

# Hughes Site/Civic Assembly: Natural Areas FAQ

## Land Conservation and Acquisition

*Q: Has the Natural Areas Department ever had a chance to acquire Hughes as a natural area or consider acquiring it, and if so why did they not do so?*

A: The City of Fort Collins (City) entered into negotiations to acquire the Hughes Stadium site from Colorado State University (CSU) after the ballot initiative passed in 2021. Natural Areas acquires lands in an opportunistic manner, working with willing sellers. Prior to the ballot initiative, Natural Areas Department (NAD) had not had any negotiations with CSU about acquiring the property as a City natural area. This area is not identified in Natural Areas 2014 Master Plan nor the 2019 Foothills Natural Areas Management Plan as a high priority for additional land conservation.

*Q: Would NAD need to take out a loan to purchase this property?*

The City of Fort Collins financed the purchase of the Hughes property in 2023. The purchase price for the Hughes site was approximately \$12.5 million. An initial cash payment of \$4 million drew \$2 million from the Natural Areas Fund and \$2 million from the City's General Fund. The remaining ~\$8.5 million was financed through "certificates of participation". These certificates require payment of principal and interest. It is anticipated that interest on the certificates will be approximately \$1.5 million for a total purchase price of \$14 million. When the final uses of the property are determined, the funding split will be adjusted accordingly by acreage.

*Q: What is the average cost per acre for recent land acquisition efforts in and around Fort Collins and how does that number compare to the cost to the City for the Hughes property?*

A: An analysis of other NAD acquisitions within the Growth Management Area between 2019-2024 shows a significant difference in the price/acre of properties with existing infrastructure and improvements such as houses/barns and those with minimal or no structures, or structures that are uninhabitable. While the Hughes site historically contained significant infrastructure, the City acquired this property after demolition of the stadium. Existing infrastructure is limited to a crushed asphalt/natural surface parking lot,

the disc golf course, underground utilities, a cell phone tower, and stormwater infrastructure that coexists with a disc golf course.

Considering the 7 unimproved properties NAD acquired between 2019-2024, the Hughes Stadium property price per acre was nearly double that of other acquisitions.

- Costs for properties other than Hughes: Average price/acre unimproved: \$46,172
- Cost for Hughes: Hughes price/acre: \$85,366

*Q: If Hughes were to become entirely a natural area, what would be the impact to the Natural Areas Department's ability to purchase other parcels?*

A: \$14 million represents 2-3 years of average spending for the Natural Areas department on land acquisition. For example, the Natural Areas Department has already committed to \$7 million of land acquisition/conservation projects for 2025. Natural Areas' purchasing power for other properties that become available in the next few years will be directly related to how many acres of Hughes end up managed as a City natural area.

## Land Management and Ecological Restoration

*Q: What is the current condition of the Hughes Stadium site?*

A: The property is best described in separate quadrants, each with unique topographical characteristics, land use histories, habitat conditions, and restoration potential. Rows of both native and non-native planted trees exist throughout the property.



#### *NW quadrant*

- Context: Location of former stadium
- Vegetation: Mostly restored native grasses and shrubs
- Soils: Imported fill over previously disturbed soils
- Challenges: Potential for unknown buried infrastructure to interfere with ecological functions is unknown
- Opportunities: Current habitat continuity with natural vegetation at Maxwell NA; native shrubs provide diverse habitat for grassland birds

#### *NE quadrant*

- Context: Former natural surface parking lot
- Vegetation: Mostly introduced grasses and weedy forbs
- Soils: Compacted soils
- Challenges: Vegetation will require significant restoration; wildlife barriers (road and dense housing) on two sides
- Opportunities: Post-restoration, the additional acreage would increase grassland habitat

#### *SE quadrant*

- Context: Stormwater infrastructure and disc golf course
- Vegetation: Introduced grasses
- Soils: Highly altered topography
- Challenges: Disc golf and sledding do not conform with Natural Area management; wildlife barrier (roads) on two sides
- Opportunities: Post-restoration, the additional acreage would increase foothills habitat

#### *SW quadrant*

- Context: Former natural surface parking lot
- Vegetation: Mix of native and introduced grasses
- Soils: Compacted soils over natural topography
- Challenges: Some restoration required; wildlife barrier (road) on one side
- Opportunities: Some vegetative cover consistency and habitat continuity with adjacent natural area

*Q: If NAD acquires Hughes, will it have to undergo restoration to be considered a natural area?*

When NAD acquires a new property, staff assesses conditions that require immediate management. For the Hughes site this would include:

- Enforcement of municipal code and natural areas best management practices would go into effect for those acres immediately including leash laws for pets and likely on trail use, to be consistent with adjacent natural areas management.
- NAD Rangers would begin education and enforcement efforts to protect natural resources.
- Aggressive, introduced plant and tree species such as noxious weeds and Siberian elm would require removal and ongoing treatment.

When NAD is ready to and has the capacity for active management of ecological and visitor use on a site, the following actions would be taken:

- NAD Staff would facilitate a site onboarding process, where plants, animals, and habitat conditions would be inventoried and assessed and documented. Staff would identify potential restoration projects, as well as potential needs for visitor use infrastructure, such as soft surface trails and expanded parking.
- Potential restoration and visitor use projects would then be evaluated and prioritized alongside other potential projects throughout the NAD system. NAD prioritizes work based on funding and staffing capacity, potential for enhancing ecological function, resource protection, connectivity, partnership opportunities, and the opportunity to support community safety and wellbeing, as well as cross-City priorities. Top-tier projects typically get prioritized for completion within the following 2-5 years depending on cost and resource availability.
- Given that prairie dog colonies exist on adjacent properties it is important to recognize that prairie dog colonies do not allow for the restoration of grassland species, as vegetative species cannot outgrow the grazing impact of colonies. It will be important to actively manage prairie dogs while the site undergoes restoration.

*Q: How would restoration impact the site's condition?*

A: Typical restoration projects for upland areas include initial treatments to suppress non-native grass species (smooth brome, crested wheatgrass, etc.), and noxious weeds, while maximizing ground cover and soil microbe growth. After multiple years of restoration efforts, native grasses, forbs, and shrubs would be expected to provide improved habitat and cover for invertebrates, grassland birds, vertebrates, and mammal species. The impact

of restoration efforts will always require ongoing adaptive management actions (beneficial disturbance such as fire, grazing, etc.) to retain healthy qualities. Beneficial restorative impacts will decrease in areas adjacent to roads, homes, and trails, due to continual non-native vegetation introductions. Consistent with other restoration efforts in the surrounding foothills area NAD's restoration goals for this site would likely include:

- Enhanced structural and native species diversity
- Improved soil health

*Q: What is the estimated cost and timeline for ecological restoration work?*

A: The costs of restoration would vary greatly depending on the extent of acreage restored, the underlying conditions of specific areas, the goals for restoration, and the ongoing adaptive management required to retain restoration improvements. Restoration is an ongoing process and requires long term adaptive management and disturbance. On average grass and shrubland restoration require 10 years of intense management to get established. The NW and SQ quadrants appear to be the best candidates for moderate-cost restoration, and they have the best opportunity for habitat connectivity with existing natural areas. *Note: estimates are not based on a full ecological assessment of the site.*

- NW quadrant
  - Assumption: some potential unknown buried infrastructure may complicate restoration
  - Restoration work enhances existing native grass and shrubland community at a cost of roughly \$10,000 over 10 years
  - Review of the environmental Phase I environmental analysis shows that the stadium was fully removed from the site.
- SW quadrant
  - Remove invasive species, enhance vegetation diversity and structure, mitigate soil compaction and nutrient depletion, remove concrete infrastructure, estimated cost roughly \$15,000 over 10 years
- NE quadrant
  - Mitigating soil compaction and nutrient depletion to rebuild soil structure would likely take decades of investment to achieve restoration goals
  - Restoration of the surface vegetation for both the NE and SE quadrants would be roughly \$300,000 over 10 years
- SE quadrant
  - Assumption: cross-country use would be restricted in order to promote revegetation (i.e. disc golf and sledding use would be halted)

- Restoration would need to be completed in concert with stormwater management requirements. See the cost estimate for NE quadrant above.
- Restoration of the surface vegetation for both the NE and SE quadrants would be roughly \$300,000 over 10 years

The timeline for ecological restoration varies greatly both depending on uncontrollable conditions such as drought but also depending upon the extent or ecological function in question. For example, soil structure takes hundreds of years or more to restore to pre-impact conditions. Conversely on the surface, restoration to native vegetation can take decades to gain but the true diversity of an intact prairie may also take hundreds of years. Ecological restoration in an urban context requires an ongoing commitment to adaptive management as the continual influx of non-native species exert pressure for landscapes to degrade.

The western side of the property presents the best opportunity for contiguous habitat to existing natural areas and efficient restoration costs.

*Q: Could a natural area be compatible with multiple uses, i.e. disc golf, sledding?*

A: Across the City, natural areas exist adjacent to and operate in concert with diverse land uses ranging from parks to housing and other built environments. Any of the proposed uses currently being considered by the Civic Assembly would be compatible in areas **adjacent** to a natural area. The final site plan would likely influence the goals and practices NAD employs to manage habitat and visitor use.

Generally, across Fort Collins, NAD acquires, plans, and enhances properties which include nature-based forms of recreation, while the City's parks are planned, built, and managed for active and programmed forms of recreation (disc golf, sledding, playgrounds, ball fields, bike pump tracks). It would be difficult to tie management of the existing disc golf course with FCNAD's mission and funding constraints. Sledding is another example of recreation that is typically not allowed in natural areas.

There are examples of situations where historical use gets adopted into a natural area when it is created. The Aggie "A" above Maxwell Natural Area is one such example. Mixing uses that don't match up well creates ongoing challenges for staff. Managing the A is not easily aligned with NAD's mission, even though it is an important historic landmark of Fort Collins. The simplest solution to maintain a disc golf course, would be to designate that area as a park facility and reserve other portions of the property for a natural area.