a new bridge over Niver Creek be added as part of this project?

A bridge is outside the original Heritage Trail project scope, but the request will be added to the Capital Improvement Project budget request list for annual funding.

Does this project have a water feature?

Niver Creek and its tributaries are the water feature. The improvements would enhance appreciation of the creek’s role as wildlife habitat.

Who has reviewed the concept plan?

The concept has been reviewed by Open Space & Project Management staff, the Open Space Park Maintenance Supervisor and the Deputy Director and Director of the Parks, Recreation and Community Programs Department. It has been posted to the Open Space & Project Management city web page for the public and viewed by webinar participants.

Have local artists had an opportunity to bid on this project?

This is not considered a ‘call for art’ project. The design consultant has contacted a Colorado-based play structure fabricator for proposed play element ideas. Safety, durability and maintenance aspects are of great importance. The butterfly sculpture shown in the webinar plan will be removed due to concern about vandalism.

How can more budget be available for this project to increase the scope?

The project budget for this segment of the Heritage Trail has been approved, but additional funding for future improvements or project expansion can be submitted via the annual Capital Improvement Project budget process. Community input and concerns received at the webinar public meeting help to evaluate the type and priority of needed and desired improvements.

What will happen if the story node signs are tagged?

If that were to unfortunately happen, Parks Maintenance would clean the sign. The sign is an *i-Zone* brand product, which readily cleans and is resistant to cutting/scratches. If the damage were such that it has to be replaced, the sign would be replaced.

Will this project increase crime?

There is no reason to believe crime would increase because of the Heritage Trail project. The improvements are hoped to bring more visitors to Niver Open Space. A presence of more people with 'eyes on the space' is a recognized deterrent to undesirable activity.

What else is happening at Niver Open Space?

Several planned projects will affect Niver Open Space in the future.

- I-25 highway expansion -- A CDOT project is in the planning stages to expand I-25 travel lanes onto the east side of Niver Open Space. Expansion would impact the existing trail adjacent to I-25 and for this reason, project components have not been located along the portion of trail.
- Niver Creek and tributary bank erosion -- MHFD is exploring opportunities to gently re-align and re-grade Niver Creek Tributary M, within Niver Open Space. The proposed location of amenities should not be impacted by this work.
- Pedestrian crossing under Huron Street -- MHFD is working with the city's Infrastructure Department to implement flood control measures between Thornton Parkway and Huron Street. Part of this project could provide a below grade trail connection from the west side of Huron Street to the east side.

Can a summary of all improvements requested during the webinar be provided?

The meeting participants made the following suggestions:

- Additional lighting
- Additional parking
- A water feature
- A music making play feature
- Additional picnic tables
- A zip-line
- Teepees and a tunnel
- Aesthetic improvements to the dam (boulders, landscape etc.)
- Improved maintenance
- 'Spread program elements throughout Niver Open Space'
- 'Don't do the project at all'

Is the webinar concept plan the final plan for this project?

No, it is a step toward the final design. Plans will be revised in the next few weeks based on public input, internal staff review and project budget priorities/considerations. If there is strong support for 'spreading out' the proposed amenities, an alternative site plan could be developed, so long as the site plan respects the goals of avoiding the spillway and 100-year floodplain.

How will input be incorporated into the proposed plan? What are the next steps?

The webinar concept plan is being evaluated based on comments and concerns received and will specifically be evaluated for including Heritage Trail amenities in a wider area within Niver Open Space. Revised plans will be developed and made available on the city web page and to the webinar attendees.

Do not hesitate to contact Andrew Tadross with questions, comments and concerns at Andrew.tadross@thorntonco.gov or 303-255-7707.