

COMMUNITY COOPERATION FOR PUBLIC LANDS:
LARAMIE'S PILOT HILL PROJECT

Jessica Schillinger

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Introduction

In 2017, Albany County, Wyoming was approached by local ranchland owners about potentially purchasing 5,500 acres of undeveloped land adjacent to the city. This land, sitting on top of the Casper Aquifer, a major supplier of the water for the city, would connect Laramie to a portion Medicine Bow National Forest, approximately five to 10 miles to the east. With the opportunity to greatly expand its outdoor recreation areas and protect its drinking water, Laramie explored many options of purchasing the land known as Pilot Hill, creating partnerships with county and state government, nonprofits, local business, and other community stakeholders. Over the course of three years and through many ups and downs, the city is nearing the end of the Pilot Hill Project, with hopes to open the area up to the public in Fall 2020.

The Pilot Hill Project provides ample opportunities to examine the development of local public policy, relationships between local government, residents, and private business, and the complexity of large-scale community projects. From the beginning, the Pilot Hill Project and subsequent policies, required the coordination of many organizations, government agencies, and the general public. This paper presents the evolution of the Pilot Hill Project, from its first introduction to the final purchase, providing details on the community, standing partnership between city and county government, key stakeholders, major issues, and implementation.

Background

Surrounded by the Medicine Bow National Forest at approximately 7200' above sea level, Laramie is a small city in southeast Wyoming.¹ Located in Albany County, Laramie has a population of about 32,000 and is home to the University of Wyoming. Residents tend to be well-educated (81% with at least some college; 51% with at least a bachelor's degree) and young (median age is 25.7), significantly

¹ "Vicinity Map for Medicine Bow - Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland."

due to the presence of the university. The median income was \$44,186 for households and \$74,550 for families, with an unemployment rate just under five percent.²

Local Government

Laramie is governed locally by a nine-member city council including the major and vice-major, each representing one of three wards, and serving overlapping four-year terms.³ While the city council oversees policy making, the City Manager directs the day-to-day administration.⁴ Several boards and commissions are organized at the city-level, both appointed and elected. These boards and commissions include the board of health, environment advisory committee, traffic commission, and building authority, among others.⁵ Albany County is governed by a body of elected board of three commissioners.⁶ The county commissioners oversee 14 county boards and commissions of appointed community members for specific areas of county government, including historic preservation, transportation, tourism, and the public library.⁷

Tourism & Outdoor Recreation

Due to its location to outdoor recreation and activities at the university, tourism plays a large role in the local and state economy, supporting transportation, retail, arts and entertainment, and service industries. According to a 2017 travel economic impact report, tourism is a major economic sector in Wyoming, generating \$188 million in state and local taxes and supporting over 32,000 jobs. In 2017, 8.7 million people visited Wyoming, spending approximately \$3.6 billion dollars in the state, nearly \$10 million per day. In Albany County alone, these industries employed nearly 1,650 people, with visitors spending over a \$158 million in the local economy and generating over \$9 million in state and local taxes. Tourists to Albany County spent over \$24 million in accommodations and over \$37 million at restaurants and bars, in addition to \$20 million in both retail sales and arts, entertainment, and recreation. It could be

² “Profile for Laramie, WY, USA Towns in Profile.”

³ “City Council Organization.”

⁴ “City Council.”

⁵ “Boards & Commissions.”

⁶ “Commissioners.”

⁷ “Boards.”

said many of these visitors traveled by vehicle, whether regional or as a road trip stop, as \$21 million was spent on local transportation and gas, whereas \$500,000 accounted for air travel.⁸

In addition to the tourism impact to local businesses and tax revenues, university athletics bring in a significant amount of revenue to the institution each year. Between 2018 and 2019, University of Wyoming athletics generated over \$47 million in revenue, \$12.5 million from football alone,⁹ about \$1 million per game.¹⁰ Furthermore, university activities and programs outside of athletics, such as music, art, student recruitment, community events, campus museum and others bring additional visitors and revenue to the local economy.

With the remarkable geology of the Vedauwoo area of the national forest to the east and the Snowy Range mountains to the west, Laramie is often a stop for outdoor recreators, skiers, campers, and others visiting the Medicine Bow National Forest and other areas in the state. Managed by the U.S. Forest Service, the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests & Thunder Basin National Grassland covers nearly 2.9 million acres of land from central Colorado to central and northeastern Wyoming. The national forest areas include several mountain ranges of the northern Rockies and provides timber, areas for livestock, natural wildlife habits, and water for much of the surrounding area.¹¹ Some areas within a 10 minute drive from Laramie, the area includes year-round outdoor recreation for visitors, including camping, skiing, hiking, and backpacking.

Within the city, Laramie boasts many trails, local parks, and green spaces.¹² For the 2021 fiscal year, the \$3.7 million budget for parks and recreation ranked third after police (\$8.2 million) and fire (\$6.6 million).¹³ Many parks and recreation community projects are funded with assistance from the

⁸ Dean Runyan Associates.

⁹ BKD CPAs & Advisors, "University of Wyoming: Independent Accountant's Report on Applying Agreed-Upon Procedures Performed on the Intercollegiate Athletics Program as Required by NCAA Bylaw 3.2.4.15.1 Year Ended June 30, 2019."

¹⁰ Assuming the average of 12 games per year.

¹¹ "About Our Forest - Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland."

¹² "Parks Division."

¹³ City of Laramie, "Adopted Budget, Fiscal Year 2021."

Albany County Recreation Board,¹⁴ including sports leagues, 4-H clubs, and social support programs, like Big Brothers-Big Sisters.¹⁵

For Laramie and Wyoming as a whole, tourism and outdoor recreation are clearly priorities for government and local economies. The sector is not only a substantial source of tax and business revenue, but a large employer and contributor to industry earnings across the state. In the case of the Pilot Hill Project, Laramie and the surrounding area had the opportunity to expand this sector, in hope of bolstering the local economy and contributing to county conservation efforts. To understand the complex community cooperation of the project and the management policies of the land, it is important to start at the beginning and describe major milestones and key players in the development of the project.

The Pilot Hill Project

Opportunity Presents Itself

In early 2017, Doug Samuelson,¹⁶ owner of the Warren Land and Livestock Company,¹⁷ came to Albany County and the University of Wyoming with an idea: he wanted to sell a portion of his grazing lands adjacent to the city of Laramie for wildlife conservation, groundwater protection, and recreational use.¹⁸ The area for sale was 5,528 acres¹⁹ of rolling hills and open prairie covered with limestone outcroppings at a price of \$14 million.²⁰ The land covers 13 percent of the Casper Aquifer,²¹ a critical source of clean water for the area, providing 60 percent of Laramie's drinking water.²² Concerns over clean water and conservation had been a concern locally for many years. The Laramie Rivers Conservation District had been advocating for the city to take formal steps to protect the Pilot Hill area

¹⁴ Also known as the Albany County School District #1 Recreation Board

¹⁵ City of Laramie, "Adopted Budget, Fiscal Year 2021."

¹⁶ "Pilot Hill Project Is Nearly Ready To Open To The Public."

¹⁷ Collective name for the following LLCs, all owned by Doug Samuelson: Pilot Peak; Lodgepole Ranch; JHD Ranch; DSS Holdings. "Purchase and Sale Agreement: Pilot Hill Parcels."

¹⁸ "Pilot Hill Land Use Plan."

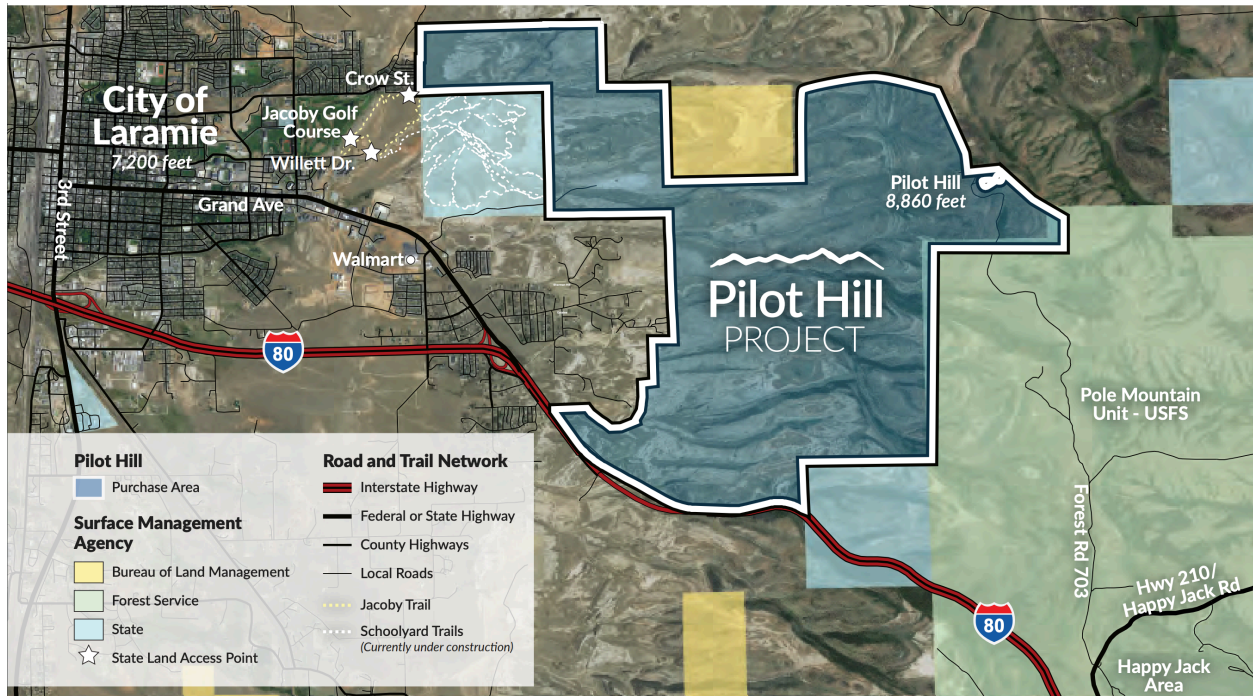
¹⁹ "Resolution No. 2017-79, Memorializing Support for Purchase of the Pilot Hill Lands by the Albany County Board of Commissioners."

²⁰ Walker, "County Commission Approves \$14 Million Land Purchase."

²¹ Edwards, "Laramie Works To Raise Millions To Buy Historic Ranch, Turn It Into Public Park."

²² Peterson, "Pilot Hill Project Would Connect Laramie with National Forest, Protect Aquifer and Wildlife."

Figure 1 Map of the Pilot Hill Project land purchase area



Source: Pilot Hill Project

from development that may damage water sources underground.²³ With its proximity to Medicine Bow National Forest and other state-owned land, the chance to create a large public recreation area directly east of Laramie was also a major draw of the sale. The proposed acreage bordered both the city and Medicine Bow and would connect Laramie with over 65,000 acres of national forest and land managed by the state and the Bureau of Land Management.²⁴

The idea of selling the land that would become known as Pilot Hill goes back over a decade. In 2009, representation from Warren Livestock approached the Laramie city council about purchasing 3,000 acres of land at the east edge of town for water conservation and recreational use. At the time, the land for sale followed closely with Interstate 80 and connected with Medicine Bow National Forest. In October 2009, the city council voted to include the land purchase in a special “sixth penny” sales tax ballot item in

²³ Peterson.

²⁴ “Pilot Hill Land Use Plan.”

the 2010 general election. The initiative would distribute 6.5 percent of the tax to protection of the Casper Aquifer.²⁵ Though the ballot initiative passed in 2010, funding was never distributed to the project.²⁶

Early Concerns & Growing Support

Once the conversation began, concerns and support began to emerge from local business, nonprofits, conservation groups, and the general public. In July 2017, the Albany County Commissioners met to discuss the purchase to a “packed District Courtroom.”²⁷ Initial reception was mixed. Residents expressed both support for the benefits a large public land area next to the city and concerns for the \$14 million price. The county had recently laid off employees, so the idea writing a check for millions of dollars was a concern for both residents and county commissioners. “We don’t have any money as a county,” commissioner Tim Chesnut said in the meeting. “We are experiencing layoffs and a crisis situation...as far as general funds money goes, we are not going to be spending that on [the Pilot Hill land].”²⁸ Commissioner Heber Richardson expressed support for the purchase from the initial offer, noting the protection of the aquifer as a major reason for support. Richardson said that the price was “worth it” to protect the groundwater and that high price tag was “because the county would be acquiring a lot of land.”²⁹

Through the summer of 2017, the commissioners solicited input from the general public, including a survey on the county’s website. The poll, conducted as a single question widget, found that 91% of respondents were for the Pilot Hill land purchase. The poll had received 790 votes at its closure in late summer.³⁰ Although the poll was not statistically representative of the city or county, it was reason

²⁵ Haderlie, “Warren Livestock Plans to Put Land on the Market.”

²⁶ “Summary Report, Official Results, 2010 General Election.”

²⁷ Walker, “Land Purchase for \$14 Million Could Connect Laramie to National Forest, State Park.”

²⁸ Walker.

²⁹ Walker, “Protecting the Water?”

³⁰ “Proposed Land Purchase.”

enough for the commissioners, local media, Laramie city county, and the newly formed Pilot Hill Project to resolve overwhelming “enthusiasm” for the project by the public.³¹

In September 2017, the Albany County Commissioners voted to approve the purchase of Pilot Hill and signed a sales agreement with Warren Livestock. As a condition of the agreement, the county would have a year to secure the \$14 million to purchase the land.³² Chesnut indicated that the commission had received substantial public feedback, saying “We’ve had quite a bit of public comment both pros and cons against this and for this land sale. I know the community appreciates that we have opened this up to be as open as possible.”³³ With funding still a major concern, the commission created a funding oversight committee in October, with appointed members from the University of Wyoming, state legislature, and other community organizations.³⁴ Members were chosen based on their knowledge of local government and “their understanding of policy, politics, funding sources, and where to go get money,” said commissioner Richardson.³⁵ In December, the Laramie city council passed a resolution formalizing its support of the project. The resolution cited the agreement with the county as reason for its support, as well as the fact “the City of Laramie has consistently recognized the importance of recreation development as contributing to both quality of life and economic development.” The resolution also recognized the project would require long-term relationships between the “City of Laramie, University of Wyoming, Laramie Chamber Business Alliance, recreational organizations and individual residents.”³⁶

Although the project was supported by local government and the general public, two major questions still remained unanswered: how was the county to pay the \$14 million and how would the area be managed in the long-term? Securing the area for water protection aside, creating an outdoor recreational area, as a condition of the agreement and a major economic development incentive, requires

³¹ “Pilot Hill Land Use Plan.”

³² “Purchase and Sale Agreement: Pilot Hill Parcels.”

³³ Walker, “Commission Votes to Purchase about 5,500 Acres of Land East of Laramie.”

³⁴ Walker, “Commission Forms Committee to Seek Funds for \$14 Million Land Purchase.”

³⁵ Walker.

³⁶ “Resolution No. 2017-79, Memorializing Support for Purchase of the Pilot Hill Lands by the Albany County Board of Commissioners.”

trail creation, access point creation, and other on-going management of the area. It was discussed early on that perhaps the area could be managed by the city through its parks program or through the Wyoming State Parks department, but no formal arrangement had been created. In order to secure the success of the project, the county would need decide exactly how to pay for the land initially, but also in the long-term, working together with the city, community organizations, local business, and residents. County commissioners hoped the newly created oversight committee would help determine those policies and support a more detailed plan for land use.³⁷

Finding Funding & Concerns of Land Management

Funding ideas and fundraising efforts started quickly after the county voted to purchase the land. The Pilot Hill Project was already in the community, educating residents, nonprofits, and local businesses about the potential benefits of the land. In December 2017, the Wyoming Community Foundation came out in support of the project, promising technical assistance to create an online donation system and website for the project.³⁸ The county commissioners expanded the Funding Oversight Committee to include three subcommittees focused on specific areas of project: finance and economic development, recreation activities, and aquifer protection.³⁹ The financial subcommittee even suggested applying for a loan from the State Loan and Investment Board, funding set aside to support water protection in Wyoming. Though commissioner Richardson expressed reservations about securing a loan for the project, the commission voted to consider the option in later meetings.⁴⁰

A funding victory occurred in February 2018, when the land was appraised at \$10.5 million, a significant decrease from the initial \$14 million asking price.⁴¹ However, funding was yet to be secured. At the time, the county was also exploring other management options, including developing the area as a

³⁷ Walker, "Commission Forms Committee to Seek Funds for \$14 Million Land Purchase."

³⁸ Walker, "Working Together to Raise Money: Wyoming Community Foundation Assists County Commission Fund Land Purchase."

³⁹ Walker, "Becoming More Efficient."

⁴⁰ Walker, "County Commission Considers Applying for Loan to Fund Land Purchase."

⁴¹ Walker, "Land Purchase to Cost Less."

Wyoming State Park. It submitted an application for state park status,⁴² though state park officials expressed some reservations due to the high price tag of the land.⁴³ Meanwhile, the Pilot Hill Project continued fundraising and assisting the county in community education, donation management, and soliciting support from major donors and organizations. The University of Wyoming was tapped for support by May, as the Pilot Hill Project and local state legislators asked for \$1 million in support from the university's trustees. Though the trustees expressed their support, no funds were pledged. The university's major concern with the land was its ability to drill water wells in the area adjacent to the university's golf course,⁴⁴ a priority noted back in 2009.⁴⁵ Trustees reiterated their interest in using wells on the property to eventually bypass the City of Laramie's water treatment system and that any cooperation from the university would include stipulations reserving water use rights.⁴⁶

As the September deadline grew closer, the county began to explore other options for acquiring the land. The Pilot Hill Project was able to raise \$400,000 by June⁴⁷ through individual donations, though no major donors had yet to contribute to the project. In addition to the \$10.5 million to purchase the land, the county had determined approximately \$4.5 million would be needed for management of the land as an outdoor recreational area.⁴⁸ At the same time, Pilot Hill announced talks with the Wyoming Office of State Lands and Investments about a possible land swap in order to finance the area. In the case of a land swap, the state would offer currently state-owned land to Warren Livestock in exchange for the Pilot Hill land. Land swaps are often done in these types of situations; they provide a benefit of consolidating areas of land for both the state and landowners. However, even in the event of a land swap, the county and community partners would still need to raise funds to cover the cost of management.⁴⁹

⁴² Walker.

⁴³ Edwards, "Laramie Works To Raise Millions To Buy Historic Ranch, Turn It Into Public Park."

⁴⁴ Victor, "Pilot Hill Project Receives Support, but Not Money, from UW Trustees."

⁴⁵ Haderlie, "Warren Livestock Plans to Put Land on the Market."

⁴⁶ Victor, "Pilot Hill Project Receives Support, but Not Money, from UW Trustees."

⁴⁷ Edwards, "Laramie's Pilot Hill Project Moves Forward With Land Swap Option."

⁴⁸ Victor, "UW Considers Pilot Hill Project Buy-In."

⁴⁹ Victor.

As the summer went on, the idea of utilizing a state land swap to acquire the land seemed more and more of a possibility. By the end of July, the landowners had agreed to an extension to the original September 2018 deadline for the county to raise funds for the set purchase price. This extension gave the county and the Pilot Hill Project more time to explore the idea of a land swap with the Office of State Lands and Investments' Trust Land Management Division. Discussion of creating a state park also continued but was proving to be a longer-term management option than initially anticipated. Darin Westby, director the Wyoming State Parks and Historic Sites, responded to the county commissioners' application saying, "We have discussed [the project] and feel it is a good candidate" to start evaluating the possible creation of a state park. "However, conducting the site criteria evaluation process can be costly and require considerable staff time. For this reason, we would like to hold off on starting the evaluation until you are a little farther along in the land acquisition process."⁵⁰ While the problem of funding was moving forward, the cost and manpower of managing the site was proving still unknown.

By the end of 2018, as the possible of a land swap became more likely, concerns for management and infrastructure of the park started to grow. While a detailed land use plan had yet to be created, concern for traffic, access fees, and other quality of life issues were discussed at the city level. In a city council meeting in December, Mayor Andi Summerville expressed concern for the impact on neighborhoods near access sites. "If this land becomes accessible early or late next spring, and we have a neighborhood that gets flooded with cars on a regular basis from people who want to access that land," Summerville said, "we've all failed as elected officials and as policy makers. That infrastructure has to come first." Councilmember Joe Shumway also shared concerns about the cost of accessing the site, particularly as a result of offsetting the management costs of the land. In both cases, Tony Hoch, co-chair of the Pilot Hill Project's Oversight Committee had few answers to calm concerns.⁵¹

Management details and specifics on land use began to formulate by summer 2019. With the deadline for purchase extended and negotiations for a land swap in full swing, the county hired SE Group

⁵⁰ Bendtsen, "State Park Status a Continuing Possibility."

⁵¹ Achs, "Council Expresses Support, Concerns for Pilot Hill Project."

to develop a comprehensive land use plan. The plan would detail infrastructure, including access points, parking areas, and trails, as well as natural resource and water protection information. These details would give the county and the Pilot Hill Project a clear understanding of recreational services and the cost of maintaining the park. The plan would be developed over the winter and be released in early 2020.⁵² By October, an active search was underway with the Office of State Lands and Investments to find other state-owned land for a swap. Additionally, Pilot Hill had raised nearly \$1 million from individuals, corporate sponsors, and major donors. In attempts to open the area as quickly as possible after the land exchange, infrastructure and access costs were pegged at an initial \$2.5 million, including the creation of parking areas, initial trail creation, and amenities like restrooms.⁵³

After partnership and sponsorship attempts had failed, the University of Wyoming announced in November they approved the purchase of 1,200 acres of the Pilot Hill land adjacent to the university's golf course for \$2.4 million. Located on the east edge of Laramie, the purchase decreased the amount of land the county was responsible of purchasing, while at the same time providing the university access to water wells on the property. This stipulation was critical to the university's involvement in the project as previously discussed. The university also planned to exchange some of the newly acquired land for an area of state school trust land to adjoin additional university-owned land.⁵⁴

Land Exchange & Final Plans

With the land exchange nearing finalization and the purchase of land by the university, Pilot Hill was becoming reality. A draft land use plan was released by SE Group in February 2020, opening the floor for public comment through the early spring. In the plan, the 5,500 acres of land would be divided into two areas: the northern portion would serve as the recreational area managed by the county, while the southern area would become a Wildlife Habitat Management Area, maintained by the state. In the

⁵² Bendtsen, "County Inks Deal for Pilot Hill Land-Use Plan."

⁵³ Achs, "City Council Considers Needed Infrastructure, Access Points for Pilot Hill."

⁵⁴ Achs, "UW Buys One-Fifth of Pilot Hill Land."

recreational zone, 34.3 miles of trails would be created for hiking, horseback riding, and mountain biking.⁵⁵ After a period of public comment, the final Pilot Hill Land Use Plan was released in July 2020.⁵⁶

In April, the Wyoming State Board of Land Commissioners and the Wyoming Office of State Lands and Investments released a detailed analysis of the land exchange to acquire the Pilot Hill land. The state agreed to exchange 11,668 acres of grazing land in both Laramie and Albany Counties for the remaining 4,239 acres of Pilot Hill, while maintaining ownership of mineral rights on the exchanged property. Both properties were appraised at approximately \$8 million. As a result, the land would be owned by the state, while Albany County and the Pilot Hill Project would lease the land at \$30-\$40,000 per year.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, while the state discussed a massive land exchange with Occidental Petroleum,⁵⁸ the energy company established a partnership with Pilot Hill to transfer surface access rights to minerals to the project.⁵⁹

Finally, in June, Wyoming State Board of Land Commissioners voted to approve the land exchange established in April, with an anticipated closing in early August.⁶⁰ Soon after the approval, the county entered into final discussions with the State Board of Land Commissioners of a 25-year lease of the land. Under the lease agreement, management of the land would be the responsibility of the county and a board of 12 appointees. However, major disputes occurred over motorized vehicle access to the land. Initially, Pilot Hill has established policies barring motorized vehicles in the area; however, the state expressed the need for vehicles such as law enforcement and emergency personnel to have access to the park.⁶¹ As a result, it is possible the land may open up to the public before the lease is finalized.⁶²

What's Next?

⁵⁵ Bendtsen, "Draft Plan Released for Pilot Hill."

⁵⁶ "Pilot Hill Land Use Plan."

⁵⁷ Office of State Lands and Investments, "Detailed Analysis, Wyoming Board of Land Commissioners Consideration for Exchange of State Trust Land, Pilot Hill Exchange."

⁵⁸ For more information, see Hiller, "State of Wyoming to Bid on Occidental Petroleum's Land, Minerals Properties."

⁵⁹ Engel, "Pilot Hill Project Avoids Potential For Mineral Dispute Through New Partnership."

⁶⁰ Boomerang Staff, "Pilot Hill Exchange Finalized."

⁶¹ Bendtsen, "Albany County Nears Finalization of 25-Year Pilot Hill Lease."

⁶² Bendtsen, "Pilot Hill Could Become Public before State Approves Lease to County."

As of this writing, the Pilot Hill Project is very close to the finish line, but both the land exchange agreement and special use lease have yet to be finalized. While trails and amenities at first will be sparse, Pilot Hill hopes to complete all three phases of the land use plan within a decade, creating over 40 miles of trails at a cost of \$1.3 to \$3.2 million.⁶³ Through a newly formed non-profit Pilot Hill Inc., management and maintenance of the property will require long-term partnerships between the county, City of Laramie, State of Wyoming, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, and continuing support of area residents and volunteers. It has yet to be seen whether the area will become a state park or sister area to other state park areas. While water and wildlife protection are critical environmental issues addressed by the Pilot Hill Project, long term economic growth and financial benefits to the community, county, and state remain to be seen in such detail as the land use plan.

Conclusion

In a state that relies heavily on tourism and natural resources for revenue, the Pilot Hill Project is an interesting case study of the complex nature of large-scale, public land use projects. In order to be successful, the project had to bring together stakeholders and partners from nearly every level of government and a variety of local businesses, nonprofits, and individuals. Over the course of three years, Laramie and the surrounding community engaged in discussion of the importance of recreation to their way of life, local economy, and their willingness to support such amenities. The project also brought together many players to discuss the importance and long-term protection of wildlife and the Casper Aquifer. It will be interesting to see how this project develops in the years to come, as mountain bike tires hit the dirt road, and if the economic and social benefits hoped for become realized.

⁶³ "Pilot Hill Land Use Plan."

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