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Open Possibilities

Nearly a year after election, Hogbacks area revegetating

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The Daily Record*

Surrounded by a peaceful tranquility broken only by an occasional bird call, the Hogbacks area is quietly revegetating itself as it heals scars caused by years of overuse.

"Mother Nature will do a lot of the recovery that needs to happen here," City Councilman Jon Stone said during a gathering late Thursday afternoon at the Hogbacks just east of Skyline Drive. "Mother Nature is incredible when you leave her alone."

Representatives of various stakeholders met to discuss the future of the area. Almost a year ago, Cañon City residents voted 57 to 43 percent to allow the city to move forward with a master plan designed to create open space in the area just east of Skyline Drive. Since that time, the Hogbacks area has been reopened to low-impact uses, such as hiking, bicycling, horseback riding and bird watching.

"The area has been revegetating, and we've been blessed with that, but it's time to start moving forward," said Monica McGowan, the moving force behind the Skyline Hogbacks Preservation Campaign. Her group urged Cañon City Council to protect the unique qualities of the area through the open space ballot measure.

"The Master Plan for this area needs to be fleshed out," Stone said. "As a city, we need to get further along. We have \$20,000 in the budget to support this — the time is right to get this done in a way that is credible."

Everyone agreed the process will be a lengthy one.

"This needs to be done in the right manner," McGowan said. "This needs to be a slow process to do this right. But just as open space, this has been wonderful."

User groups, including Cañonland Walkers and Hikers, Rocky Mountain Backcountry Horsemen, Garden Park Paleontology Society and Lower Arkansas Mountain Bike Association, have banded together to support the effort.



City Councilman **Jon Stone** talks about the progress of the Hogbacks project Thursday.
Jeff Shane/Daily Record

"This is a great facility for the entire city," said Curt Sorenson of Cañonland. "We're thrilled to see the way the land is healing. We're happy to help in cleanup, trail building and fundraising — we'll help out in any way we can."

His wife, Peggy, said the group has hiked the area in all seasons and types of weather, including deep snow.

"We've made snow angels here," she said.

Brian LeDoux of LAMBA said he enjoyed riding his mountain bike in the Hogbacks, which is beginning to suffer a weed overgrowth that needs to be addressed.

"Black thistle is disgustingly thick," LeDoux said. Coupled with rain damage from last summer's downpours, the Hogbacks is still rideable but is no longer enjoyable, he said.

"We need to improve the trails so it's easy to walk as well as ride," Sorenson said. "We need to plan so we are not making trails to increase erosion; we want to minimize the erosion."

Becky Schiola, RMBCH, said her group's purpose is to keep public lands open to public uses.

"We teach 'leave no trace,'" Schiola said. "I'm so excited about this. We can work together to make this a happy place."

The Hogbacks area holds great potential as an educational tool as well as recreational space. Andy Fieth, program administrator at Garden Park High School, is eager to utilize the space to help educate children. He said he would like to help get students involved, so they take pride in their community and ownership of the open space.

The area incorporates history, geology, paleontology, flora and fauna in a relatively small space — the perfect teaching tool. Skyline Elementary School fifth-graders already have studied the area and held a clean-up effort for Earth Day.

"The possibilities are endless," Peggy Sorenson said. "This community open space is a potential resource for everyone in the Cañon City area. This is the perfect resource for educational purposes and conservation efforts."

McGowan said the diverse groups are collaborating to continue the preservation group's original mission — to assist the city in planning and with community support. Garden Park Paleontology Society has agreed to be an umbrella 501(c)3 organization for grant writing and other fundraising.

"There is such strength in collaboration," McGowan said. "The next step is to bring this back into the community's eye."