



City Council
STAFF REPORT
City of Glenwood Springs
May 20, 2021

Agenda Item: South Canyon Planning

Action Requested: Evaluation of Planning Options for South Canyon Hotsprings.

Department: Parks & Recreation

Presented By: Brian Smith, Recreation Director

Background Info: South Canyon is a vast area of City-owned land with approximately 3,000 acres of designated parkland. This public land encompasses the City landfill, a shooting range, and vast area of unmanaged open space. South Canyon is the site of a set of undeveloped hot springs pools (a.k.a. the “Hippy Hot Springs”) where locals venture despite insufficient filtration flow and unhealthy fecal form bacteria levels.

The City also has concerns about illegal camping in the canyon. Recent interest from developers in transforming the undeveloped hot springs into a tourist destination, as well the construction of the new trails and potential for establishing camp grounds in the area, has generated concerns from a variety of stakeholders regarding impacts on nearby residents and the health of the ecosystem in the canyon, which is vulnerable to illegal dumping, human impacts, and fire risk.

Recreational Features:

- Archery Range
- Hiking/ Biking- South Canyon Trial System
- Hot Springs
- Gun Range
- Historical Sites

Issues:

- Primitive hot springs plagued by public safety issues, illegal activities, trash, broken glass, human waste, and high bacterial levels.
- High fire risk from illegal camp fires and the coal seam fires with no alternate evacuation routes.
- Roadside Dumping at turnoff along Route 134 leading to and above the landfill.
- Degraded health of the South Canyon Creek causing a polluted tributary into the Colorado.
- Illegal shooting threatens the safety of visitors and residents and leaves a lot of debris.
- Vandalism of unmarked historical sites in the Canyon.
- Social (or Pirate) trails creep into private property and sensitive wildlife habitat.
- Vandalism of the Gun Range and the law enforcement training areas and lack of maintenance and management by the gun club.

South Canyon Plan:

The Parks & Recreation Department has applied for planning grants and submitted budget appropriation request to conduct an improvement plan for South Canyon for several years. Grant requests have not been successful yet and other critical projects have taken priority for funding. A South Canyon Plan includes studies into the health of the water system, assessment of historical sites, evaluation of wildlife habitat, planning for a higher standard of maintenance, completion of development of the formalized trail systems, improvements to the existing gun range and archery range properties, development of camping sites, and development and a management plan for the

hot springs.

Several preparatory reports have been completed over the last few years to move a South Canyon Plan forward including:

- A Historical Study completed by Mountain States Historical in 2018.
- An independent study of the water table and water quality in the canyon done by Steve Beckley in 2018.
- Design of a developed shooting sports park done by Marty Fischer Course Design in 2018.
- An evaluation of the Canyon wildlife habitations conducted by CPW/DNR in 2019.
- Stream health and water quality monitoring evaluated by the department with the Middle Colorado Watershed Council in 2019.
- A bio-diversity study completed by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program in 2020.

An outline of a South Canyon Plan has been developed by Parks & Recreation and is included in the Council Packet.

Issues:

Area Specific Planning:

While the many recreational needs and safety issues in South Canyon affect each amenity planning efforts are best served by a phased and area autonomous approach. Because of the scale of impact developing the currently undeveloped hot springs will have on other features and residents in the area, staff recommend starting with a development and management plan for the hot springs.

South Canyon Hot Springs Planning Needs:

1. Appropriation of New Water Rights
2. Water Engineering: how much water can the spring produce, FEMA Floodplain (may not be necessary due to the size of the stream), potential impacts to the stream due to development, continued water quality assessment (some of this has been completed by Steve Beckley and we have those reports)
3. Traffic Study: traffic impacts and access points
4. Infrastructure Needs: water, sewer, stormwater, electric
5. Geo-Tech
6. Wetland Study & Delineation (CNHP did not include aquatic life in the Biological Diversity Study)
7. Public outreach (judging from past projects in South Canyon this will be a big part of the planning)
8. Fire Mitigation and Evacuation Planning

Planning Options:

There are 4 outcome options that will direct how planning proceeds for Council to evaluate and consider for South Canyon Hot Springs Improvements:

1. Develop the hot springs as a public and open access amenity, maintained by the City, similar the white water park or Carbondale's Penny Hot Springs, making improvements to allow for better filtration and water quality, safer access, trash receptacles, portalets and other public use improvements.
2. Develop the hot springs as a formalized facility, managed and maintained by the City. This option would hardscape and increase the number of pools and include a mechanical filtration system, improved access, parking, developed picnic areas and amenities as a paid day use park.
3. Contract with a private entity to develop the hot springs with a lease agreement, with operations and maintenance to be conducted by the private business. Similar to the White Water Inc. boat ramp and other private hot springs in the City.
4. Development in partnership with a private contractor to improve the hot springs as in option 2 to be owned and maintained by the City and managed in agreement with a private business to provide transportation to the Canyon and operation of a reservation system. Similar to Hanging Lake.

Staff Recommendation: Staff defers to Council for direction.

SOUTH CANYON AREA PARKS PLAN

Project Description:

The City of Glenwood Springs, CO, seeks to develop an area plan for the approximately 3,000 acres of designated parkland in the South Canyon area, west of downtown Glenwood Springs. The plan will provide recommendations for improving and protecting the canyon's ecosystem while enhancing public access to recreation and historical resources in the area. The plan will build upon recent studies and public outreach to address a variety of proposed upgrades to existing trails and sites, as well as the development of new recreational opportunities in the area, including camp sites and bike trails.

1. PLAN TYPE:

The City of Glenwood Springs seeks to support the development of a South Canyon Area Parks Plan to address the need for comprehensive studies and planning to protect and improve the ecosystem of this undermanaged and underutilized area while improving public access to existing and planned recreational and historical amenities.

Located west of Glenwood Springs, the South Canyon is a vast area of City-owned land with approximately 3,000 acres of designated parkland. This public land encompasses the City landfill, a shooting range, and vast area of unmanaged open space. South Canyon is the site of a set of undeveloped hot springs pools (a.k.a. the "Hippy Hot Springs") where locals venture despite insufficient filtration flow and unhealthy fecal form bacteria levels. The City also has concerns about illegal camping in the canyon. Recent interest from developers in transforming the undeveloped hot springs into a tourist destination, as well the construction of the new trails and potential for establishing camp grounds in the area, has generated concerns from a variety of stakeholders regarding impacts on nearby residents and the health of the ecosystem in the canyon, which is vulnerable to illegal dumping, human impacts, and fire risk.

The South Canyon Area Parks Plan project will bring together stakeholders from across the community, including residents, developers, outdoor adventure groups, environmental groups, and public agencies to undertake a planning process that will seek to address these challenges and find solutions acceptable to all parties. The key deliverable will be an improvement plan that addresses the misuse happening in the canyon, outlines potential approaches for enhancing public access and enjoyment of the area, and provides a framework for protection of the ecosystem and habitat that will bring awareness to this unique public amenity. This plan will build past efforts to inventory the historical and biological resources in South Canyon, including an intensive archaeological survey in 2003 with the US Forest Service to assess the historic significance and condition of the historic coal mining sites and a recently completed historical assessment.

The outcome of the project will be a plan that informs new management and recreation practices with understanding of the area's natural and cultural assets and the risks and benefits of developing new recreational opportunities. The plan will help to move forward on a clear path of action that will balance needs for preservation and protection with the advantages of enhanced public access to this unique public amenity. Potential recreation will include new mountain bike trails that

highlight the canyon's historic, 19th Century coal mining sites; a safe designated camp ground that will reduce illegal camping and mitigate associated wildfire risks, and a clean, developed hot springs destination.

2. PLANNING PROCESS:

(1) Convene Stakeholders – The Parks & Recreation Department will convene a South Canyon Area Parks Plan project team with representation from local officials, community members, outdoor adventure groups, landowners, developers, and environmental groups.

(2) Review Previous Plans & Studies – The project team will then undertake a comprehensive review of existing conditions and gather data from surveys, assessments, and planning efforts, including the History and Summary of South Canyon Coal Mine Historic Site prepared by Mountain States Historical, the South Canyon Trails Plan prepared by Kay-Lin Enterprises for Roaring Fork Mountain Bike Association, and development proposals.

(3) Conduct Resource Inventory – The project team will inventory existing assets in the South Canyon area, identifying and categorizing the land presently used by the public but without guarantee of remaining public; areas experts have identified as having historic or biological value worthy of preservation (animal and vegetative habitat, the streambelt corridor, traprock ridges, historic mining sites); areas unsuitable for development due to slope, wetland status, fire risk, flooding, or shallow soils; areas that might be preserved by regulation; cultural resources such as scenic vistas and community gathering places (Hippy Hot Springs); and areas used for outdoor recreation (gun range, bike trails).

(4) Assess Community Needs & Preferences – The project team will review stakeholder input to date, including the memorandum raising concerns of Garfield County and Glenwood Springs residents and minutes from public meetings. The project team will secure additional public input through scheduled workshops, public meetings, surveys, and stakeholder interviews, as well as digital engagement through social media and websites. Initial public outreach will ensure public understanding of and involvement in the planning process.

(5) Confirm Objectives – The project team will establish a set of objectives for the plan, such as creating a blueprint for preservation, maintenance, and development of parkland that balances preservation/environmental protection with enhanced public access/recreational opportunities.

(6) Seek Expertise – The project team will solicit assistance from public agencies with knowledge about land planning, resource protection, and historic preservation, such as the CO Department of Natural Resources, Colorado Parks & Wildlife, and History CO. The project team will procure a consultant to provide professional help with specific areas of identified need within the planning process.

(7) Plan Development – The South Canyon Area Parks Plan will identify assets that need to be maintained, provide recommendations regarding proposed development, and outline action steps for how the plan will be accomplished.

Deliverable: The South Canyon Area Parks Plan will describe and rank-order priorities for addressing protection, maintenance, and/or proposed upgrades to: natural areas; ecology and watershed health; the bike trail system; the gun range; the archery range; historical sites; the hot springs; the landfill; camping areas; mine reclamation and coal seam fires, and emergency action plans and evacuation routes. The plan will include a matrix that describes the proposed programs/projects, location, cost estimates, funding strategies and potential sources of funding, the timeline for implementation, and best practices for partnering, using volunteers to promote stewardship, adopting “green” environmental practices, outreaching to vulnerable populations, and instituting performance measurement programs.

4. NEEDS/CHALLENGES:

The City’s current lack of proactive management of the South Canyon area has (ironically) resulted in a great deal of preventable work for the Parks Department, as “pirate trails” creep into private property and sensitive wildlife habitat; roadside dumping along Route 134 is degrading the health of the stream causing a polluted tributary into the Colorado River; illegal shooting from the Glenwood Springs Gun Club threatens the safety of visitors and leaves a lot of debris; vandals have damaged unmarked historical sites in the Canyon; and the primitive hot springs have been plagued by trash, broken glass, and human waste that has generated bacterial levels so high that a Bio Hazard sign had to be posted to warn the public of the unsafe conditions.

There is general consensus among stakeholders across the community that action must be taken to manage these hazards; however, some stakeholders differ with regard to their conceptions for future use of the parkland in terms of what types of recreational amenities or private development might be beneficial or potentially hazardous to the area. This planning process will be designed to find solutions that best serve a variety of stakeholders who may have diverging interests they seek to protect. Making informed decisions regarding the future of the Canyon will require expert input on biological, historical, and recreational assets beyond the capacity of the Parks Department. Expert input will enable the Parks Department to move forward confidently with new plans.

The partners and stakeholders that will be engaged in the planning process, include concerned Garfield County and Glenwood Springs residents (represented by the South Canyon Group Coalition), adventure groups (such as the Roaring Fork Mountain Bike Association), the City (which bears the cost of management), developers (including Steve Beckley, who owns Glenwood Caverns Adventure Park and Iron Mountain Hot Springs), and public agencies (including DNR and CPW). Representation from these stakeholder groups will participate in the project team, provide data and assessments available to them, encourage participation in public input sessions, and provide expertise and knowledge for relevant aspects of the planning process. The plan will outline specific roles for each stakeholder.

The project will address the following challenging questions about South Canyon that have been set forth by the stakeholders listed above:

- How can we improve the safety and health of the primitive hotsprings for continued public use?
- How can we prevent pollution and illegal dumping? How much would prevention efforts cost?
- How do we maximize public benefit from the South Canyon parkland? What types of recreational amenities is there demand for?
- How might trail development impact the canyon's historic and biologic resources?
- How might new private development of recreational opportunities such as an archery range or commercial hot springs impact the canyon's historic and biologic resources?
- How do we minimize impacts of recreational development in the canyon?
- How should areas of the canyon that have historic and biological be protected?
- How can the water quality of the creek be improve in the long-term?
- What wildlife exists in the canyon that may depend on canyon habitat to survive? How do we protect wildlife habitat in the parkland?
- How will new uses impact needs for parking?
- Who will maintain new trails and amenities in the canyon? How will maintenance be funded?
- How will residents of the area be affected by planned development? Will there be traffic impacts?

5. IMPLEMENTATION:

The final plan will serve as a blueprint for implementation, clearly outlining the roles, responsibilities, and actions necessary to achieve the defined objectives, as well as a strategy to secure funding for implementation by leveraging state and County-level grant resources will local funds. The Glenwood Springs Parks & Recreation Department will advance the plan for adoption by the City Council, initiating a final, well-advertised public hearing for feedback and comment. Cost estimates and policy considerations developed within the plan will inform budgeting for maintenance and capital expenditures, as well as policy changes and approvals that may be necessary to implement the vision for South Canyon. Following adoption of the plan, the project team will host a series of informational meetings about plan implementation that will ensure continued public support and momentum. The team will also generate briefing materials to distribute to potential funders to build support.

The partnerships established for the planning project with Garfield County, the Roaring Fork Mountain Bike Association, landowners, developers, and public agencies, will be sustained to ensure timely implementation. The project team will establish a standing task force of members critical to the implementation of the plan to carry forward the work outlined within it. These partners may also provide matching funds on future grant applications for implementation.

The plan will instate well-thought-out management practices for this vast area of public land that was previously neglected, which will have significant impacts for ending the misuse that threatens the canyon and for enhancing protections for the historical and biological resources therein. Not only will this generate health, safety, and economic benefits for local residents, but it will also generate benefits for wildlife and water quality that extend far beyond the City boundary.

The project will protect wildlife through addressing pollution and guiding smart development; promote public safety through cleaning up toxic waste and mitigating fire risk; connect people to the outdoors by enhancing recreational opportunities on bike trail and at the hot springs; and inspire exploration of unique public lands that previously lacked sufficient infrastructure for access.

South Canyon Management Zones



Legend

- Park Lands - Open Space
- Bureau of Land Management

MIDDLE

- 'Alpine Slide' Trail
- Gun club usage?
- Access agreements for adjacent landowners
- City landfill site
- Dead standing timber removal & repurposing
- Douglas fir & Pinon pine regeneration coups

LOWER:

- Archery range upgrade
- Pedestrian bridge usage?
- Carpark lot establishment
- Trail head
- Hot springs public usage

UPPER

- 'Horse Mountain' Trail proposal
- Coal seam fire mitigation work
- Carpark
- Dumping hotspots

