

Land Exchange for City-owned Land in Planning Reserve Would be a Win-Win for Flood Mitigation, Residents, CU, the City, Open Space and Climate Action

By Mike Chiropolos

Protecting South Boulder Creek's natural floodplain ecosystem and completing the open space vision of the City and County of Boulder is a complex, multi-faceted challenge.

But the heart of the issue is simple, serious and solvable:

1. Simple: It's simple because the question is whether to allow CU to develop in a ridiculously inappropriate location within the natural floodplain of South Boulder Creek at a cost to taxpayers of at least \$15 million, or to pursue a land exchange to look at a "North Campus" at that protects our open space while directing development to a high and dry location designated suitable for future development
2. Serious: It's serious because the stakes of getting it wrong include thousands of lives and more than a billion dollars in downstream property valuation, the loss of a crucial piece of Boulder Valley's open space puzzle, and whether we walk the talk on environmental protection , climate, and intelligent planning
3. Solvable: It's solvable because the "planning reserve" on Jay Road and 28<sup>th</sup> was set aside for the exact purpose proposed for a North Campus: to meet future community needs; and evaluating a potential land exchange kicks off with the easy step of conducting an "urban services extension study"

CU representatives have wrongly suggested that land in the North Boulder Planning Reserve could not be "annexed" into the City of Boulder. The Boulder Valley Comprehensive Plan ("BVCP"), adopted by both the City and County, establishes a process for annexation of the reserve. Annexation of the reserve is a question of time, and whether we obtain any environmental benefits in return for a comprehensive land use plan at the reserve.

The BVCP states that the reserve's location and characteristics "make it potentially suitable for new urban development" based on the apparent lack of

sensitive environmental areas, hazard areas, significant agricultural lands, the feasibility of efficient urban service extension and contiguity to the existing Service Area which maintains a compact community.”

Save South Boulder wants the City and CU to analyze a land exchange that would expedite flood mitigation engineering and construction; protect and restore South Boulder Creek’s historic floodplain; direct CU to build staff and graduate student housing and playing fields at a suitable location. The Planning Reserve could be the answer.

“CU South” is the last place any rational planner would choose to build. The questions are *how* and *when*, not *whether*, to develop the Reserve.

The reserve is high and dry (outside the flood plain). It is characterized by degraded soils and vegetation (sparse, and mostly invasive species or noxious weeds) with limited restoration potential. The reserve lacks habitat for any species protected by the federal Endangered Species Act.

The reserve can be annexed following an urban services study and a community-wide planning process. The how goes to the balance of development and amenities, such as playing fields, playgrounds, and parks. A land exchange is consistent with the BVCP Guiding Principle Number 6 for CU South, inserted because it never made sense to develop.

If that goes forward, the City and County can protect all 308 acres at “CU South” for flood mitigation and open space resources; in exchange for only 159 acres at the reserve (the ceiling on development at “CU South” under CU’s annexation petition.

CU initially questioned whether the Reserve is proximate, comparable, developable, annexable under the BVCP. The answers are yes, yes, yes, and yes. The Reserve is annexable if the City Council determines that the proposed uses will meet community needs. It faces far fewer hurdles today or potential hazards tomorrow.

An exchange would protect a magnificent open space acquisition. Revenues from the 2019 open Space and Mountain Parks tax extension could fund an ecosystem and recreation management plan, including soil reclamation and restoration of open space values degraded by decades of gravel mining and neglect. Taxpayers would save more than \$15 million by avoiding landfill costs to allow CU to build in the 500-year floodplain at “CU South” (adjacent to a flood mitigation project that will cost more than \$65 million).

By contrast, “CU South” is a riparian floodplain scattered with wetlands, springs, steep slopes, unstable soils and complex groundwater hydrology. “CU South” supports tens of thousands of quality recreational user-visits a month and has great potential under a restoration scenario to re-establish native grasslands and habitat.

Up to now, City Council has failed to direct staff to direct initial studies that will allow us to thoroughly analyze a land exchange. The amounts to sticking our heads in the sand and “looking before we leap” in a community that has long prided itself on being one of the best-planned cities in North America with a world-class open space system. Developing “CU South” would make a mockery of Boulder’s avowed commitment to climate science: it would increase future flood dangers by paving and developing in the floodplain, contrary to the principles of resilience, adaptation and connectivity for natural ecosystems, wildlife and habitats.

Please write City Council at [council@bouldercolorado.gov](mailto:council@bouldercolorado.gov) to request that they authorize an “urban services extension study” as the first step to analyzing the potential for annexation and a North Campus at the reserve in return for protection of all 308 acres at “CU South” through a win-win land exchange.