



M A S T E R   P L A N  
E X E C U T I V E   S U M M A R Y

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## PARKS AT A GLANCE

**DENVER MOUNTAIN PARKS FACTS**

- 14,141 acres of parks
- 22 developed parks
- 24 conservation/wilderness areas
- 4 counties: Clear Creek, Douglas, Jefferson, Grand
- 70% of Denver Park and Recreation's 20,000-acre system
- 1% of the department's operating budget and 3% of its capital budget (2007)
- 68% of Denver residents visit a DMP at least once a year (Game Plan Survey)
- Open space preserved beginning in 1912
- Genesee Park first (1912) and largest park (2,413 acres)
- Genesee Outdoor Experiential Center
- Colorow Point smallest park (0.5 acres)
- Highest city park in the USA: Summit Lake (13,000 feet)
- Two bison herds, related to the last herds at Yellowstone National Park
- Two of the metro area's top ten tourist attractions: Buffalo Bill's Grave & Museum and Red Rocks Park & Amphitheatre
- Major parks and scenic roads listed on the National Register of Historic Places
- Bear Creek watershed and headwaters
- Evergreen Golf Course and historic Keys on the Green Clubhouse
- Gifts and food year-round at Pahaska Teepee and Red Rocks, and summers at Echo Lake Lodge
- RV and tent camping Chief Hosa Campground
- Permitted group events at historic Chief Hosa Lodge and Newton Park
- Highly intact Mt. Morrison Civilian Conservation Corps camp
- Internationally known personal collection of William "Buffalo Bill" Cody and American West
- Dedicated funding, 0.5 of a mill levy from 1912 to 1956
- Initial 1914 Plan by nationally known landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.
- Distinguished architects and landscape architects: J.J. Benedict, Burnham Hoyt, S.R. DeBoer, E. Mann, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.

<b>CLEAR CREEK COUNTY</b>	<b>TYPE</b>	<b>ACRES</b>
Echo Lake	Park	616.3
Summit Lake	Park	161.83
Forsberg	Conservation	1.91
Hicks Mountain	Conservation	840
Mt. Judge	Conservation	360
Pence Mountain	Conservation	560
Snyder Mountain	Conservation	240
Total acres in Clear Creek		2780.04
<b>JEFFERSON COUNTY</b>	<b>TYPE</b>	<b>ACRES</b>
Bell	Park	480
Bergen	Park	25.431
Colorow Point	Park	0.537
Corwina	Park	297.82
Cub Creek and Dillon	Park	549.14
Dedisse	Park	420.42
Deer Creek	Park	89.7
Fillius	Park	107.674
Genesee	Park	2412.72
Katherine Craig	Park	56
Little	Park	400.34
Lookout Mountain	Park	66.11
Newton	Park	431
O'Fallon	Park	860
Pence	Park	320
Red Rocks	Park	804.19
Starbuck	Park	11.13
Turkey Creek	Park	61
Bear Creek Canyon	Conservation	130
Bergen Peak	Conservation	520
Berrian Mountain	Conservation	520
Birch Hill	Conservation	160
Double Header Mountain	Conservation	40
Elephant Butte	Conservation	665.1
Fenders	Conservation	40
Flying 'J'	Conservation	80
Hobbs Peak	Conservation	40
Legault Mountain	Conservation	160
Mt. Falcon	Conservation	160
Mt. Lindo	Conservation	80
N. Turkey Creek	Conservation	40
Old Cemetery Ground	Conservation	0.185
Parmalee Gulch	Conservation	2.88
Stanley Park	Conservation	80
Strain Gulch	Conservation	40
W. Jefferson School	Conservation	80
Yegge Peak	Conservation	40
Total acres in Jefferson County		10271.377
<b>DOUGLAS COUNTY: Daniels Park</b>	<b>Park</b>	<b>1000.65</b>
<b>GRAND COUNTY: Winter Park</b>	<b>Ski Resort</b>	<b>88.9</b>
<b>Total acreage</b>		<b>14,141</b>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

***The Denver Mountain Parks Master Plan is a strategic plan that examines the value of the Mountain Parks to the people of Denver; provides sustainable management strategies for the funding, marketing, and protection of the currently underfunded system; and proposes both large and small improvements for the next 5-20+ years, to take this system of parks to a level of quality commensurate with its international status.***

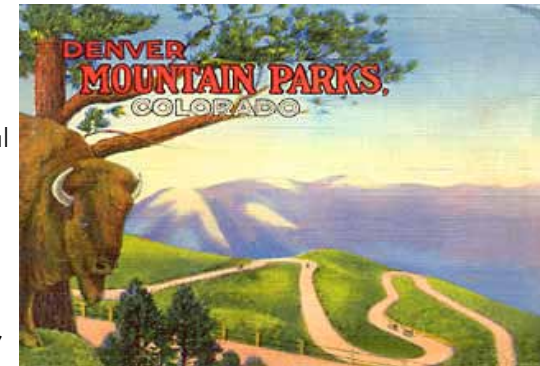
### BACKGROUND

Denver residents love their parks, one of the most diverse, expansive, and historic park and recreation systems in the West. In the early 1900s when Mayor Robert Speer and his civic colleagues crafted their bold “City Beautiful” vision of parks and parkways throughout Denver, they set on an equally aggressive campaign to acquire and develop the other “half” of the park system: the Denver Mountain Parks (DMP). Decades ahead of other Colorado counties and cities, Denver created a mountain open space system outside of the city itself, safeguarded from development and accessible to all Denver citizens. The Mountain Parks were an extension of the City Beautiful parks in town, intended to provide an equitable mountain experience for everyone and not just the privileged. The result is a comprehensive system of 22 accessible mountain parks and 24 less or inaccessible conservation areas that totals more than 14,000 acres in Clear Creek, Douglas, Grand, and Jefferson Counties.

***“The Mountain Parks idea in Denver is equality of opportunity....”***  
 Denver Municipal Facts  
 Vol. 1 #15 May 17, 1913

The DMP system is unrivaled in its spectacular settings and variety of outdoor experiences. In this municipal park system visitors can find bison, an international ski resort, an alpine lake 13,000 feet above sea level, and Red Rocks Park and Amphitheatre, carved out of 200-foot high red-rock monoliths. Starting in 1912, Denver acquired land for its scenic beauty, natural resources, views, and recreation. The

system stretches over five life zones from near the peak of Mt. Evans (with a 10,000-year-old fen and plants found nowhere else outside the Arctic Circle) to the oak woodlands of Daniels Park in Douglas County. Even the bison are unusual; their lineage traces to the last herd in Yellowstone National Park.



Renowned architects and landscape architects designed the roads, buildings, and stone structures that give the parks their character. This Master Plan updates the work of the nationally known landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., of Massachusetts, who completed the initial 1914 plan. Today, the DMP are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

With the exception of Winter Park in Grand County, all of the parks are officially designated parkland; none can be sold without approval by a majority of Denver voters. In addition, close to 93% of the parks must maintain their purpose as public parks because of additional deed restrictions. The DMP system was sustained by a dedicated 0.5 mill levy, passed by Denver voters in 1912, until City Council retired the levy in 1956. The Mountain Park Board that had provided oversight also was disbanded and the system became one of the many maintenance districts in the department, competing with city-wide operating and capital needs.

The funding and, consequently, the condition of the DMP began to slip over time. Denver’s funding for the Mountain Parks is approximately 1/3 of what other counties and cities are spending on their open space and mountain systems. DMP receives 1% of the Parks and Recreation operating budget and 3% of its capital budget

despite its size and complexity. The result has been a decline in the condition of the infrastructure (from social trails to deteriorating roofs and picnic tables), degradation of the natural resources, crowded parks, and few visitor services. As of 2008, DMP has a lone ranger and no printed maps.

***The Plan and its recommendations are based on the four DPR Game Plan values that drive the Parks and Recreation Department: equity, sustainability, engagement, and economic soundness.***

Context has changed as well from 1912.

Ninety years ago

Denver had a population of more than 200,000 residents while the other counties averaged 14,000 residents each. Denver was providing the only public mountain parks for all the Front Range counties. Today the open space and mountain park systems are regional and reciprocal in use, whether being used by people or wildlife. From the 1960s through today, dedicated sales taxes and mill levies have been passed creating extensive open space and mountain park systems managed by many Colorado counties and cities. Most DMP visitorship is similar to what is experienced by other county open space parks. Around 1/3 of the users are from the local county, 1/3 are from the City and County of Denver, and the final 1/3 are from the other surrounding cities and from out of state. Denver now is one partner of many in a complex regional open space system.

Since the mill levy was retired, elected officials and others have questioned whether Denver should own or manage the DMP, in effect, also questioning whether the DMP are used and valued by Denver residents. These difficult questions were prompted by funding competition and the lack of current data about the DMP. In fact, the DMP were not included in the 2007 \$500 million Better Denver Bond, with the expectation that this Master Plan would answer those longstanding questions and make recommendations about the future of the DMP. In 2006, with funding from a Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) Planning Grant, the Denver Mountain Parks Foundation, and City capital funds, Denver Parks and Recreation began the

18-month process to research and craft recommendations for the DMP with a comprehensive Denver Mountain Parks Master Plan.

The DMP Master Plan is heavily research-based. The process was expansive, with public outreach in four counties, extensive research and surveys, and oversight by a 50-member Advisory Group of regional civic leaders. More than 800 1:1 interviews with park users, a 1,500 person generalizable survey of Denver adults, focus groups, and other research tools analyzed current use patterns and values held by Denver residents. Experts from around the region were invited to Roundtable Work Sessions on funding, marketing/communication, and recreation. The website continually posted information on the planning and invited comments through a related blog. See <http://denvermountainparks.org>. The Plan is broadly divided into three sections that cover research findings; management recommendations (ownership, funding, communication, and protection); and physical and programmatic system-wide and individual park recommendations.

#### KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

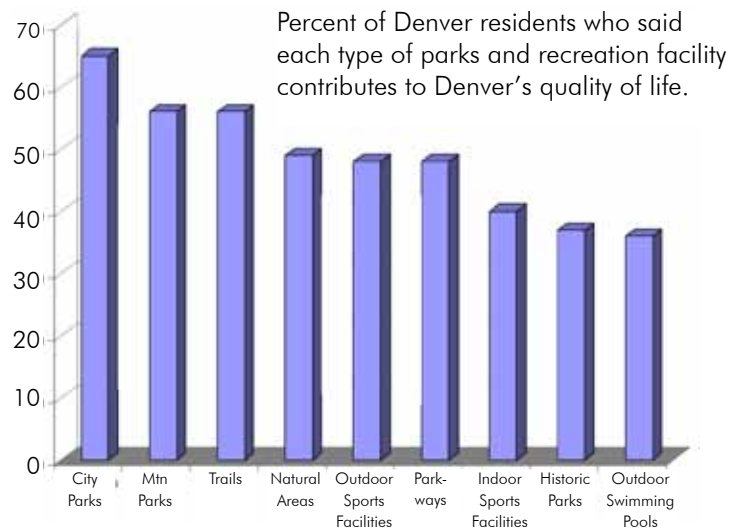
Do Denver residents use and value the DMP? According to research, the reply is a resounding yes. Research showed that lack of information and many misperceptions exist about the Mountain Parks, especially about users. The DMP are heavily used. Statistically valid surveys showed that 68% of Denver residents visit a typical (excluding Red Rocks and Winter Park) DMP at least once each year. Add visits from other non-Denver



WOW Camping Program at Genesee Park

users to the traditional DMP and the regional and tourist visitors to Red Rocks and Buffalo Bill, and total visitorship to the entire system is more than two million people annually. O'Fallon Park alone can have more than 1,000 people clustered around Bear Creek on a hot weekend, and Lookout Mountain, with its picnic area, Pahaska Tepee, and Buffalo Bill attractions, hosts close to 500,000 visitors from around the world every year.

Surveys also showed that 78% of Denver residents considered the DMP important to their quality of life, even more so than some other segments of the park and recreation system. Denver residents echoed the founders' words in expressing why Denver Mountain Parks are important to them and to the city: quality of life (primarily recreation and health), visionary protection of natural resources, and civic pride.



Source: 2003 Game Plan General Survey of Denver residents

The key benefits and values provided by the DMP continually expressed by park users and summarized by the Advisory Group are:

1. Play and Refuge

Denver should ensure that all residents, not just those who can afford it, have access to the mountains for play and refuge. Given its large population base, Denver should proactively protect land for its residents' quality of life.

2. Protection

Denver should continue helping to protect natural resources—water, wildlife, views, forests and meadows, mountaintops—that are essential to the future of the region. Denver Mountain Parks are Greenprint Denver in action since 1912.

3. Wonder

Denver should ensure that every city adult and child experiences the wonder of nature, in both urban and mountain environments. Connecting people, especially kids, to nature produces quantifiable physical, educational and social benefits.

4. Stewardship

Denver should be a vigilant steward of this economic benefit and public asset, caring for these irreplaceable mountain lands and natural resources for today and for the future. They are a source of civic pride as well as revenue.

5. Partnership

Denver should be a full partner with the other counties and cities to provide this regional open space system. Because Denver Mountain Parks have evolved into an integral part of a regional recreational resource, it is more important than ever before to see them in that larger context.

6. Celebration

Denver should protect and celebrate the western history expressed throughout the DMP. The DMP contain some of the most important historical and cultural attractions in the region.

Research also affirmed their longstanding economic value, particularly in terms of tourism, business location decisions, and direct revenues to Denver. Winter Park contributes \$2.2 million a year to the Parks and Recreation capital fund, and bison sales almost cover the cost of the herd. Red Rocks and Buffalo Bill Grave and Museum attract more than a million visitors from around the world each year and consistently rank in the top ten tourist attractions in the metro area.

Trend and user research analyzed DMP's established recreation niche in the region. Based on the parks' natural resources, site design, and historic use, DMP have a unique role in the region in accommodating highly social activities from large family reunions at a picnic park to a geology class at Red Rocks. At the same time, less-visited backcountry hiking trails offer a quiet way to escape the crowd. As visitors repeated in interview after interview, the parks have something for everyone. Even so, recreation trends shift, and the Plan outlines criteria to research and evaluate any recreation activities or sports. Rock-climbing, geo-caching, and family camping exemplify three new uses identified in the Plan for further study.



*Ropes Course at Genesee Park*

## KEY MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

### Ownership

Even if highly valued and used, is there a more efficient way to manage the DMP? Would it be better for different agencies to manage them? Should Denver sell them? A significant goal of this Plan was to vigorously research and pursue all options for the DMP. Research showed that Denver voters are unlikely to approve sale of any park land and think that a sale of DMP would be short-sighted. Charter and deed restrictions also essentially make sale extremely difficult, if not impossible. For example, the 5,800 acres purchased from the USDA Forest Service in 1914 would revert to them at no cost if Denver no longer managed them as parks.

Other agencies show little interest in taking over responsibility and management of the DMP, primarily because Denver residents also heavily use their open space systems. The regional perspective of the DMP is that Denver was the visionary leader in acquiring public open space and maintains that responsibility to its citizens (as well as the region) today. It costs money to take care of the DMP, whoever manages them. As of 2008, Denver spends around \$70/acre, approximately 25-35% of what is spent on other open space systems in the area. The counties where DMP are located definitely acknowledge the value that these parks provide their communities. For years many allied agencies, such as Jefferson County, Douglas County, and Evergreen Park and Recreation District, have invested in DMP through trails, roads, a lake house, and other amenities that they funded and built on Denver land.

The hope and expectation expressed by the Advisory Group and allied agencies is that Denver fund its fair share of the regional partnership, while collaborating wherever possible. Consequently, the Master Plan calls for Denver to keep the management and increase its reinvestment in the Denver Mountain Parks in order to bring them up to a quality comparable to other open space parks in the region, and to enhance the system's unique, historic facilities to a national level of quality.

## Funding and Partnerships

The Plan calls for a responsible “quilt” of short- and long-term funding and partnership strategies that realistically respond to today’s economic instability and shrinking city budgets. It will take time and partnerships to build the funding bases and gain momentum. The quilt outlines three primary strategies.



**1. A Bigger Share of City Resources.** A first step is for Denver to increase its commitment to the DMP from existing capital and operating funds, not only to repair an aging system and provide basic services to visitors, but to reaffirm the City commitment to the regional open space partnership. Although difficult to do in a tight economy, the context for this shift is encouraging. The major needs of many of the urban parks will be addressed by the \$93 million share of the Better Denver Bond and ongoing capital mill levy passed in 2007. Consequently, the Plan recommends increasing the DMP share of the annual \$8-9 million Capital Improvement Fund (\$2.2 million of which is contributed by DMP from the Winter Park Ski Resort) from an average \$200,000/year to at least \$1 million/year.

Just as strongly, the Advisory Group, as well as the Plan’s Funding Roundtable, strongly recommended researching and building the collaboration needed for dedicated funding in the future. If Denver’s 1912-1956 0.5 mill levy were in place in 2008, it would yield \$4.2 million annually. The options for dedicated funding vary, including a potential regional funding mechanism including most Front-Range counties (such as the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District). Other

options include dedicated funding for the entire Parks and Recreation system. Any dedicated funding options require building credibility, collaboration, and an advocacy base.

**2. Building Capacity and Partnerships.** Longstanding and new partnerships position the DMP very positively. The newly formed Denver Mountain Parks Foundation already has contributed to the costs of this Plan. The City supports the growth of the Foundation into a major fundraiser and advocate for the DMP. Other existing, but limited, partnerships and volunteer efforts that have benefited DMP over time have untapped potential that can only grow with more staff time and attention from Denver. Joint projects with Douglas, Jefferson, and Clear Creek Counties are underway for improvements on DMP land. Projects and plans have begun or will start soon with partners such as the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, the Evergreen Nature Center, Denver Public Schools, the University of Colorado Architecture and Planning Division, Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado, Trout Unlimited, and the Beckwourth Mt. Club. Friends of Red Rocks is a model for an expanded volunteer effort.

**3. New Opportunities.** The revenue-producing pieces within the DMP, such as Red Rocks Amphitheatre or Winter Park, have their current revenues already earmarked. But the potential is great for additional revenues from these DMP icons, such as increased events, donation programs, or fees earmarked for the DMP system. The DMP also have the kind of compelling history, character, and imagery that could be captured through merchandising of books, clothes, and posters.

Despite the Charter and deed restrictions, each part of the DMP system was assessed for its current integrity, context, and possible market value. A couple of parks were identified to study for new revenue options that meet legal constraints and public approval, including one 40-acre conservation parcel surrounded by the quarry in Morrison.

## Communications and Marketing

Funding and partnership strategies depend upon an informed and engaged public, and the research overwhelmingly revealed that awareness and knowledge of the DMP is extremely low. One survey showed that 60% of the people being surveyed in a DMP did not realize that it was a Denver park. Consequently, increased communication, education, and marketing (such as branding the DMP with a new logo) are priorities.



*Evergreen Lake in Dedisse Park*

## Protection

The DMP are a major Denver asset, and policies and guidelines to protect that asset are critical to the system's future. The Plan offers strategies for protection of the natural, cultural, and historic resources responsible for the DMP's uniqueness. For example, a separate set of Design Guidelines will accompany the Plan to ensure that repairs and new construction continue the design legacy.

In summary, key early Management Recommendations are to:

- ▶ Increase awareness of the DMP and improve the visitors' experience through communication and marketing materials.
- ▶ Increase the Denver Mountain Parks' share of the yearly capital budget, with a minimal \$1 million share of the annual Capital Improvement Fund (CIP), and increase operating funds when supported by the economy.
- ▶ Expand existing partnerships and volunteer projects with other counties and with other partners, especially with the Denver Mountain Parks Foundation.
- ▶ Build on the entertainment and entrepreneurial opportunities in the system at places such as Red Rocks, the concessions in historic lodges, or Winter Park.
- ▶ Build a Mountain Parks Division within the department when feasible to increase awareness, visibility, and ability to focus on the complexity and regional nature of the system.
- ▶ Create Natural Resource Management Plans for each park to develop site specific strategies for natural resource restoration and protection, recreation, and volunteerism.
- ▶ Create and adopt the DMP Design Guidelines to protect and build on the character and legacy of the system's designed buildings, structures, and landscapes.



*New logo designed by national artist Michael Schwab.*

#### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS: PLACES AND PROGRAMS

The Master Plan has natural, cultural, and recreation recommendations that are both physical and programmatic for the system as a whole as well as for each major park or area. To organize this complex system, the Master Plan breaks the DMP system into four equally important tiers:

- ▶ **The “Stars”** are the world-renowned attractions of Red Rocks Park and Amphitheatre, Buffalo Bill Grave and Museum on Lookout Mountain, Summit and Echo Lake Parks on Mt. Evans, and Winter Park Ski Resort. Millions of visitors come yearly from around the world. As Denver residents said over and over when surveyed, when your friends visit Denver from the Midwest, you take them here.
- ▶ **The “Hearts”** of the system are the large, special parks of Genesee, Daniels, Newton, and Dedisse. These parks feature special facilities, bison herds, historic lodges, and ranches. They have tremendous potential for future enhancements and new programs to draw more families from the city into the mountains and to connect kids to nature.

- ▶ **The “Picnic Parks”** are the series of early parks all along Bear Creek (and other smaller creeks), such as Little, Corwina/O’Fallon/Pence, Turkey Creek, Deer Creek, Cub Creek, and Bell Parks. As the most heavily used informal parks, these picnic parks would benefit from more shelters, trails, amenities, and restoration.
- ▶ **The Conservation/Wilderness Areas** are the 24 primarily inaccessible tracts purchased to protect natural features such as rock faces or peaks, views, wildlife habitat, and watersheds. Most of these areas are surrounded by private land and continue to serve their purpose well. Some warrant more protection as the population grows, while others, if access were available, could provide limited recreation.

Most urgent is the need to restore, repair, and protect the deteriorating park facilities and underlying natural resources. As in the urban portion of the DPR system, sustainability and responsibility are DMP priorities and principles. Repair and restore the existing system first and ensure that it remains at high quality. Many of the historic lodges and shelters need extensive work, for example, but their beauty and design are National Park Service quality, putting Denver on the national map.

The Plan also calls for a cautious but parallel effort to add cost-effective basic improvements in the DMP: ADA access; marketing and maps; additional rangers; new hiking trails within parks and regional multi-use trail connections; and new park amenities. These improvements would respond to today’s needs and bring DMP to a level comparable with neighboring open space parks.

And, finally, vision. The DMP system can position itself for the next 100 years with new programs and new facilities that capitalize on its unique character and niche. At this point, the Plan suggests some concepts to extend the DMP vision into the future, “conversation starters” without even cost estimates. New amenities and programs

need to take advantage of, but not diminish, the valuable natural and cultural resources that are at the heart of the DMP system. They must be maintained, and they must be financially sustainable. Consequently, these larger plans need more thought work—feasibility and marketing research—and solid funding.

Detailed cost estimates are in the Plan's Appendix. The Funding Section in Chapter 3 outlines the operations staff levels needed to maintain the system. In summary, the capital priorities are:

**1. Protect natural resources.** Restoring and protecting the forests, habitat, and water is the highest priority. Strategies include forest thinning, stream bank restoration, revegetation, and individual park Natural Resource Management Plans. Close to \$8 million is estimated for work.

**2. Repair and restore existing parks and facilities.** The SHF System-wide Assessment of facilities identified basic health and safety repairs needed for the major structures in the DMP. In addition, buildings, roads, trails, park furniture, and signs all need basic repairs beyond safety. Cost estimates for these core repairs of built resources are \$15 million and, depending upon partnerships and momentum, could take as long as 10 years.

**3. Improve and expand facilities** to meet current, basic recreational needs. Examples include improved ADA accessibility; new internal hiking trails and regional trail connections; amenities such as new picnic tables or shelters; and improved visitor services and safety (maps, signage, rangers, educators). Cost estimates for adding new basic amenities and visitor services are a minimum of \$6 million.



**4. Expand the vision.** With vision tempered by feasibility, DMP has tremendous untapped potential to connect people of all ages with both nature and a taste of the American West. Exploration of new uses, major restorations, and the addition of new facilities in parks such as Genesee, Newton, Echo Lake, Daniels, and Lookout Mountain could elevate DMP to a previously unknown level of quality and experience. The Plan recommends months of visioning, feasibility studies, and partnership-building critical to plan and build for tomorrow.

Finally, how do we get more people from Denver to the DMP and, especially, into the less crowded parks? New and expanded programs and facilities will mutually benefit everyone wanting to connect people to the mountains, whether for health, knowledge, or recreation. But access and transit are critical. With its partners, Denver must find ways for everyone to be able to reach the Mountain Parks using a variety of means from light-rail and buses with bike racks to even a new railway up the mountain. DMP could become the outdoor experience away from home for all ages.

## CONCLUSION

The City and County of Denver was a national leader when it acquired and safeguarded a system of parks, roads, trails, and wilderness areas in the foothills and mountains outside of Denver in the early 1900s. Today, it is one city of many providing its share of a complex, regional open space system. Decades of underfunding and minimum staffing have left the DMP behind in this regional system, with deteriorating conditions and few services for visitors. Yet its spectacular settings, from Mt. Evans to the historic Daniels Park ranch, its internationally known cultural attractions, and its beautiful buildings and landscapes are unmatched.

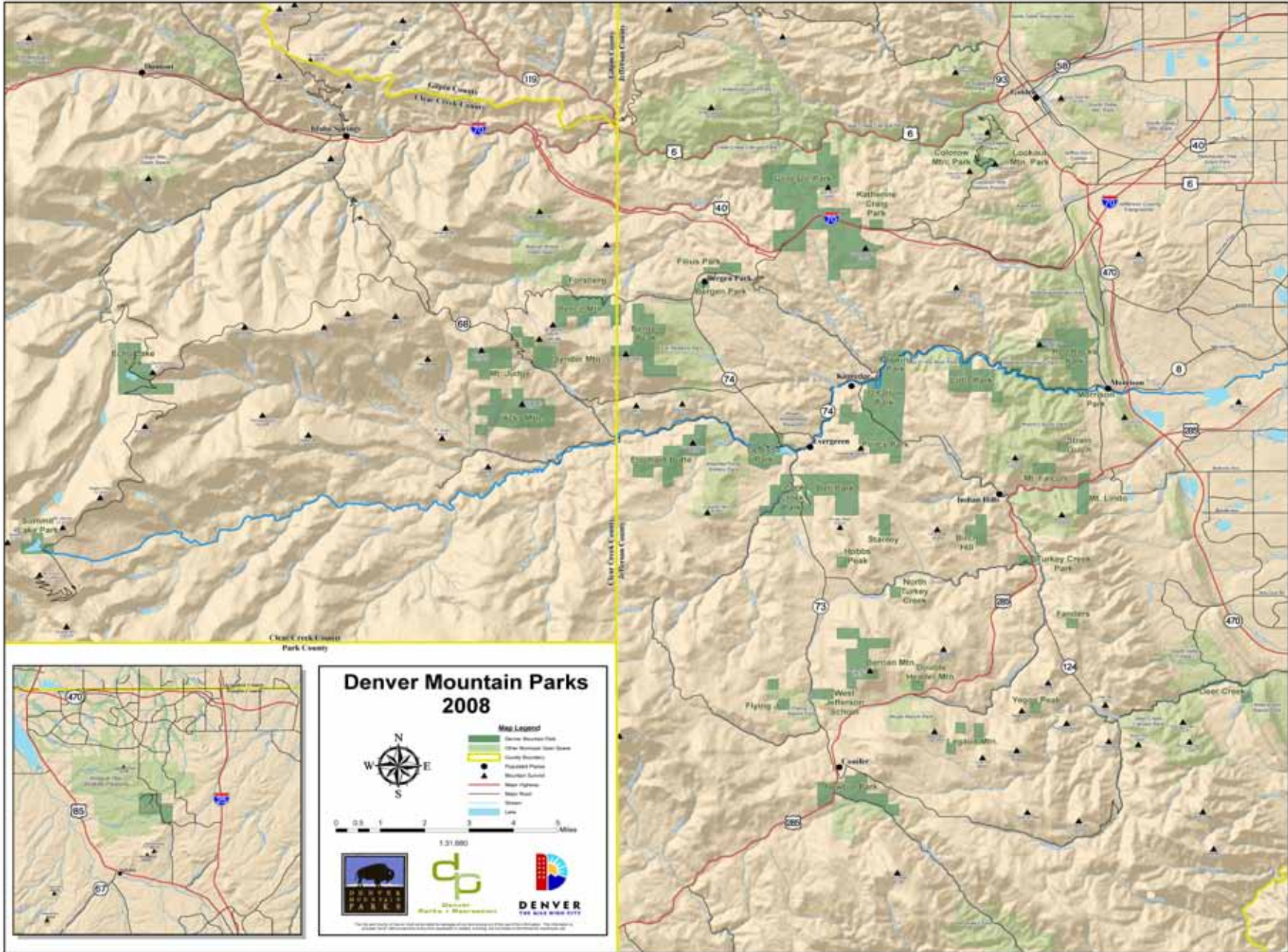
In this planning process, Denver residents and civic leaders, as well as regional partners, reaffirmed the importance of the Denver Mountain Parks to them and to the city. An increased commitment from Denver to this important part of Denver's Park and Recreation system and the strategies outlined in this Plan can restore this historic system to world-class quality.

For more information on the plan or Denver Mountain Parks, see <http://denvergov.org> or <http://denvermountainparks.org> or

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*Winter Park*



Denver Mountain Parks System Map