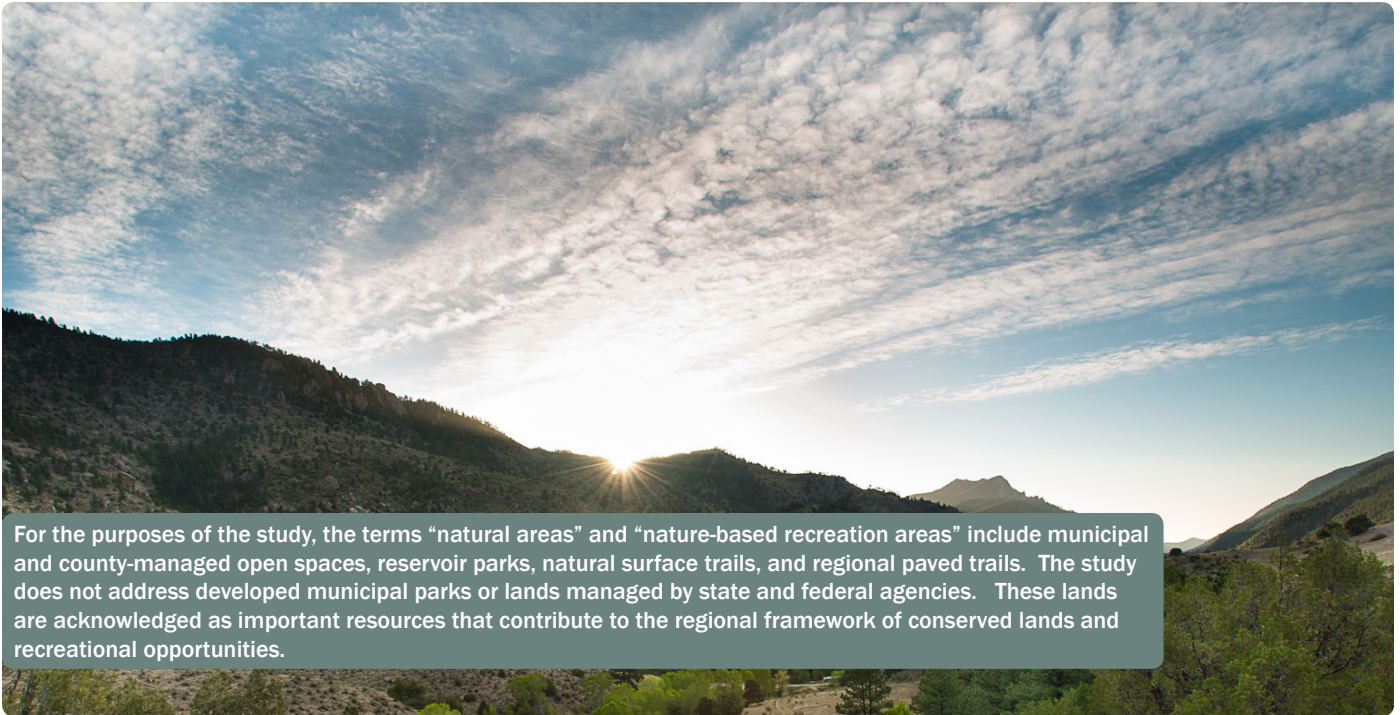




CHAPTER 1.

OUR PURPOSE



For the purposes of the study, the terms “natural areas” and “nature-based recreation areas” include municipal and county-managed open spaces, reservoir parks, natural surface trails, and regional paved trails. The study does not address developed municipal parks or lands managed by state and federal agencies. These lands are acknowledged as important resources that contribute to the regional framework of conserved lands and recreational opportunities.

With the recognition that change will inevitably occur and that unconserved open land is a diminishing resource in the urbanizing Front Range, all of the municipalities and the county in which they are located have joined together to analyze the challenges, opportunities and possible gaps in their collective land conservation, stewardship, and outdoor recreation programs and portfolios. The local governments assembled a Partners Team and Advisory Board consisting of individuals intended to represent the diversity of the citizens of Larimer County.

All of the local government programs in Larimer County are motivated by a desire for coordinated, science-based planning to conserve land-based resources and meet public recreation needs and desires. The Partners Team and Advisory Board guided a precedent-setting, county-wide study lasting over 12 months to develop a grassroots vision for the future of the county’s critical landscapes and outdoor recreational opportunities.

BACKGROUND

In 1995, Larimer County voters passed the Help Preserve Open Spaces Initiative for a \$0.0025 (¼ cent) county-wide sales tax specifically for the purchase and protection of open space, natural areas, wildlife habitat, and regional park preserves, regional trails, and agricultural lands. Funding from Help Preserve Open Spaces helped initiate the Larimer County Open Lands Program and support municipal open space programs within the County.

The tax revenue is shared between Larimer County (43%) and the cities of Ft. Collins (34%), Loveland (17%), Estes Park (3%), Berthoud (1%), Wellington (1%), Windsor (<1%), Johnstown (<1%) and Timnath (<1%)¹. Since 1996, the ¼ cent Larimer County Help Preserve Open Spaces (HPOS) sales tax has helped to conserve approximately 50,000 acres and provide over 120 miles of trails across Larimer County, as well as benefiting municipal parks and open spaces.

In 1999, Larimer County citizens voted to extend the existing sales tax until 2018 and establish bonding authority for Larimer County. In addition, the City of Fort Collins “Open Space Yes!” 0.0025% (¼ cent) sales tax was approved in 2002 for a 25-year period (to end in 2030). These two sources provide approximately 95% of the funding for the Fort Collins Natural Areas Department. No other municipality has a dedicated open space sales tax outside the share they receive from the county sales tax, though several have other programs in place for purchasing and maintaining parks, natural areas and open space.

The municipalities in the county use additional funding mechanisms and strategies for open space acquisition and programs, as described in Chapter 5.

The Larimer County Natural Resources Department now manages over 25,000 acres through fee-simple acquisition and holds over 8,000 acres in conservation easements with the use of county open space sales tax dollars. The amount of land conserved by the county more than tripled in the decade between 2001 and 2011². Approximately 54% of Larimer County’s Open Lands offer public access and there is the potential for future public access on an additional 9%. The remaining 37% consists of conservation easements with no public access³. Fort Collins’ Natural Areas Department has helped conserve 47,600 acres and manages approximately 35,000 acres. Conservation efforts by the City of Loveland’s Open Lands Division within the Parks and Recreation Department has conserved nearly 7,000 acres. The other cities and towns that receive a portion of the county open space sales tax along with the active land trusts in the county also manage thousands of acres of open lands and natural areas.





In total, over 75,000 acres of land are conserved and managed by the project partners throughout the County with “Help Preserve Open Spaces” and a variety of other funding sources. This figure excludes lands managed by the Estes Valley Recreation and Park District, local and national land conservation trusts, and State and Federal agencies such as Rocky Mountain National Park and the Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest. Partnerships are common, so total numbers may duplicate acreages where multiple agencies contributed.

Red Mountain Open Space; photo by Charlie Johnson



THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

This is not the first time that the project partners have joined efforts to accomplish shared goals. Since its establishment in 1996, the county-wide Help Preserve Open Spaces Tax shares at least 55% of the revenues back to the municipalities – over \$80 million to date. As land prices and capital development costs increase, funds are often pooled together between local governments to leverage resources and maximize benefits. A few examples follow:

- Larimer County and the City of Fort Collins contributed funds for the acquisition of Fossil Creek Reservoir Regional Open Space, Cathy Fromme Prairie and Coyote Ridge natural areas, and on conservation easements on three working farms in the Wellington Community Separator. In addition, both partners contributed to the Roberts Ranch and Stonewall Creek Ranch conservation easements, conserved by area land trusts.
- The cities of Loveland and Fort Collins contributed funds for portions of Larimer County's Devil's Backbone Open Space.
- The City of Fort Collins contributed funds for Larimer County's Rimrock Open Space, portions of Horsetooth Mountain Open Space, and Red Mountain Open Space.
- Larimer County, the City of Loveland, and City of Fort Collins joined forces to preserve Prairie Ridge Natural Area and Long View Farm Open Space in the Fort Collins/Loveland community separator.
- Larimer County, the City of Loveland, and Town of Berthoud partnered on several acquisitions, including the Lazy J Bar S conservation easement and the Heron Lakes Open Space project.
- The Town of Estes Park, City of Loveland, City of Fort Collins, Town of Berthoud, and Estes Valley Land Trust partnered with Larimer County on the acquisition of Hermit Park Open Space.
- The towns of Windsor, Johnstown, and Timnath, which straddle the county line, have a history of collaborating with both Weld and Larimer counties as well as other municipalities in the region.
- Most regional trail connectivity projects are jointly planned and developed by local governments working in concert with each other. For example, in preparing the Town of Timnath Parks, Recreation, Open Space and Trails Plan in 2011 a trails group that included Windsor, Fort Collins, Larimer County, and the City of Greeley was formed to complete the Poudre River Trail. This resulted in a successful \$5 million Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) grant application that was funded in 2012.

There is great diversity in the expertise and resources of local government conservation programs. The larger entities – Fort Collins, Loveland, and Larimer County – are protecting thousands of acres annually with established staff and equipment. Conversely, smaller towns are in various states of program development - some have no resources or funding apart from their share of the county-wide Help Preserve Open Spaces Tax. Staff from the larger, established programs and conservation organizations often assist smaller towns that have more limited resources to jointly plan conservation projects between communities and develop cooperative management and operations programs.

Apart from the partnerships between Larimer County and its municipalities, the number of other partnerships and collaborations to protect open land is unprecedented in the State. These relationships include multiple collaborations with Legacy Land Trust, the Estes Valley Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, The Conservation Trust Fund, Colorado Open Lands, Colorado State Forest Service, Colorado Department of Parks and Wildlife, US Bureau of Reclamation, US Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Rocky Mountain National Park, the Great Western Trail Authority, the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, homeowners' associations, and hundreds of individual property owners who have donated conservation easements, granted property and left bequests.

With State Organizations. Multiple conservation accomplishments have been funded by GOCO. Between 1995, when the first competitive grant was awarded in Larimer County, through 2011, approximately \$32.0 million in GOCO grants have been awarded to project sponsors for projects in Larimer County. Other partnerships include:

- The City of Loveland has partnered with the Colorado Department of Parks and Wildlife on several acquisitions around Boyd Lake.
- Several projects have been funded monetarily or with in-kind services by the Colorado Division of Wildlife for Watchable Wildlife, Fishing is Fun grants, and the Colorado State Trails Program.

With Federal Organizations. Partnerships are common with Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest, Rocky Mountain National Park, NRCS, the US Fish & Wildlife Service, Bureau of Reclamation, and secondarily with the Bureau of Land Management, who together manage a total of 819,287 acres across the County. Cases in point include:

- The US Bureau of Reclamation and the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District jointly operate the Colorado – Big Thompson Project, which includes Carter Lake, Flatiron Reservoir, Pinewood Reservoir, Horsetooth Reservoir and adjacent public land. Larimer County manages recreation at these reservoirs.



- The City of Fort Collins and Larimer County have partnered with the US Forest Service at Bobcat Ridge and Hermit Park Open Space so that the trail system could utilize Forest Service lands to create a better system and experience for visitors.
- The Lindenmeier site at Soapstone Natural Area has been recognized as a National Historic Landmark by the Department of Interior.



Horsetooth Reservoir; photo by Harry Strharsky

With Non-Profit Conservation Organizations.

The County and municipalities routinely and extensively partner with the Legacy Land Trust, the Estes Valley Land Trust, Colorado Open Lands, and The Nature Conservancy in securing conservation easements and providing monitoring services. Other land management partnerships have included the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, Colorado Natural Heritage Program, The Audubon Society, The Trust for Public Land (TPL), Ducks Unlimited, Colorado Water Trust, Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust, and The Conservation Fund. Specific examples include:

- Larimer County and the Town of Estes Park have strong relationships with the Estes Valley Land Trust and the Estes Valley Recreation and Park District. The County provides dollars for land protection and regional trail planning and development and the Land Trust and District lead the planning efforts.
- Legacy Land Trust co-holds the conservation easement on the City of Loveland’s Dakota Ridge project. The easement transaction includes State of Colorado Tax Credits, a future public trail and a future City water tank. Due to the cooperation of the City Water & Power Department, Legacy Land Trust, City Natural Areas Division and the landowner, the project was successfully completed.
- The Town of Johnstown has established working relationships with the Legacy Land Trust, Colorado Open Lands, the American Farmland Trust and the Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust. Each of these organizations was instrumental in drafting or reviewing portions of its parks, trails, and open space plan.

With Other Private Entities. Many jurisdictions conserve through development - working closely with land developments, homeowners’ associations and metropolitan districts as well as private donors. Examples include:

- The Town of Windsor has a history of collaboration with the Poudre River Trail Corridor Board, Poudre River Inc., the National Heritage Area Board, and the Great Western Trail Authority to complete regional trail systems.
- Through the Natural Areas Enhancement Fund, the City of Fort Collins offers grants to assist private landowners and others with the restoration and enhancement of privately-owned natural areas.
- The City of Loveland completed a unique arrangement with the developer for the Meadowbrook Natural Area. The City agreed to accept the donation of a 20-acre open space parcel with the condition that the developer donate approximately \$325 for each lot sold in the adjacent development to pay for the long term maintenance of the site. The City and the developer made a concerted effort to cooperate and execute this acquisition.
- The City of Loveland worked with McWhinney and McStain Enterprises to launch the High Plains Environmental Center, which manages 275 acres of lakes, wetlands and open space. Through the Millennium Agreement, environmental fees are collected through 2040 and used exclusively for acquisition of critical open space and for the High Plains Environmental Center’s purposes.
- Larimer County offers a tool called the Rural Land Use Process that merges rural development with land conservation. This process can be used for parcel 70 acres or larger and offers incentives to encourage alternative development and help retain the rural and agricultural lands of Larimer County. This process requires restrictive use covenants on larger parcels in return for the incentives. The process offers a common-sense approval process founded on flexible solutions and reliable outcomes.



PROJECT GOALS

Each of the project partners have established their own land conservation and recreation priorities, which represent a broad spectrum of conservation values and associated recreational uses. As documented in their comprehensive plans and detailed in Chapter 3, each jurisdiction proposes conserving the following resources:

- Regionally-significant recreation opportunities, such as river- and reservoir-based recreation and trails;
- Natural resource and wildlife areas, such as grasslands, wetlands and riparian areas, rivers, ponds and reservoirs;
- Urban settings that provide natural areas, recreation, community character and heritage;
- Working farms and ranches that provide economic benefits and preserve the area’s rural character.

Our Lands - Our Future provides the tools, research, and principles to assist local governments, their citizens, and even State and Federal agencies and non-profits in updating relevant planning documents so that local government open space programs can work more efficiently and effectively with partners in achieving shared regional goals about land conservation, recreation and stewardship as shown in Figure 1.1. This report does not make new policy recommendations; rather, it frames some of the serious choices facing the region and provides tools and resources for updating local policies and practices as shown below.

As Larimer County, the City of Loveland, the City of Fort Collins, and the Town of Berthoud embark on updating their respective master plans in 2013 and 2014, the tools and resources of Our Lands - Our Future should greatly inform their decision-making process.

The five goals of the Our Lands - Our Future process are to:

- Strengthen partnerships and broaden community engagement.
- Create common tools for future master planning efforts that function both county-wide and locally. These are:
 - Property inventory for four open space types
 - Levels of service
 - Financial baselines
 - Online interactive mapping website
 - Two County-wide surveys with local segmentation
 - Financial stewardship and funding scenarios
- Quantify the economic benefits of land conservation and outdoor recreation.
- Build a shared vision of conservation and recreation priorities.
- Build awareness and education of the financial requirements and funding possibilities to support the vision.

PLANNING PROCESS RELATIONSHIP TO LOCAL MASTER PLANS

Our Lands - Our Future: Recreation & Conservation Choices for Northern Colorado

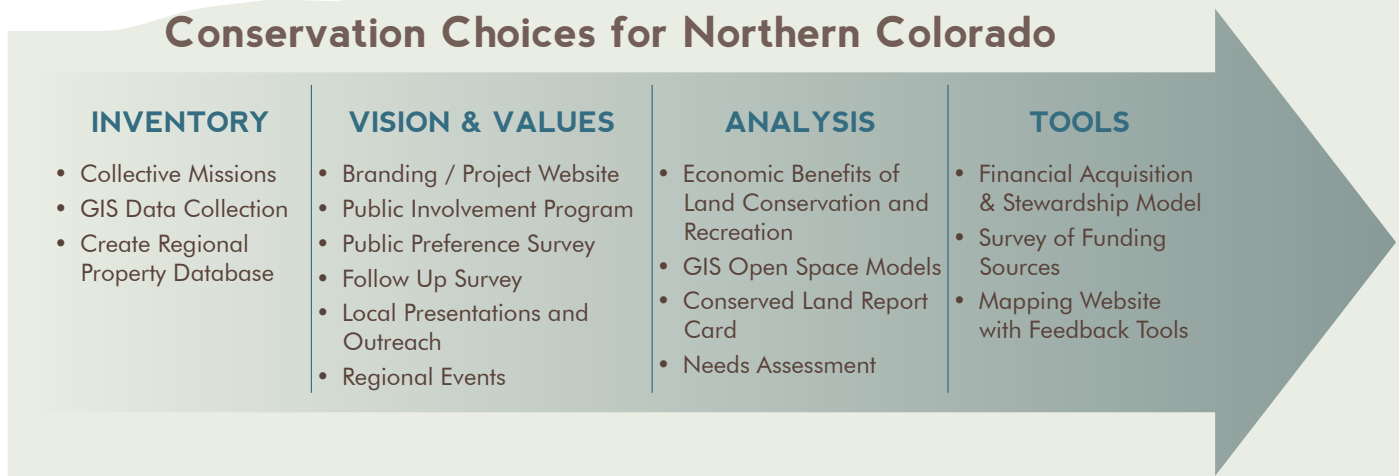


Figure 1.1 Planning Process. The outcomes of Our Lands - Our Future form the foundation for subsequent partner master plans.





Devil's Backbone Open Space; photo by Jim Disney

Local Parks, Recreation, Open Space & Trails Master Plans

ALTERNATIVES

- Local Mission
- Local Opportunities / Constraints
- Priority Areas: Agriculture, Natural Resource Areas, Urban/Regional Areas, Trail Corridors
- Levels of Service

GOALS & POLICIES

- Land Conservation
- Stewardship
- Passive Recreation
- Education
- Level of Service
- Definitions and Standards

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

- Local Financial Stewardship Analysis
- Funding Tools
- Partnerships
- Project Prioritization
- Program Organization and Procedures

DRAFT & FINAL MASTER PLANS

- Public Review of Draft Plan
- Local Adoption of Final Plan



PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PROCESS

Our Lands - Our Future was driven by public and stakeholder involvement. Throughout the four-phase process, the public provided feedback to staff from the partner agencies and members of the advisory board through a series of public events and activities leading to the final study report. Regional workshops were held periodically, as well as local presentations and work sessions in cities and towns throughout the county. In addition, mailed and online surveys were sent to residents to gather input on conservation and recreation priorities, preferences, and needs. Finally, an interactive mapping website allowed residents to examine options and tradeoffs for the future.

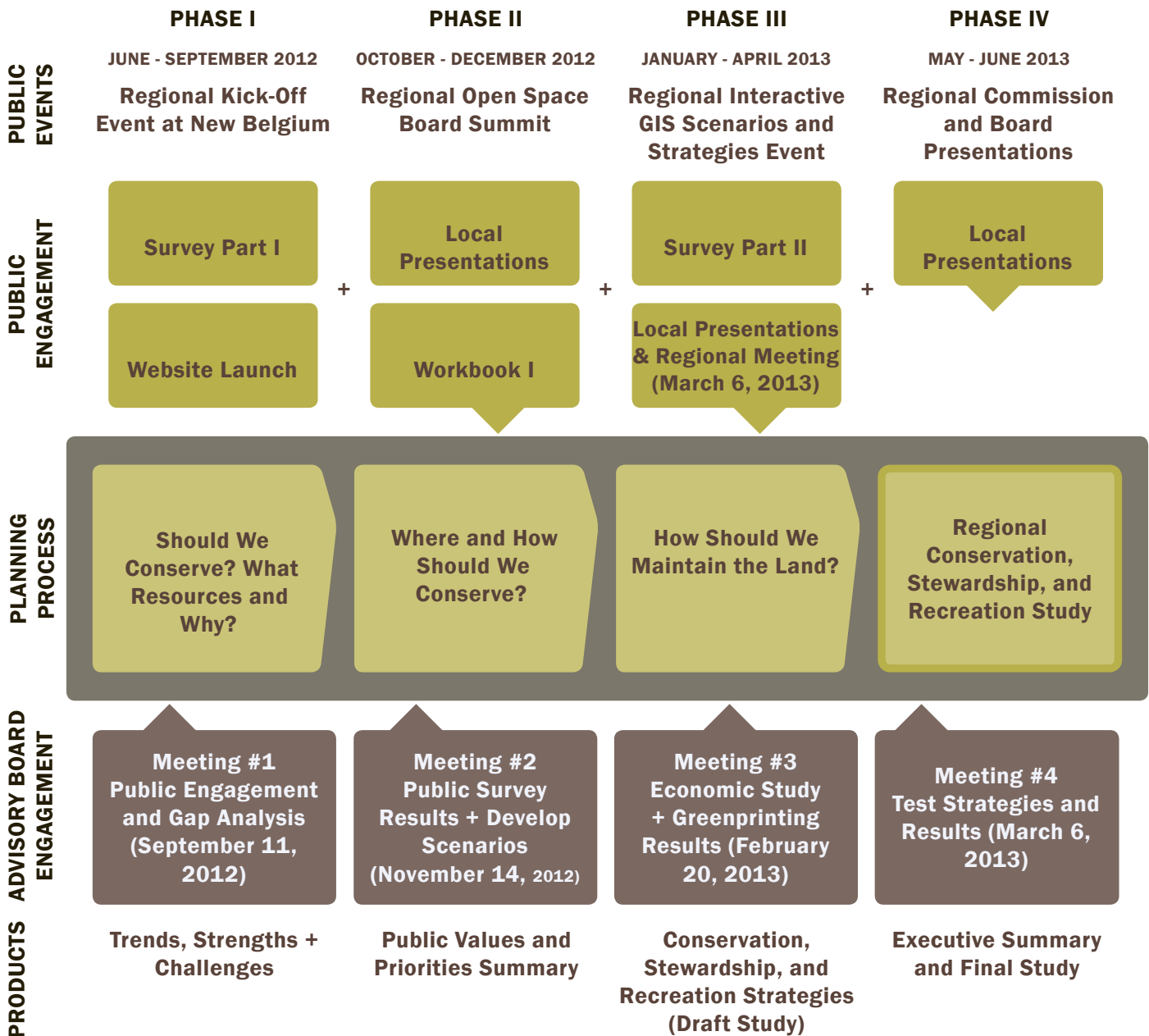


Figure 1.2 Public Involvement Process



CHAPTER ENDNOTES

The public involvement approach:

- Offered the public meaningful and continuous opportunities to shape a vision plan and priorities for the region's conservation and recreation programs.
- Fostered collaboration among Larimer County and its many cities and towns.
- Utilized multiple mediums for outreach to engage the greatest possible range of participants and perspectives, including those who have been previously under-represented.
- Through scenario analysis, gained a deeper understanding and visualization of the key opportunities, threats, and trends that inform future master planning.
- Generated a regional toolbox for strategic and holistic decision-making that reflects local autonomy and priorities.
- Strengthened the foundation for ongoing dialogue, collaborative learning, and planning for throughout Larimer County.

The Study outreach process is divided into four phases to answer the following questions:

PHASE I - Inventory + Gap Analysis. Should we conserve land? Why? What types of resources should be conserved?

PHASE II - Vision + Values. Where and how should land be conserved?

PHASE III - Scenarios + Priorities. How should stewardship on the land occur? What type of outdoor recreation should be provided?

PHASE IV - Choices. Summarizing answers to the above in a Draft and Final Study document.

- 1 Sales tax revenues and the allocation to each municipality fluctuate annually. Percentages listed are based on Larimer County's 2012 Open Lands Compass of Larimer County. Updated June 6, 2012. Accessed from: http://www.larimer.org/compass/openlands_env_use.htm
- 2 Larimer County. (2012). Open Lands. Compass of Larimer County. Updated June 6, 2012. Accessed from: http://www.larimer.org/compass/openlands_env_use.htm
- 3 Larimer County. (2012). Open Lands. Compass of Larimer County. Updated June 6, 2012. Accessed from: http://www.larimer.org/compass/openlands_env_use.htm



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