

Fox Run Nature Center Position Statement

Significant questions about the Integrity of the county and county process supporting the building of a nature center in Fox Run Regional Park have been raised. Citizen questions and concerns have not been accurately and adequately addressed. Responses to concerns have been answered inconsistently depending on who is asking, greatly affecting the citizens' trust of the system or County officials. In response, citizens have implemented a petition requesting a halting of the project until such concerns are heard and addressed. Below is a summary of these concerns.

1. The County did not pursue appropriate **notification and input** processes in support of this project.

- A. **Local citizens who reside along the Fox Run Park corridors and will be most impacted by this development have NEVER been notified and feedback has never been directly solicited.** While the County indicates that public discussions of this project date to 2019, the first Initial posting at the park was done in mid January of 2024, at least five years later. At the time of this posting, thousands were completely unaware of any such development. Awareness of this project has only happened because of an uprise of concern raised by citizens via social media sites.

- B. **The master plan for the nature center was not based on meaningful input from the community.** The Master plan was published in 2020 following one meeting and a survey of 302 El Paso County citizens from 30 Colorado zip codes. The survey was conducted in 2019 via a post on the website and no attempts were made to directly reach those most affected by the development. Given non-targeted marketing of the survey, the small number of respondents relative to the population, and the spread of zip codes around the state, it is irresponsible to consider this adequate local or even county representation into initiation, placement, and planning of the nature center. One question was about general interest in a nature center in Northern El Paso County and the focus of the rest of the survey was the type of amenities that would be preferred.

There was an initial meeting held in the 2019 timeframe and according to an attendee, there was a general presentation and discussion of the idea. It was not widely advertised, there was no public forum allowing for input, and no record was taken of input or concerns. Shortly after this meeting, the master plan was rolled out. It was clear that there was not good faith intent to gather early input into the development, but rather these vehicles served to begin selling a

predetermined project plan without suggesting plans that were previously developed and finalized without any true public input.

- C. **The County's later "input" meetings were only to provide feedback on the predetermined final plan.** Over the course of the last two years, the County ran a series of meetings which they claimed to be input opportunities into the nature center. However, this is not an accurate description of what has taken place as they were designed only to receive input on the amenities associated with the final plan. These meetings, often titled, "Tell Us What You Think," were most often held as part of another meeting or venue, including bars, concerts, science nights, etc. When trying to express concerns and raise questions at these venues, attendees were told the plans were final and their responses served only to deflect the concerns and justify the predetermined direction of the project.

- D. **The county indicates that there are no such input requirements for development within our parks.** If this is accurate, it raises significant questions as to why the county is not accountable for seeking and responding to input on major development of publicly owned properties. There is a strong impression that there is no valid avenue for true input that affects the direction of plans and any actions taken are to check a box and for appearance only. The management of this process suggests that the direction and decisions around County projects, including the nature center in Fox Run, are largely made behind closed doors, raising significant concerns about the level of influence of the developers in this project over the input and feedback of the local citizens. While the County claims its meetings are input sessions, they are in effect only for show.

2. The plan does not adequately study or address **impact on traffic, speeding, and local safety.**

- A. **The setting and issues associated with Fox Run Park are not equivalent to Bear Creek or Fountain Creek nature centers.** Fox Run Park is unique in that it is more heavily nestled in residential areas, notably different from both the Bear Creek and Fountain Creek Nature Centers. The County has stated that the setting for the Fox Run Park is the same as that of Bear Creek and Fountain Creek nature centers, but Fox Run is indisputably more residential on all four sides of the park. Bear Creek Park is surrounded by thoroughfares on 21st street and Bear Creek Road without homes directly positioned on the roadway . Fountain Creek Nature Center is bordered primarily by I-25 and I-85, which do not have homes. Park visitors for either location **do not** drive directly through residential areas to get to the main entrance for the nature centers. Fox Run Park

is surrounded on all sides by homes with direct access to driveways and low residential speed limits.

- B. **Main entrance to the nature center as currently proposed on Stella would increase traffic through the residential areas.** GPS leads visitors through a residential street with a speed limit of 20mph. Traffic and safety are not currently addressed as part of the feasibility study. In recent conversations, some county representatives didn't even know that there was an entrance to the park off of Roller Coaster Road. The County claimed the main entrance is not off of Stella when asked about the impact, but all of the placards and materials indicate the main entrance is off of Stella.

- C. **Traffic and speeding in residential areas is already a major issue around the park, and it is not believable that the nature center will have no impact.** Neighbors have attempted to control this issue over the last 5 years with signs, placards, and contact with the county. A study conducted for a 30-day period in 2023 produced a 161-page report of speeding on Becky Road. Despite the County's claim that the nature center in Fox Run Park will have no additional impact on current traffic and speeding, it was not included in the feasibility report and has not been well studied. Just recently, the County released traffic data pulled from two times on two weekdays in the month of May on Becky Road. A small amount of impact data was shared from June of 2020 on Baptist/Hodgen and Roller Coaster. This data is incomplete, outdated and inconsistent with other data and experience and yet serves as the only basis for the County's claims that the center will have no impact. The fact that the County was quoted as calling the nature center a major tourist attraction that would be broadly promoted including signage on I-25 is completely incongruent with their claim of no impact and raises serious credibility issues related to the project.

- D. **Astronomical population growth in the Monument area further renders the County's traffic analysis inadequate.** The population growth in Monument area over the last five years has been astronomical and will continue over the next five years, given the number of subdivisions currently under construction in the Monument area. Estimates show a 56% increase since the feasibility study from 2019 (World Population Review, 2024). Claims projecting little to no impact on the local area are not adequate or based on current data. The data pulled from June 2020 is of questionable value given the timing of the data pulled and the population growth since this data was obtained. Given the dramatic increase in population and traffic over the last five years, this study no longer reflects the true and accurate impact of this project.

When further pushed about the issue, citizens were then told that they would attempt to route traffic on Baptist and Rollercoaster Roads. However, residents living off of the Rollercoaster corridor remind County officials that this road is also residential and the speeding along this 35 mph road is already an issue that is not regularly monitored. Traffic along Baptist road leading toward Rollercoaster has also become a major issue and a source of car accidents due to speeding through on a hilly, two-lane road splitting a neighborhood without the infrastructure to support it.

- E. **Concerns about safety and security in and around the park have been raised but not answered.** Sexual activity, drug use, speeding, car break-ins, and illegal camping have all been witnessed and are not rare to the park. The use of mountain bikes, hover boards and other motorized vehicles have also been witnessed with some frequency on the trails. It is conceivable that further development of the park will increase the level of unwanted activities and increase the need for security. There is no regular security in or around the park and questions raised about the budget for the nature center have not been answered.

3. **Environmental impact** on the park or local area has not been considered and concerns have been ignored.

- A. Fox Run Park is a distinct natural environment tucked in a neighborhood setting. Though the County claims that placement of the nature center and 60 parking spots in a more remote natural, undeveloped section of the park will have no environmental impact, **there have been no environmental studies to support this.** Answers to questions about the degree of tree removal in the name of preserving nature have been inconsistently answered and do not seem consistent with the project plan.
- B. **The feasibility study itself is inadequate and outdated given the housing and population growth in the area over the last five years.** It was published in 2019 and does not include factors that are important considerations for decision-making, including analysis of effects on the surrounding neighborhoods, effect on wildlife, effects on trails, plans for trail repair and maintenance, environmental impact, historical or cultural protections, increased traffic or changes in traffic patterns, or other factors that should be addressed. Despite claims by the County that the nature center will have no impact, it is more realistic to expect it will result in significant impact on the unique natural environment, including removal of trees, increase in foot and car traffic in remote

sections, proliferation of current and new social trails, increase erosion caused by lack of trail maintenance, displacement of fox, owl, deer, and other wildlife, and introduction of noise and light pollution in currently preserved areas. There's been no consideration of the negative impact on wildlife, including the namesake fox population that has very recently made a comeback from the brink of extinction less than three years ago.

- C. **The County's claim that the nature center would not pose any additional fire risk to the local area raises serious questions about the degree of consideration of the risk.** According to the County, the project is not held to the same fire mitigation standards as residents in the community or recommendations of insurance companies. In speaking with a local fire chief, there was concern with the lack of fire mitigation planned for the nature center and a potential increase in fire risk. The very small projections of tree removal stated by the County would not account for any fire mitigation activity. The official was also unaware of any lowered requirements for buildings placed in forested areas and would be concerned if this were true. Questions were raised about the need to remove considerably more trees than projected surrounding the nature center and all the parking spots in order to minimize risk both to the nature center and to the surrounding residents.

4. The **trail system in the park is in poor condition** and there are no funds for trail repair and maintenance.

- A. **The trails throughout the park have not been maintained and there is significant erosion throughout the trail system.** The decline over the last five years has been most notable with a rapid proliferation of unplanned trails running all throughout the park. The County admits that the park has not been well-maintained and indicates that there is not money in the budget to do so. It's clear the county has not been interested in maintaining the park prior to this project and did not even build money into the budget for trail repair and maintenance even once the nature center is built.
- B. **This project and the current placement of the center will propagate the damage to the natural area and the trails,** despite their stated vision of preserving the environment. It is planned to build the center in the most forested area of the park because it will provide a more natural experience. This is also an area where trails are widely used because a hiker can currently enjoy a more natural experience.. Ironically, in the name of preservation and providing a natural experience, this location will sacrifice the most trees, increase foot and

vehicle traffic in less developed areas, and lessen the sense of being able to hike in a more remote area.

- C. **The county recognizes the park is in poor repair, but has not built park maintenance into the budget.** County officials have said that the park has not been well managed but the “hope” is that having the nature center will help them to better maintain it. The County claims it is not “commercializing” the park, but has also indicated that they expect the nature center will be an opportunity to raise revenue to support the park. Despite their recognition of the current problems, trail repair and maintenance has not been built into the budget. To those witnessing the rapid decline of the park over the last ten years, it appears irresponsible to refuse to repair and maintain the park to this point and assume that an increase in the level of foot and vehicle traffic will improve the situation, particularly given it not being built into the county budget.

5. There is a lack of County **accountability and transparency** for financing, budget, and park administration.

Over the course of the last ten months as local citizens have become aware of the building of the nature center, questions and concerns raised in various venues and settings have been largely ignored and gone unanswered. Despite the lack of integrity for local citizen input into the process, citizens have been told repeatedly that the project is finalized and moving forward. **Direct questions about budget, funding, and impact on taxes and tax expenditures have been deflected.** County officials have continued to respond with vague answers, implying everything would be paid for via private funding and staffing would be with volunteers. Follow up questions about current budgets for Bear Creek and Fountain Creek nature centers have similarly gone unanswered. The refusal of County officials to answer legitimate questions has raised suspicions about the project and left local citizens with many questions.

If tax based funding is used for this project, does it not require transparency and accountability for the use of tax resources? What is the role and influence of developers hired very early in the project, long before any proper awareness of the project? Do citizens not have the right to have legitimate questions answered about funding and budgets? Would the County actually staff a \$10 million dollar project only with volunteers? Is it responsible and appropriate to not fully budget for trail repair and maintenance, security, and other expenses created by this project? Why does the County refuse to give direct and consistent answers to questions raised by those most impacted by this project?

Request Response: It is for these reasons and the lack of serious consideration that a petition was initiated among El Paso County citizens. Over a thousand local citizens responded within three weeks, indicating serious, widespread concern and a request that the County be held accountable to the following:

- Directly notify all residents surrounding the park and provide a means for direct input.
- Immediately include a committee of concerned citizens in nature center development planning and efforts.
- Properly study and address the concerns of the community surrounding the park, including traffic control, speeding, and safety.
- Budget and obtain adequate regular funding for trail repair, erosion control, waste management prior to expending resources on the building of new facilities.
- Explore relocation of the placement of the Nature Center elsewhere or to an already developed area of the park where parking is already available.
- Identify ways to control or re-route entrance to the park to avoid further danger and impact to the local neighborhoods.
- Conduct updated studies appropriate, accepted impact studies on the environment in and surrounding the park. (updated or current or)
- Exercise financial and administrative transparency to include private and government funding and annual budget of the nature center.