

# Viktor on Jefferson County Open Space

by Penny Randell

It's Viktor here again, wishing all of you well and hoping you are enjoying the wonders of the fall season that are now upon us. Perhaps you remember me from a couple months ago when I authored an article concerning the elk that live here in Evergreen. As said back then, I am a two-year-old elk and have been afforded additional time to be with my mother, therefore more time to learn about the invaluable land where we live. It turns out that everyone who resides here in Jefferson County is a fortunate recipient of an impressive expanse of land to take pleasure in and explore. Within this writing I plan to share with you folks about the precious gift of Jefferson County Open Space and the many parks and recreation areas they own and maintain. First things first though, a solid definition, as well as a bit of history of such an organization, are in order and I'm just the chap for the job.

It all began back in 1972 when two ambitious assemblies, PLAN Jeffco and The League of Women Voters, committed themselves to the preservation of the extraordinary landscape and wide-open spaces that are located within Jefferson County. These two groups joined forces and approached the Board of County Commissioners...you know, the folks you voted in to oversee the County and allocate the money. They boldly hit them with a proposal that was accepted and continues to prosper until this day. The two groups suggested a collection of a one-half of one percent sales tax that would fund what would eventually be known as Jeffco Open Space, or JCOS for us who are more or less in the know. The mission statement is simply put: To acquire property rights for the preservation of open space and parklands, protect natural and park resources, and provide for healthy nature-based experiences. Besides this, something called the "Enabling Resolution" was drafted to stipulate where and how the collected money would be spent. Access, acquisition, maintenance and preservation of the open land were the considered issues that would benefit the general public. About eight years later this resolution was amended and a percentage of money was then allocated for construction, acquisition and maintenance of city parks and recreational areas, as well.

The best part of the Enabling Resolution, which is reflected in the voice of the voters, did not include an end date. Coined "no sunset" JCOS has continued to procure land throughout the ensuing years. In fact, to date the organization has acquired 52,817 acres of public land and 3,177 acres of privately owned land that have been preserved through conservation easements. I learned that the easement is an agreement between a landowner and government agency that forever holds the land undeveloped and protected. Besides that, Jeffco owns 28 Open Space parks and each one of them comes loaded with maintained trails so that no one gets lost. If that isn't enough, they offer nature and history education, historical sites and even a museum. Imagine, all that AND continuous conservation of our panoramic views, natural resources and of course, wildlife habitat for us critters.

No doubt you people have noticed there is no fee to visit any of Jeffco's parks or otherwise. Even Hiwan Homestead Museum is free, and again, that's because of the wee tax paid by you citizens. But, did you know that back in 1998 JCOS borrowed a whole bunch of money (\$160 million) against the development of future Open Space parks that gave them the advantage of quickly acquiring new lands? Now that's some serious caring. Also, for you who live in districts and cities within Jefferson County, grant funding is available. It just seems to me that preservation of the land is aggressive and I'm so very taken by Jeffco's efforts and record of success.

Word has it that JCOS is one of the leading organizations of its kind in the whole nation. Indeed, they even provide us with a dog park. It's located on Stagecoach where the cars travel very fast, so just like we elk, you must be careful out there on the road. Anyway, the park has won awards, including being featured in this year's July edition of Dog Fancy magazine. It truly is a lovely area and perfect for you folks to meet and spark up a friendship. Of course, only healthy dogs are wanted and they must be socialized and respond to their owner's commands. The area amounts to 107 acres all together, with acres of marked trails.

Now that you are filled with JCOS facts and figures, wouldn't you like to know who takes care of all this land? Well that would be the rangers; sometimes 15 in total. It is their responsibility to patrol the areas in the parks and to keep an eye out for both you and us; the ones who make a living in the forest. Beyond that, it's up to the rangers to keep the bathrooms fresh and tidy, the bulletin boards informative and updated, and most of all, to meet and greet all visitors. Rangers are usually stationed in a particular park and become acquainted with the wildlife that prevails. They constantly view the videos taken throughout the area. Ranger Jason is one of the team and monitors my homeland at Elk Meadow. Although Jason has been a Jeffco ranger for 19 years, he has been here at my meadow for 10. Besides his obvious dedication and kind demeanor, he knows just about everything about critters.

Most important to me: Ranger Jason has plenty of advice when it comes to us elk. He says we have become habituated and aren't too afraid of you humans any more. It's his belief that my herd, one of two that graze the meadow, is over populated and that's the major reason for us to travel into your town and private dwellings. Well, I suppose more than 200 elk is a bit of a load and sometimes we can get a bit pushy with you. But, on the other hand, as the ranger says, "be respectful of the animals and understand their needs." Just remember, it's easier to gobble down a mouthful of your soft, colorful and plentiful plants than to compete for the open range. That right there should alert us all to the element of surprise and how dangerous that can be. And then there's those nasty cars! Sad but true, as Jason says, we are the prey and your autos are the predator.

When considering the JCOS' triumphs, it would seem reasonable to take stock of the people and the programs that support such keen interest. It should be noted that the public expects and assumes that Jeffco will not only provide healthy outdoor experiences but will also observe rules and conduct that conserves nature. It is this connection that fundamentally sustains JCOS. As the founder of the science of wildlife management,

Aldo Leopold once said, "Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land." Happily, I can report what seems to be harmony here between the men and the land. A 2011 study indicated just how much Jeffco residents care with a citizen survey that calculated the number of volunteers, attendees to community and Open Space Advisory Committee meetings, input on projects and initiatives, writing correspondence with Board members, and in person contact with staff, rangers, hosts and other patrollers.

The Jeffco Open Space logo includes the words, "enriching life." This could not be more relevant when considering the future. As the population of Denver increases, so will the population here in the County. More and more people will want to visit our parks and open space than ever before. To always place sustainability first while enriching the quality of life is quite the mission, but can succeed by actively pursuing donations of easements, as well as partnering with other entities to meet acquisition goals. One such entity, Jeffco Outdoors Foundation, serves the area with a bus and assists in educational programs for school groups. In addition, more information concerning the parks and trail systems will be circulated and programs will be more accommodating to offset the increase in numbers visiting our parks. Community programs through collaborative efforts with cities, districts and non-profits will offer park and recreational opportunities that will affect all age groups.

Health, too, is an issue that has not gone unnoticed. There is actually a County Community Health Improvement Plan that identifies various strategies that will address the causes of chronic diseases and death. The considered opinion among health care workers is that JCOS lands and parks are free and close enough to encourage outdoor experiences among its citizens, thus creating a healthier lifestyle. After all, according to the Agriculture Secretary with USDA, Tom Vilson, "The connection between healthy forests, healthy communities and healthy lifestyles not only promotes physical activity, it fosters environmental awareness and stewardship among young people as we face critical environmental challenges, such as the effect of climate change." Gosh, that was well put!

And that's not all, for JCOS is determined to educate its citizens and they are forever planning and implementing programs of interest. The essence of the park is preserved through awareness concerning the natural, historic, archeologic and paleontologic resources. After all, when you understand something you can and will appreciate it more. My mother always says that education and knowledge promote freedom and happiness. This must be true, for so many volunteers provide continuous nature-based programs at the Lookout Mountain Nature Center and Hiwan Homestead Museum. Even Jason and the other rangers head up outdoor programs that include resource protection and facts concerning wildlife behavior. So, should anyone have a problem with us, or any of the animals in our area, someone is always on hand to ask or consult.

Speaking for myself, my mom and the rest of the herd, we are so very proud to be residents of Jefferson County and I'm sure you are, too. We all have a responsibility to be stewards of the land and observe a management practice that promotes sustainability. Ultimately, Jefferson County Open Space remains active and prepared to promote healthy lifestyles now and in the future. We're all in it together. See you on the trail, and

remember the element of surprise. Talk, sing, wear bells, but just stay aware so we all can revel in the wealth of the land we have inherited.