

January 11, 2013

The Poudre Runs Through It Study/Action Work Group

SESSION SUMMARY

Snow—glorious snow—fell in fat flakes for at least an hour outside the windows at Tamasag during our January session: good inspiration for our continuing dialogue about the Poudre River.

We kicked off our day together assessing where we are, where we are going.

We are chomping at the bit to start formulating, assessing, and adopting potential action(s) we could take to blend our goals for working river/healthy river. But we still recognize the need to better understand the additional demands that will be placed on the river from proposed projects and planned diversions, Thornton, NISP, and Halligan-Seaman.

We better understand what makes a “healthy river” based on clues provided from our ecologists in the group, but some of us still wish there were some measurable criteria we could point to—a set of standards we could show the community to get their buy-in. Mostly we seem convinced that standards with hard numbers is premature at this point, that the river is in hard enough straits at this point that almost anything we can do to improve its health is going to be of benefit. Act, show what can be done, and the community will respond, one member suggested.

We asked, but didn’t answer, “is part of our moving forward figuring out a way to convene this group after June? Do we need to evolve into an operations group?” The concept of a dual track was introduced: continue with the education while moving into the action stage. “The education has been good, but now we need to get closer to the action, focus on reaching positive change.”

We heard from our members at the east end of the river that we may not be paying enough attention to what’s happening beyond I-25.

An agricultural member pointed out that we still seem to have a gap in our understanding of healthy river and working river. After the session, he expressed further that we seem to be focusing more on healthy river and not enough on how important it is to value the “working river” and the significant contributions to the community made by those who are diverting and using the water for urban and agricultural benefit.

We virtually flew down the river west to east piloted by the City of Fort Collins’ designated “Poudre Guru.”

From John Stokes, we learned about what the City of Fort Collins’ Natural Resources Department already has up its sleeve to improve the environmental and recreational attributes of the Poudre.

- Clean water, abundant wildlife, flourishing riparian forests, and functioning ecological process that allows the river to be self-sustaining are goals the Natural Resources Department has for the river.
- The department will soon issue a request for proposals to study the diversions on the river and how they might be changed to improve the environmental health and recreational passage characteristics of the river.

- An Ecosystem Response Model is underway to guide and inform (but not make) decisions to improve the health of the river.
- An instream flow project is underway to develop a minimum instream flow regime on a particular reach of the river as it flows through the city.
- Other planned and underway improvements were pointed out as we flew down the river, stopping at points where obstructions can be removed and where banks are being amended.

We gained an understanding of another important provider of municipal water—the Tri-Districts.

When our “working river” presenters talked about diversions for urban uses in December, it became obvious that we were missing a part of the picture. The City of Fort Collins water utility provides water for a sizable chunk of those who live in or near Fort Collins, but another sizable chunk falls outside the city’s service area. Fort Collins-Loveland Water District, East Larimer County Water District, and North Weld County Water District make up what is commonly known as the “Tri-Districts.”

Shawn Hoff and Richard Raines, water resource managers for the Tri-Districts helped fill in the blanks:

- In 1962 the three districts built the Soldier Canyon Filter Plant on the edge of Horsetooth Reservoir to treat CB-T water from Horsetooth and native waters from the Poudre to supply the needs of rural residents of parts of Larimer and Weld Counties without a public water supply.
- Water from the Poudre travels to the filter plant from the intake off the Monroe Gravity Canal via their 8.5 mile Pleasant Valley Pipeline.
- The 2012 demand of the three districts totaled 23,000 acre feet of water. Though the City of Fort Collins’ service area is considered pretty much built out, that is definitely not the case for the Tri-Districts. Each of the districts is individually planning for how to find the water needed for future growth. Fort Collins-Loveland Water District, for instance, is one of the participants in the NISP (Northern Integrated Supply Project.)

We gained an appreciation for how much has changed the past few years in the “river district” of downtown Fort Collins and what is being planned for the future.

We learned about the river district from Matt Robenault, director of the DDA—Downtown Development Authority.

- The river district is a part of the downtown Fort Collins area that forms something of a triangle, made up of the streets that run at an angle not in keeping with the north/south, east/west layout of other downtown streets.
- Matt helped us visualize the area on a map, then laid the river on top so we could see how the river runs through it.
- DDA is striving to achieve their infill vision of the river district through development of public areas and compatible private uses.
- Issues related to the river considered in downtown development, including development in the river district, include stormwater quality and controlled discharge; flood plain management and flood safety regulations; and river edge/habitat sensitivity.

We got the inside scoop on a proposed infill development within the Poudre River flood plains.

Rich Shannon from the Pinnacle Group described his proposed development:

- In what appears to be the only “developable” space along the Poudre as it travels through the river district of downtown Fort Collins.
- Consisting of a concept that’s both multi-layered bottom to top, and multi-layered from the river inland. Bottom to top includes retail space, topped by office space, topped by residential. River to land includes the river, stabilized river bank, river landscape buffer, connecting walkway and outdoor spaces (porches, patios, balconies, courtyards, side yards).
- As complementary to CSU’s Energy Lab in the old power plant building and in juxtaposition to the Ranchway Feeds operation.

We ended the day with a quick trip to Australia.

Susan Smolnik encouraged us to broaden our horizons by learning something about how agriculture, urban, and environmental interests in the drought-stricken Murray-Darling Basin of Australia are striving to cooperate in reaction to water crisis.

- The basin experienced a full decade of extreme drought which led to dead fish and a 500 mile algae bloom, thirsty people, and farmers going out of business.
- The national government responded by formulating a Murray –Darling Basin Plan that called for sustainable diversion limits and water to be left in place for the environment in order to improve water security.
- A key part of the plan was for the national government to spend a huge amount of money to implement the plan, including buying back water allotments from willing sellers, mostly farmers.
- Farmers and rural communities rebelled because of their concern for loss of rural economic and social viability.
- Concessions were made such that less water was set aside for the environment (though still a big chunk) and money was set aside for mitigation for rural communities.
- Side note: it is now a widely quoted statistic that urban dwellers have cut their per capita per day water use to 36 gallons! (compared to 150-250 more common here in the United States)

Homework for February

First phase: sending action ideas in the form of “mini-presentations” for group consideration at the February 8 session .

Second phase: reading through the submittal package prior to the session.

Details are provided on the website.