**Guest Opinion: Tim Hogan: CU South’s wild nature**

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**By Tim Hogan**

These pages have seen a richness of commentary from Boulder citizens on the South Boulder Creek Floodplain over the past six months. Issues of flood mitigation and the university’s desire for annexation have led the chorus.

Council signed off on the Variant 1, 100-year South Boulder Creek flood mitigation project in early February of 2021, sealing an arrangement that was provisionally approved by council in June of 2020. Before the June meeting one council member suggested, “I am not sure the 100 year [plan] is the best solution, but it’s one we can afford better than we’re going to be able to afford the others and I think we need to live in the real world in that respect.”

The flood that devastated Boulder in early September of 2013 should give us pause. That event was very likely exacerbated by anthropogenic warming according to the work of Kevin Trenberth and his colleagues at the National Center for Atmospheric Research. As quoted in the Camera by Charlie Brennan in June of 2015, “Trenberth contends that questioning the likelihood of such a storm in the age of a changed climate is not as important as examining climate change’s potentially magnifying effect on such a storm when one does occur.”

While flood mitigation was the main priority for the city, annexation has always been the primary prize for the university. Informed citizens have marshalled their case against such an appropriation, and their voices have been heard from the start on a multitude of substantive issues. Hanging somewhere in the mix is the questionable assumption over whether the university even needs a third campus. Boulder’s citizens will be presented with a petition in the coming months to gauge their views on annexation.

There is a better way. The South Boulder Creek Floodplain and riparian areas were purchased in 1996 under veiled circumstances and any gains the university may have thought they would accrue have long since disappeared under the critical eye of scientists, engineers, and citizen conservationists. The planet has dramatically changed over these past 25 years, with human numbers growing from roughly six to eight billion, a 35% increase.

These exponential numbers coupled with a feverish earth and the extirpation of species across the planet do not bode well for Mother Earth. Wild nature’s abundance and the cumulative impacts this has on food webs and energy paths linked to that abundance must be addressed.  The most economic, effective, and elegant solution for the property in the floodplain is to restore the entire 308 acres to open space.

Even in the absence of climate disruption, the blue/green earth would be in a world of hurt.  President Biden and his Secretary of Interior Deb Haalland have highlighted the administration’s sweeping plans to protect at least 30% of U.S. lands and ocean territories by 2030. Audacious as proposals to secure half the planet as biodiversity preserves may once have sounded, the best conservation science tells us this is what is necessary if the specter of the sixth extinction and anthropocentric chaos is to be averted. Organizations such as Nature Needs Half, the Wildlands Network, and Half Earth are spearheading these visions.

The ecological benefits of a wetland complex at the base of a 136 square-mile Front Range drainage basin is not to be ignored. The habitats of South Boulder Creek serve as reservoirs for wild nature, harboring lush vegetation along with their attendant bird and animal communities. Two Colorado Natural Areas are proximate to the site, the Colorado Tallgrass Prairie with the largest known area of xeric and mesic tallgrass prairie in the state; and the South Boulder Creek Floodplain for its wetlands and rare species. These ecosystems serve as critically important sinks for greenhouse gases.

Some of us have grown familiar with the treasures of this watershed, having spent many days over the years cataloging the ecological diversity of the area. Along with Ute lady tresses orchids, Leopard frogs, and Preble’s jumping mouse, there are many other species that prosper in the mesic vegetation, including a Gentian that had not been seen in over 50 years, and the Northern harrier, better known to the initiated as Marsh hawks.

To the extent flood mitigation will play a role in the overall project as we all agree it should, any impacts to Open Space, and especially those designated as State Natural Areas, should be left off the table. Disposal is not acceptable to the generations of Boulder citizens who have supported the purchase of these parcels.

*Tim Hogan lives in Boulder and has served in the university’s Museum of Natural History for more than three decades.*