Commentary

5-3-2021

***The Road Not Taken***

Robert Frost’s famous poem The Road Not Taken ends with:*I shall be telling this with a sigh Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.*

For me, this captures the essence of the struggle around flood control for area around South Boulder Creek and what should happen on the CU South property.

The “road” that the majority of the city council has committed to is almost certain to be looked back on as one taken with inadequate foresight.

Climate change will likely cause significantly larger and more frequent floods. But using detention ponds (new to Boulder on this scale) means that a flood significantly bigger than designed for will overtop the dams and inundate the downstream areas anyway. And committing to allow CU to develop land that otherwise might be used to expand detention capacity means that improving protection levels above that currently planned will be limited, difficult, and much more costly. So the many other parts of Boulder that also were flooded, though smaller than the South Boulder Creek flood zone individually, will potentially have to wait decades for the improvements they need.

When I asked some city council members why they are so committed to letting CU develop this land, the reply was always the same, “We need to preserve good relations with CU”, or something to that effect.

To me, this catch phrase excuses shortcutting the serious, in-depth analysis that should be done, and so is being used to avoid actually engaging with the citizens over the big unaddressed strategic issues.

First is the lack of a citywide comprehensive flood protection plan that includes all the projects, with designs, timelines, budgets, and revenue sources. I’m one of the citizens that are helping with the outreach for the update to the current Comprehensive Flood & Stormwater Master Plan. But at almost every step in the process, I see how far we are from having anything like what we need.

To quote from the one page handout to this effort, “Boulder has the highest risk of flash flooding in the state of Colorado. … At current funding levels it would take over 100 years to complete mitigation projects currently designed or in planning.” So, if you got flooded by any of the rest of Boulder’s creeks, including Wonderland, Two Mile, Goose, Gregory, Bluebell, Skunk, King’s Gulch, and Bear, you may be waiting a very long time before your flood work gets done.

Second, the vast majority of Boulder’s current funding comes from Boulder’s ongoing service fees, which are based on a property’s impervious area. But South Boulder Creek drains a 100+ square mile watershed completely outside the city. So there are serious legal issues with using a fee charged on properties within the city to pay for South Boulder Creek projects, to say nothing of paying millions of dollars to raise CU’s

tennis courts and fill huge areas to provide CU’s future development better flood protection than downstream residents get.

Third, the council has been unwilling to push CU to seriously consider trading CU South for land further north. For example, the City owns about 200 almost flat acres on the east side of North 26th Street. Safe access from there to US36 (28th Street) only needs a stop light, unlike the dangerous proposed intersection from CU South onto CO 93 (Broadway) on the downhill curve just south of the city limits. There are few neighbors, unlike CU South, which borders directly on Tantra and Majestic Heights. Boulder Fire Station 5 is at 19th Street and Violet, only two to three minutes away. And it has no flood hazards.

To figure out how to provide water and sewer shouldn’t take but a few weeks.

Fourth, given how development of CU South will severely limit the ability to deal with larger floods, I really don’t understand why the council is so unwilling to condemn the necessary property. When CU was planning their East Campus some decades ago, they wanted to develop some of the wetland area. But the city council found that unacceptable and threatened to deny access to some city streets. CU then agreed to appropriate protections. And City-CU relations continued just fine.

It’s time the council and the regents sat down and hashed all this out. And while they’re at it, they can finally address CU’s endless expansion in Boulder with its impacts on affordable housing, traffic congestion, etc.

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