INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Plan

The Parks and Open Space Master Plan is designed to serve a variety of purposes. These include:

1. Implementing the goals and policies regarding parks, recreation, trails, and open space included in the Thornton Comprehensive Plan.

2. Assessing current and future needs for parks, trails, recreation, and open space in Thornton.

3. Defining the community’s vision for a citywide parks and open space plan, and establishing goals and policies to move this vision forward.

4. Providing strategies to assist city officials in determining where to locate new parks, construct new and/or extend existing trails, construct new recreation facilities, acquire open space, and prioritize improvements to existing parks and recreation facilities.

5. Coordinating the location of parks, recreation facilities, trails, and open space with other land uses in the city to avoid potential land use conflicts.

6. Establishing standards for the types and sizes of parks, open space, trails, and recreation facilities and the amenities to be included in each area/facility.

This Master Plan uses the all encompassing term “Parks and Open Space” when referring to Thornton’s citywide system of parks, recreation programs, recreation facilities, designated open space, open lands, and trails.

Plan Update

The Parks and Open Space Master Plan is intended to be updated every three years to respond to changing or emerging needs, to update the strategies for acquisition and preservation of parks, open space, trail corridors and facilities, and to update priorities and action steps. Plan updates were completed in 2003, 2007, 2009 and 2012. This fifth update to the 2000 Parks and Open Space Master Plan was initiated in January 2016, and presented to City Council in 2017.

Relationship to Thornton Comprehensive Plan

The Thornton Comprehensive Plan establishes goals, major strategies, and key policies for Thornton’s neighborhoods, future jobs, and potential amenities for city residents, and serves as an advisory document for development in the city. The Plan gives a broad overview of how the city will grow, and where future development or redevelopment will occur. This document is not regulatory in nature similar to the city’s Code or zoning map, but provides an overall vision of how development should take place within Thornton in decades to come.

The city currently uses the 2012 Comprehensive Plan, adopted by City Council at a public hearing on September 11, 2012. Thornton City Council may periodically approve minor amendments to the Plan to bring private development proposals into compliance with the Plan’s vision. In March of 2015, City Council approved an amendment to the Future Land Use Map.
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While the 2012 Comprehensive Plan provides the ‘big picture’ vision, the city also uses more detailed plans to supplement the broader goals, strategies and actions of the Comprehensive Plan. The Parks and Open Space Master Plan is a supplement of the city’s Comprehensive Plan and outlines the key environmental corridors, comprehensive trail network and future parks, open space, and recreational facility expansion recommendations. A complete list of the goals, policies, and recommendations from the recent 2012 Comprehensive Plan Update related to parks, open space, recreation, and trails have been included in the Technical Appendices – Appendix 1.

PLANNING PROCESS

The Thornton Parks and Open Space Master Plan is the result of sustained effort by the Parks and Open Space Advisory Commission (POSAC), public input received from interested citizens, and research and analysis by city staff and consultants. This process benefited from earlier work done by the Parks, Recreation and Open Space Committee (PROS) during development of the original Thornton Comprehensive Plan. The planning process used to create this Master Plan update addresses current conditions as well as needs driven by the city’s growth.

Parks, Recreation and Open Space Committee (PROS)

The Parks, Recreation and Open Space Committee was one of four citizen committees formed by the Thornton City Council to assist with development of the original Thornton Comprehensive Plan. This committee identified issues that needed to be addressed and developed goals, policies, objectives and actual projects related to recreation needs in the community. Based on the work of the committee, a Parks, Recreation, Trails and Open Space Opportunities Map was developed that identified 47 opportunity sites throughout Thornton. This map was included as Exhibit 6.3 in the original Thornton Comprehensive Plan, and provided a valuable starting point for the work on the original Parks and Open Space Master Plan. The PROS Committee also recommended that City Council place a .25% sales tax increase on the November 1996 ballot to fund approximately 8.5 million dollars worth of park and trail improvements. Thornton voters did not pass this ballot measure.

Passage of the 1997 Parks and Open Space Tax

In 1997, citizens concerned with the preservation of wildlife habitat formed the Wetland-Eagles group (WE). They approached the Thornton City Council about purchasing land on the northeast corner of 104th Avenue and Colorado Boulevard, which had served as a winter feeding ground for hawks and eagles. City Council advised the WE group that the city would need an additional revenue source, such as an open space tax, to consider purchasing wildlife habitat. In response, the WE group along with other interested citizen groups worked to prepare and support a new sales tax initiative on the November 1997 ballot.

The 1997 initiative provided for a .25% sales tax increase. The proceeds of this tax increase are divided into thirds; one third for parks, one third for open space and one third to be determined by City Council based on recommendations of an open space and parks advisory commission appointed by the City Council. (The specific ballot language for this initiative is stated in the Technical Appendices - Appendix 2.) Thornton voters passed this initiative, which provided impetus for the formation of the Parks and Open Space Advisory Commission and preparation of a Parks and Open Space Master Plan. In November, 2013, Thornton voters approved the extension of the existing .25% sales and use tax for open space and parks purposes from its current termination date of December 31, 2018 to December 31, 2038. Voters also approved allocation of no more than 20% of the total annual revenues from the tax to be spent on or reserved for maintenance costs.

Passage of the 2000 Parks and Open Space Bond Issue

In November 2000, Thornton voters also approved a $22.4 million bond issue, to finance the costs of acquiring
116 acres of open space, 5.5 miles of trails, and 53 acres of parkland. The bond issue also provided for development of various facilities, including the Gravel Lakes and West Sprat Platte Fishing Facilities, Thornton Sports Complex, Croke Lake Park, Mountain View Park, Lamberton Lakes Park, McAllister Field, and the Margaret W. Carpenter Recreation Center Master Plan. (The specific ballot language for this initiative is stated in the Technical Appendices - Appendix 3.)

**Parks and Open Space Advisory Commission (POSAC)**

In spring 1998, the Thornton City Council formed the Parks and Open Space Advisory Commission (POSAC) and provided the Commission with a specific outline of its responsibilities. (The actual charge from the City Council to POSAC stating its responsibilities is included in the Technical Appendices - Appendix 5.) One of POSAC’s primary tasks is to prepare recommendations for the Parks and Open Space Master Plan and forward them to City Council. During 1998-1999, POSAC undertook this task with diligence, reviewing previous work done on the Thornton Comprehensive Plan, receiving the results of city staff and consultant research, conducting field trips, identifying and evaluating parks, trails and open space opportunities, and receiving public input. POSAC formulated its vision for parks and open space in Thornton, proposed goals, policies and action steps, and made recommendations for achieving a citywide system of parks, trails and open space. In March 2000, the Thornton City Council received POSAC’s recommendations regarding the Parks and Open Space Master Plan.

In October 2002, the city commissioned the first update of the Parks and Open Space Master Plan. POSAC members participated in over a dozen meetings with staff and the consulting team. In July 2003, the Thornton City Council received POSAC’s recommendations regarding the Parks and Open Space Master Plan Update.

In August 2006, the city commissioned the second update of the Parks and Open Space Master Plan. POSAC members met with City staff and the consultants in a dozen meetings to revisit the recommendations they made in the previous Plan Update. POSAC continued its focus on identifying the city’s current and future needs for parks and active recreation facilities, examining the geographic distribution of facilities within the city, identifying needs for recreation and senior programming, identifying “missing links” in the trails system, and identifying and evaluating potential opportunities for acquisition or improvements. Phasing and financing of acquisitions and improvements were also discussed and evaluated.

In April 2009, the third plan update was commissioned. POSAC members toured existing facilities and opportunity sites with city staff and consultants, and were briefed on potential needs and opportunities for open space acquisition, park and recreation facility development, and build-out of the trails system.

In August 2012, the city commissioned the fourth Master Plan update. POSAC members met with city staff and the consultants in a series of meetings to evaluate the city’s current parks and open space system and distribution throughout the city, identify future needs for recreation programs and facilities, identify primary trail corridors and prioritize missing links in the system, and to evaluate and identify open space acquisition opportunities.

In January of 2016, the City commissioned the 2015 update to include updated data through 2015. As part of the process, two public meetings were conducted to evaluate current park and open space distribution, trails and recreation facilities, and a survey was distributed to solicit feedback on parks, open space, recreation and trails. Six POSAC meetings were conducted to review process, public comments, survey results and the draft master plan update.

**Research and Analysis**

City staff and consultants assisted POSAC in their analysis of Thornton’s current and future needs for parks, recreation facilities, trails, and open space. Key tasks included estimating the city’s current and future population
and the current levels of service provided by the City’s existing parks and recreation facilities, as well as parks that are currently in progress by developers. The consultants also completed an extensive inventory of recreational and environmental resources in the community and developed profiles, design standards and service areas for the different types of parks proposed as part of the citywide system. City staff created a list of parks, trails, recreation activities and facilities that community members have identified as needed or desired based on contact with the community. In addition, a list of city-owned land was created from the city’s Geographic Information System (GIS). POSAC considered all of this information in making its recommendations on the 2000 Parks and Open Space Master Plan.

For each update, the existing parks and open space inventory was reviewed and amended, census and population projections were reviewed, levels of service for parks and recreation facilities were analyzed and for the majority of updates, neighboring municipal and multi-jurisdictional parks and recreation facilities were inventoried as a means of comparison to assist in understanding potential needs and/or expansion of Thornton facilities. (A listing of all of the projects recommended by Thornton residents since 1998 is included in the Technical Appendices - Appendix 6B)

Public Input
From 1996-1997, during the development of the Thornton Comprehensive Plan, the PROS Committee held a number of public meetings in each Council Ward of the City. The purpose of the meetings was to obtain input on park, trail, and open space issues throughout the community. Attendees were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their opinions on park, recreation and open space issues. This information was used in the formulation of the Parks, Recreation and Open Space section of the Thornton Comprehensive Plan. This information was also used by POSAC in the development of this Parks and Open Space Master Plan.

During regularly scheduled quarterly meetings, POSAC often hears from citizens on a variety of topics related to parks, trails and open space issues. POSAC allocates time at each meeting for public comment and gives careful consideration to public comment in the Parks and Open Space Master Plan update process.

2015 Parks and Open Space Master Plan Update Process
The following list summarizes the methods used by City staff and consultants to solicit public input during the 2015 update process. A complete Summary of Public Comment is included in the Appendices - Appendix 6A.

- **POSAC MEETINGS** - A series of POSAC meetings were conducted to review existing and updated inventory and data. These meetings were open to the public.

- **PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY** - An electronic survey was developed and links were provided on the city’s website. Hard copies were distributed at the Margaret W. Carpenter Recreation Center, the Thornton Community Center and the Senior Center. There was a total of 280 responses. A copy of the survey and the survey results are included in Appendix 17.

- **STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS** - Interviews were conducted with Thornton youth sports organizations in order to have a better understanding of current and future needs and program participation for each of the individual user groups and sports leagues. A Stakeholder Interview Summary is included in the Appendix 6A.

- **PUBLIC MEETINGS** - Two public meetings were conducted to solicit input from Thornton residents regarding the master plan update and parks, open space, trails and recreation facilities and programs. Public meeting summaries are included in Appendix 6A.

- **PRIOR PUBLIC OUTREACH EFFORTS facilitated in conjunction with other PLANS/UPDATES** - Public comments sought during previous plan updates were revisited as many comments were still relevant to this plan update (See Master List of Recreation Projects for the Parks and Open Space Master Plan - Appendix 6B).
Adoption
The first Parks and Open Space Master Plan was adopted on June 26, 2000, and the second plan update was adopted by City Council on May 11, 2004. The third plan update was presented to City Council in Fall/Winter of 2007 and adopted in January 2009. The fourth update was adopted in August 2013, and the current update was adopted by City Council in August of 2017.

PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITIES: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW
In October 1955, the citizens of Thornton created a non-profit corporation known as the Thornton Recreation Association. The Association was comprised of a number of non-profit agencies and was the precursor of the existing Community Services Department. The Thornton Recreation Association had a $1,500 annual budget and no facilities. Both winter and summer programs were offered at area school sites. No fees were charged, and although instructors were paid, many non-paid volunteers assisted them.

The first recreational amenity constructed in Thornton was the outdoor swimming pool located at Community Park at 94th Avenue and Gaylord Street. The pool was constructed by Sam Hoffman in 1957 and dedicated to the city in 1958. The pool has been renovated many times, and it remains in use today serving Thornton citizens each summer.

In the mid 1960’s, the city established its own Parks and Recreation Department and in 1973 the Thornton Youth Activity Association (TYAA) was formed. TYAA consisted of a number of youth sports groups operated by the parents of the children in the group. Today, many of the original sports groups remain in operation and are an integral part of recreational programming in the community.

In 1974, the city commissioned its first formal master plan for parks and recreation and, in 1980 the Thornton City Council adopted an update of the original master plan. Over the years, parks and recreation facilities have been added to the Thornton system as opportunities arose. Existing facilities are described in more detail in the following sections. (A more detailed community overview and historical sketch of Thornton is included in the Technical Appendices - Appendix 7.)

RECREATION AND TOURISM USES ELEMENT
In 2001, Colorado lawmakers adopted House Bill 1006, which requires master plans to include a recreation and tourism uses element. Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5 as well as this chapter of the Thornton Parks and Recreation Master Plan, meets the requirements of HB 1006 by detailing uses located throughout the city. These amenities are available to residents, employees, visitors and tourists alike. The city’s existing and planned parks and open space system provides diverse recreational opportunities, including team sports, fishing, skateboarding, golfing, trails for hiking, walking, jogging, and bicycling, as well as indoor activities such as dancing, swimming, basketball, fitness classes, and crafts.

PLAN ORGANIZATION
The Thornton Parks and Open Space Master Plan is organized into the following chapters:

1. Introduction - Describes the process used to develop the Parks and Open Space Master Plan, and its relationship to the Thornton Comprehensive Plan.
2. Existing Conditions - Describes types of parks, open space, trails, recreation facilities, and recreation
program that are currently available to Thornton citizens. This background provides a useful context for understanding the overall vision presented in Chapter 3.

3. **Vision, Goals and Policies** - Describes the vision, goals and policies, for a connected citywide system of parks, open space, trails, recreation facilities and recreation programs.

4. **Plan Overview: Citywide Parks and Open Space System** - Describes the importance of the Parks and Open Space Master Plan Map, how to use the map, and understanding the methodology used to create the map.

5. **Parks, Recreation and Recreation Facilities Element** - Examines current and future needs for parks, recreation and recreation facilities, and provides recommendations for areas of acquisition and design standards for parks.

6. **Trails Element** - Examines current and future needs for trails in Thornton and the significant opportunities presented by the South Platte River, Big Dry Creek, Niver Creek, drainages, and irrigation ditches for establishing trail corridors. This element also expands the master plan’s focus to include promoting Thornton’s heritage and the 2012 Heritage Trails Plan (See Appendix 12), incorporates “Complete Streets” policies, and establishes a network-based approach for implementation.

7. **Open Space Element** - Examines current and future needs for open space in Thornton and identifies and evaluates sites in the city and its planned growth area that have high value historical and natural resources. It presents specific recommendations for preserving certain sites as part of an open space system.

8. **Implementation** - Describes the tools, resources available, and proposed action steps and strategies necessary to implement the vision of the Thornton parks and open space system.

Because this is a plan update, the analysis and recommendations as presented in the Parks and Open Space Master Plan, adopted in 2000, 2004, 2007, 2009 and 2013 have been carried forward in their entirety where appropriate and have been modified where updates have been necessary. The original Master Plan organization has been retained. Updated Technical Appendices and Glossary provide additional information and more detailed data related to this Master Plan update.