

# THE MUNICIPAL

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## MAINTENANCE & OPERATIONS



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# Poudre River project strikes the right balance

**The city of Fort Collins, Colo., and its community members had a dream: the revitalization of the Cache la Poudre — pronounced pooh-der — River corridor. The corridor was a historically degraded area, which had once included a landfill and other industries. These developments had cut the river off from its floodplain and had reduced its accessibility for the community. With the river passing through the city's downtown, it was an invaluable asset that simply needed rediscovering.**

By SARAH WRIGHT | The Municipal

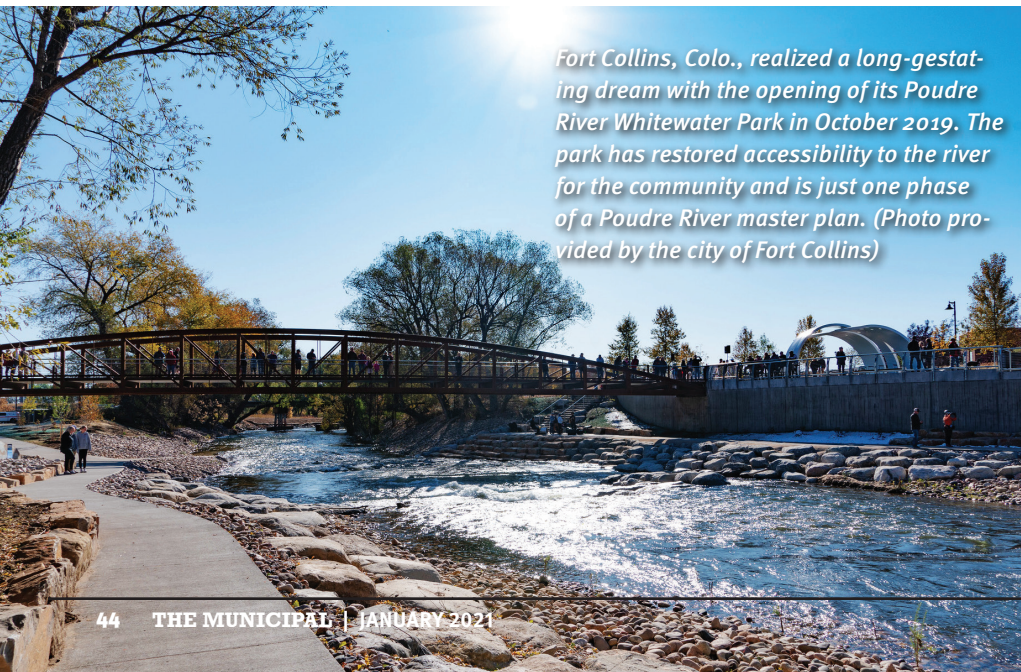
"There were individual efforts over time, but they all failed," Kurt Friesen, director of Fort Collins Park Planning and Development, said. "All of them were focused on a singular purpose whether restoration, recreation or downtown investments. What made this (recent) effort unique was it provided multiple benefits."

These benefits included a safer river with an improved floodplain; improved natural habitat and connectivity; and recreational opportunities not just limited to whitewater. All of those benefits combined proved vital to drawing the backing of the community and key stakeholders.

"We did a lot of traditional outreach," Friesen said, also citing a holistic approach when crafting the October 2014 master plan for the entire river corridor. "There were community meetings, individual stakeholder meetings and conversations with different groups about what the river should be like through downtown. There were diverse opinions about the project. It enabled us to create a plan that created a balance between all these desires."

Valerie Van Ryn, leading marketing specialist with the Park Planning and Development Department, guided communications and public relations efforts, keeping the community informed and crafting a consistent message. Because of the project's location and the number of interests involved, Van Ryn noted, "It was high profile for everyone."

*Fort Collins, Colo., realized a long-gestating dream with the opening of its Poudre River Whitewater Park in October 2019. The park has restored accessibility to the river for the community and is just one phase of a Poudre River master plan. (Photo provided by the city of Fort Collins)*





**LEFT:** Since its opening, the Poudre River Whitewater Park in Fort Collins has been popular with the community. Its diverse features make it an enjoyable destination for more than whitewater recreation. (Photo provided by the city of Fort Collins)

**RIGHT:** Workers installed sheet pile to push the Poudre River onto the north bank allowing in-channel work to occur. (Photo provided by the city of Fort Collins)

Since previous efforts, there had been an increased interest in preservation and recreation, which can be at two ends of the spectrum. For this reason, an emphasis was placed on finding the path that best fits the city and its needs.

Ultimately, in the master plan, the project was divided into six reaches for construction. These reaches contained different transitions that consisted of more natural experiences on each end of the river corridor and transition zones, which bookended the centralized urban interface zone in Fort Collins' downtown area.

Reach 3 — from the Museum of Discovery to BNSF Railroad — was the first to be implemented and would form the Fort Collins' Poudre River Whitewater Park. It is located within the urban interface zone and industry had heavily altered it with structures like bridges, concrete floodwalls, a diversion structure and adjacent private development having influenced the river and its floodplain. Additionally, it is along College Avenue, one of the city's most traveled streets, and east of Lee Martinez Park and north of downtown Fort Collins.

In this reach, there were four main groups interested: naturalists; a whitewater advocacy group; adjacent businesses and stakeholders; and lastly, the funders, which consisted of both private and public donors, with one private donor giving \$1 million to the project. Because of this, Friesen noted there were many expectations to manage and his team had to work hard to do so. The key, according to him, was consistent communications that highlighted the three benefits.

"Not just one but all three benefits. We really beat that drum," he said, noting success came from striking the right balance and using unifying language.

Construction in Reach 3 began in late September and early October 2018, with a tight window to get in after the irrigation season but out before spring runoff could cause high flows. In-channel work took priority, and workers installed sheet pile, pushing the river onto the north bank, thus allowing the south side to dry up. From there, workers dismantled the Coy diversion structure and other man-made features.

Of the entire construction process, Friesen said, "It was challenging on every level. During construction, we uncovered a 100-year-old infiltration gallery from an old power plant that was used to generate electricity. We had a limited construction window so the clock was ticking. An archaeologist did come out and was able to document it."

Following that documentation, the structure was removed, though portions were salvaged and remain on-site.

By January 2019, demolition wrapped up and construction began on the whitewater features, designed by S2o Design. This entailed



*The pedestrian bridge is swung into place over the Poudre River, where in-channel work continues. The bridge's inclusion in the project was made possible by a private donor. (Photo provided by the city of Fort Collins)*

placing boulders and grouting them together with rip-rap and cobble surrounding them. A fish passage was also installed.

One key aspect of the park's design was a 180-foot, single-span pedestrian bridge to further the community's connection to the river. It was transported in 45-foot sections and assembled on-site before being hoisted into place. By April and May, in-channel work wrapped up, and the whitewater features along the north bank were completed — in time for the spring's runoff. During that period, work shifted to upland construction components: trails, a parking lot and footers for the art structure on the overlook plaza.

"There are a lot of diverse features," Friesen said. "It's going to be used year-round."

The greatness of Poudre River Whitewater Park, according to Friesen, is that it's not just for whitewater recreation but for everyone — fishermen, the casual river enthusiast who might just want to go tubing or enjoy the water and children who have a protected play area to explore.

"There is also handicap accessibility to the riverfront," Friesen added. ►





At least 1,000 people turned out to explore the Poudre River Whitewater Park during its Oct. 12 ribbon-cutting ceremony. Among this number were kayakers who enjoyed a fuller river than is normal in October. (Photo provided by the city of Fort Collins)



Kayakers and paddle boarders test out the Poudre River Whitewater Park's features, which were designed by S2O Design. (Photo provided by the city of Fort Collins)

Poudre River Whitewater Park opened to the public in September 2019 and held its ribbon cutting Oct. 12. That ceremony drew at least 1,000 people eager to explore the new park while enjoying live music and learning about the project and its history. The river doesn't usually carry a lot of water during the fall, but a local energy provider through its operations provided a large water delivery into it in time for the event.

"The river was full of kayakers in October," Friesen said. "We don't have that amount of water normally, so it was magical."

Since October, the enjoyment has carried on.

"It's been a huge success. This was its first full season, and it has been packed with people. It's just been a great addition to the community," Friesen said, sharing people will come

## On the Web

View Fort Collins' Poudre River Downtown Master Plan at <https://www.fcgov.com/parkplanning/pdf/poudre-river-downtown-master-plan.pdf?1593092846>.

up and tell him they have seen so many people at the Whitewater Park even on a Tuesday.

Friesen and the city aim to turn that success into momentum to realize other components of the master plan, which will chart the Poudre River corridor's future during the next 20 years. Work is underway on Reach 4, which is located between BNSF Railroad and Linden Street, with a feasibility study to determine what can be done to clean up the site environmentally. Like Reach 3, it is surrounded by urban development and has been highly altered.

"We want to keep the momentum going and expand reaches over the coming years," Friesen said. "We want to be opportunists on how we develop these reaches and work with our partners and with (other city) departments as they do projects and look for more opportunities."

For cities approaching large-scale projects, Friesen advised it's great to have a vision and spend time developing it. "It allowed us to move forward and implement this plan."

He added, "I'd also emphasize the value of funding and private funders. There was a point in the project where we were not sure if we'd get the project fully funded. It (the whitewater park) could have been average, but when a private funder stepped in, that pushed it over the top, making it a really special place."

While the majority of the project utilized public funds, private backers can be key to giving projects an edge to realize components that are not necessary but improve a project. Friesen shared the pedestrian bridge almost didn't happen as the funding just wasn't there, but one funder stepped in and agreed to fund it.

"It wouldn't have happened without the vision for them (funders) to rally behind," Friesen said, noting it helps to show business owners and private funders a project's benefits to the community and their businesses.

"We are a city that builds our own plans," Friesen added. "This project is a testament to that strategy." 