

Larimer County working to reopen campsites but sets no date; trailheads, boat ramps open
Health director says people shouldn't camp during stay-at-home order



A campsite sits empty on Monday, April 6, 2020, at Carter Lake west of Loveland. Larimer County campsites are closed because of the coronavirus. (Jenny Sparks / Loveland Reporter-Herald)

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Larimer County has not yet decided when to reopen its campgrounds, which closed due to the stay-at-home order for the coronavirus pandemic.

The Department of Natural Resources does not have the seasonal staff yet to handle full campgrounds, the sheriff's office is worried about handling more calls when rangers are not on staff, and the county's health director opposes opening campsites now.

"Whenever we open up, whatever that magic date is in the future, we need to be ready with staffing," Daylan Figs, director of the Department of Natural Resources, said in a work session Monday with the Larimer County Board of Commissioners.

Larimer County closed its campgrounds two weeks ago when Gov. Jared Polis issued a stay-at-home order because county officials believed it was required under his order. Later they learned that the county had some leeway and could reopen its campgrounds if it could do so safely.

One concern that officials aired last week was being able to keep the restrooms clean with limited staff and new standards due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The department is having trouble keeping up with the bathrooms that are currently open at trailheads and boat ramps and is looking to hire a contractor to keep those facilities clean, according to Figgs and Mark Caughlan, Horsetooth District manager.

The department also will look at a contractor to help with restrooms in campgrounds and may consider opening sites only to self-sustaining and hard-sided campers and not tents, Figgs said. Officials may look at restricting the number of campers allowed and possibly whether they can forbid campers from outside the county. About 27% of the campers at Larimer County's sites live within the county.

Figgs said he worries that more people may crowd to the campgrounds because surrounding camping areas in Colorado, Wyoming and Nebraska are closed and because Larimer County rangers are seeing summer-level use of trails early in the season as people look for a way to get outside.

"We're having summer visitation now at the trailheads," Caughlan said. "We're not staffed up to handle this. Our trailheads are so full, that's taking up all of our resources. We'd be overwhelmed. We don't have the staff to keep up with that."

People's need to get outside during this pandemic is one reason mentioned last week by Commissioner Steve Johnson in pushing to get the campsites open as soon as possible.

Figgs said he contacted Larimer County Public Health Director Tom Gonzales about the possibility of opening campgrounds soon, and Gonzales did not support opening the sites right now.

"His note back to me was that we're on stay-at-home orders, and people should not go camping," Figgs said to the commissioners. "He has concerns about people gathering at the campgrounds. ... He would prefer that we keep campgrounds closed."

Johnson said he believes Gonzales should issue a public health order stating that — an order that residents could read and would be on the official record.

"He needs to issue that as an order," Johnson said. "That's the way public health issues work."

Figgs did not offer a date when he thinks the campgrounds should open. He said it could take up to three weeks for the department to be ready, with hiring staff and getting the reservations system operational again. Plus, officials need to consider how to reopen safely in light of the pandemic, ways they may need to limit usage and the ever-changing public health situation.

Figgs said the department might open camping slowly, only to existing reservations, which number 7,000 in May and 10,000 in June. Details are still being worked out.

Because he does not want to open back up, and then have to close again, Figgs wants a solid opening date that would stand before announcing it to the public. That date is yet to be decided.

"We'd certainly like to have some of these amenities open to the public as soon as possible," added Commissioner Tom Donnelly.

Coloradans flock to mountains, trails with mixed messages on outdoor recreation

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Give outdoor-starved Coloradans an inch and they'll take a mile — on the trails.

Despite Gov. Jared Polis' plea for residents to stay away from the mountains and despite the state's national forests and state parks closing facilities, stir-crazy residents are packing parking lots and taking to the trails.

Hiking in the national forest and state parks is legal, although it might be discouraged, which is sending mixed messages. So many Coloradans are making the decision to enjoy the outdoors, even if they have to drive.

The Greyrock Trail parking lot up the Poudre Canyon in the Roosevelt National Forest was full, with vehicles overflowing onto the shoulder of Colorado Highway 14, on a warm Tuesday morning this week.

Meredith Dole and her young son, Tucker Dole, decided to hike the popular Greyrock Trail for their first trip outside since Tucker's school was cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"For us, it was a matter of breaking some cabin fever," Meredith said at the trailhead. "I think it's important to get out and take advantage of the sunshine. It's good for your mental health."

She said she was not concerned about contracting coronavirus while hiking with her son.

"We wouldn't be out here if we were showing any signs or symptoms," she said. "We would have stayed at home. Most people are probably behaving in the same manner."

U.S. Forest Service officials in Colorado are hoping that's true.

They remind visitors to check local conditions before heading out for possible closures, given the fluid situation.

They remind visitors that restrooms are closed and there are no trash containers. And they ask that visitors practice social distancing in the parking lots and on trails.

"We are getting a lot of questions about recreation in general," said Reghan Cloudman, Roosevelt National Forest Canyon Lakes District spokesperson. "We are temporarily discouraging recreation, but we understand that people want to be outside. All we ask is that visitors follow the state and federal orders to stay close to home and to visit our website for up-to-date information."

As of Wednesday, the Larimer County and state stay-at-home order ends April 26, while the federal order ends April 30.

What is open, closed

The U.S. Forest Service's developed recreation sites are temporarily closed, while dispersed camping, hiking and river uses are allowed, though discouraged. Developed recreation sites include campgrounds, day-use areas, picnic areas, restroom facilities and trash cans and trash collection services.

There have been complaints that the U.S. Forest Service is allowing trails to be open, which draws people to the mountains when Polis is asking people not to travel to the high country.

Social media posts have shown full and overflowing parking lots at U.S. Forest Service sites along Interstate 70.

Colorado State Parks is allowing hiking, biking and fishing but no camping.

Larimer County Department of Natural Resources parks, reservoirs, trails, open spaces, and boat ramps remain open. All campgrounds, offices and visitor centers are closed.

Fort Collins natural areas and city trails are open. The city has a webcam to view the parking lot at several natural areas so you can avoid the crowds.

Rocky Mountain National Park is closed.

On Tuesday, Gunnison County announced it is prohibiting all visitors, including non-resident homeowners, from remaining in the county for the duration of the order, with jail time and fines if people disobey.

However, evidenced by the full forest service parking lots, there are many people who believe the trails should remain open, including Fort Collins resident Dan Perez.

"I think it's great that people are getting out," said Perez, who parked along Colorado 14 near the Greyrock Trail on Tuesday morning. "Sure, there are a lot of people here, but when you look at how big the mountain is, we are not all that close together. As long as you cover your mouth if you sneeze and keep your distance, you should be fine."

Outdoor guidelines

- Stay close to home to keep other communities safe.
- Stay 6 feet apart from others.
- Wear a cloth mask that fits snugly over your mouth and nose.
- Avoid crowding in parking lots, trails, scenic overlooks and other areas.
- Prepare for limited or no services, such as restroom facilities and garbage collection.
- Prepare to pack out trash and human waste.
- Stay to easier trails where rescue will be minimized
- Take CDC precautions to prevent illnesses like COVID-19.

Source: U.S. Forest Service

Larimer looking to pilot e-bikes on two soft surface trails

Carter, Horsetooth may be pilot sites



Reporter-Herald file photo Loveland residents, from left, Todd Singiser, Dennis Andersen and Rick Brent pose in 2019 with their e-bikes near a sign at the Devil's Backbone notifying cyclists that e-bikes are prohibited on the trail. The men have asked Larimer County to change a regulation that prohibits all classifications of e-bikes from soft-surface trails. The county is considering allowing Class 1 e-bikes on a couple of trails as a pilot project.

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Larimer County is looking at allowing Class 1 e-bikes on at least two soft surface trails as a pilot program, to see how it works before taking another look at its regulations in 2021.

"They're designed for a lot of older folks," said Tom Donnelly, Larimer County commissioner. "I've talked to folks that, if not for these bikes, they'd have to quit cycling."



A boat travels across Carter Lake on Monday west of Loveland. Larimer County is considering allowing e-bikes on a trail that parallels the east side of the lake as a pilot project. (Jenny Sparks / Loveland Reporter-Herald)

Right now, Larimer County allows e-bikes only on its paved trails and not on any soft surface trails at its parks or open spaces — a change made Jan. 1, 2019 after the state of Colorado put the decision whether to allow or ban in the hands of local land agencies . The county’s rules align with those for Fort Collins Natural Areas, though Loveland has more allowances.

In Loveland, e-bikes are allowed on all trails that allow regular bikes.

Lory State Park already allows them on its soft surface trails, and Figgs said he has heard of no issues there.

In early February 2019, a small group of residents asked Larimer County officials to change that rule, saying that e-bikes help them stay active despite aging and other physical issues. They have met with county officials on the issue several times since, but the rules have not changed.

Discussion before parks and open lands advisory groups for the county revealed that, in surveys, many other trail users did not support e-bikes, fearing damage to trails, noise and disruption of wildlife and the landscape itself. Research has shown that these perceptions are not true, Daylan Figgs, director of the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources, said earlier this week.

“The research doesn’t follow suit,” he said, explaining that Class 1 e-bikes look like regular mountain bikes, are not noisy and, in fact, simply have a pedal assist function that is capped at 20 mph. They are not at all like motorcycles, which is some of the perception, county officials said.

Larimer County plans to reopen its look at e-bikes across all of its properties in 2021. But first this year, managers are looking to open at least two soft surface trails to the bikes to see how it goes. They, then, will have a first-hand picture of any impacts — or lack of impacts — on trails going into 2021.

Figgs, in a meeting with the commissioners, suggested allowing them on a trail that parallels the shore of Carter Lake and on one trail at Horsetooth Reservoir. Both are on properties owned by the Bureau of Reclamation and managed by Larimer County; the bureau opened the discussion on e-bikes in January.

Both of these trails are solely at Larimer County parks and would make a great pilot project because they do not connect with trails managed by Fort Collins or Loveland, Figgs said. He explained it would be easier to manage this limited use there because of different regulations that would apply when the trails connect to those Loveland or Fort Collins properties.

Donnelly, however, suggested that the county move the pilot to a property where there have been specific requests for e-bikes.

“Why don’t we do a pilot program at Devil’s Backbone?” he asked. “That’s not federal land. That’s solely ours. We could do a pilot program there. That’s where we hear (the requests).”

That is a possibility, Figgs explained, but it would take more work and be more difficult to manage because the trails at the Backbone tie into city of Fort Collins-managed trails that do not allow e-bikes.

“The Sundance Trail on the east side (of Carter Lake) doesn’t link to any other trails where it is not allowed,” said Meegan Flenniken, resource program manager. The trails links with the Devil’s Backbone might make it “trickier,” she said.

And if a pilot project is instituted in such a popular area, and then the county decides it does not work, it may be more difficult to once again stop allowing e-bikes, Commissioner Steve Johnson said.

“It’s easy to allow something,” Johnson said. “It’s really hard to stop doing this in a popular area.”

Donnelly asked Figgs to gauge the opinions of the parks and open lands advisory boards on a pilot program at the Backbone before finalizing where to do the pilot project. The director of natural resources said he would look at that, as well as other county sites, in addition to the Carter Lake and Horsetooth trails and bring back a proposal to begin allowing them on select sites this year.

Donnelly spoke of the people who likely would not be able to cycle on these soft surface trails without pedal assist because of their age or medical conditions.

“There are a lot of folks who want to use our open spaces and open lands properties who are going to be removed from them if they can’t do this,” Donnelly said. “Everyone pays taxes, and I want them to be able to use our beautiful lands and properties.”