



# Thumb Open Space Proposal

November 6, 2019

Town of Estes Park

Estes Valley Land Trust

## Table of Contents

1. Purpose	3
2. Recreation History and Current Use	3
3. Thumb Open Space Vision	4
4. Hiking	4
i. Existing Trail	4
ii. Future Trails	5
5. Climbing	5
i. Existing Climbing	5
ii. Staging Areas	6
iii. Future Climbing	6
6. Youth Programming and Use	6
7. Other Human-Powered Uses	7
8. Access	7
i. Pedestrian and Bicycle Access	7
ii. Motorized Access and Trailheads	8
iii. Gates	9
iv. Enforcement	9
9. Insurance and Liability	10
10. Commercial Uses	10
11. Promotion and Advertising	10
12. Anticipated Costs	11

## Appendix

1. Map of property with trail, trailhead, gate, Thumb and Needle.	13
2. Photos of recreation uses, open space and trailhead	14

## **1 Purpose**

The Town of Estes Park is considering the purchase of parcels to ensure public access to “The Thumb and Needle,” two prominent rock spires on Prospect Mountain that have been used by climbers for half a century. Access to the Thumb and Needle currently occurs at the discretion of the current landowner. This access could be lost with the sale of the property to a new owner. If it proceeds, the Town’s purchase would include an amended conservation easement by the Estes Valley Land Trust.

The Thumb Open Space Proposal is designed to provide a framework for a future management plan that balances natural resource protection, quality of life, and outdoor recreation. This proposal identifies the vision and management concepts that have been discussed to date, and are subject to revision based on the public process. All contents of this proposal are meant to serve as a starting point for discussions with neighbors, elected officials and community stakeholders.

This proposal is not a management plan. If the property is acquired, a community-wide steering committee of subject experts related to recreation and natural resource protection, and other stakeholders, will be formed to lead the management planning process. The management plan process will include many opportunities for public input. This process will likely take 12-18 months to complete and typically occurs after land acquisition.

## **2 Recreation History and Current Use**

The historical use of the property is based on conversations with climbers and hikers that have accessed the property for decades. Tom Hornbein, a world-renowned Mountaineer and local resident, began climbing the Thumb as early as the 1940s.

Tommy Caldwell, a professional climber and local resident, climbed the Thumb as a child many times, under the impression the area was public land.

Today, steel bolts and chains, used to protect climbers ascending the rock and for rappelling down the rock, can be seen on the Thumb and Needle. Rock climbing guides published in the early 2000s highlight more than a dozen climbing routes on the Thumb and Needle and online guides list more than 30 routes on these features.

Based on neighbor feedback and observed parking along Peak View Drive, hiking currently occurs at the Thumb Open Space on a daily basis.

Local climbing guides have used the rocks to introduce families, youth and veterans to climbing. Neighbors have confirmed that the Thumb and Needle are still used today and climbers can be seen on the summit.

The history of hiking the Thumb Open Space is more difficult to document. The trail from Peak View Drive is well established, but since there are no built features, it is difficult to date. As the

trail continues near the northern boundary, it appears to be “built” with small rocks forming short retaining walls.

Based on feedback from locals, hiking the Thumb Open Space has occurred at least since the 1980s, but may go back even earlier. If locals were climbing in the area in the 1940s, it is likely they were also hiking the area around the same time.

Today, neighbors access the property on foot, and may hike the trail or Curry Drive, the public road along the eastern boundary. Neighbors also see cars parked along Peak View Drive on a daily basis, where the trail commences. Since there are no trail counters installed on the trail or a trailhead monitoring program, there is no estimate for current trail use.

### **3 Thumb Open Space Vision**

A town-owned 65-acre open space, much like Centennial Open Space at Knoll-Willows, that continues to support hiking, climbing, bouldering, environmental education and wildlife watching. The Thumb Open Space will be a primitive, day-use park.

The vision for the Thumb Open Space is a primitive, day-use park, much like the Town of Estes Park’s Centennial Open Space at Knoll Willows.

### **4 Hiking**

Hiking is likely the most popular outdoor recreation activity in Estes Park and the most popular activity at the Thumb Open Space. The Thumb Open Space will permit hiking on designated trails.

#### **4.1 Existing Trails**

There are currently two trails on the property. A 0.5-mile platted trail starts at Peak View Drive at the proposed trailhead, on a property owned by the Town of Estes Park. The platted trail crosses through a private lot and enters the proposed property. From there it gains approximately 500 feet in elevation to the property boundary.

The trail continues past the proposed property for another approximately 0.35 miles to the top of Prospect Mountain. The trail is not platted north of the Thumb Open Space.

Two hiking trails currently exist on the proposed Thumb Open Space. The 0.5-mile trail from Peak View Drive is platted and receives the most use.

Hikers also use Curry Drive as a hiking trail. The lower 0.6- miles of this road leads to the proposed Thumb Open Space northern boundary, and approximately 0.25 miles is paved. A gate located at the northern property boundary restricts vehicular access to the neighboring property.

From Curry Drive, a steep hiking trail leads to the Thumb and Needles and trails around the Thumb and Needle provide climbing access.

Existing trails need to be evaluated for long-term sustainability. Sections that have, or are likely to be washed out, eroded or entrenched should be redesigned, repaired or relocated. The management plan should identify the location of trails that will be retained, improved, relocated or closed and restored.

## 4.2 Future Trails

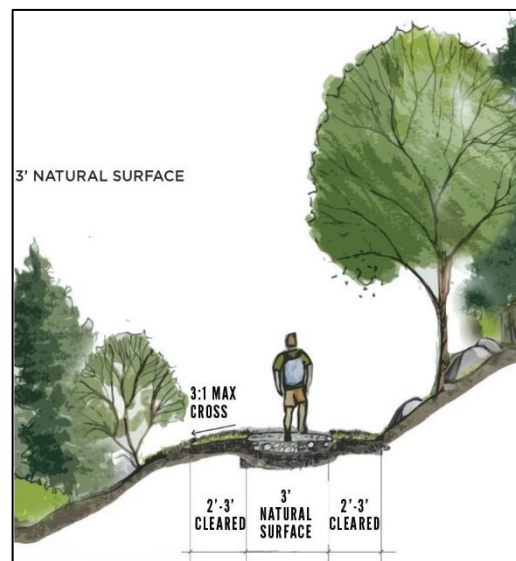
Social trails, or trails that are not part of a managed trail system, should be closed to allow for restoration and to improve habitat.

Any new trails will be designed to meet hiking trail standards, will be limited to three feet in width and composed of natural surfaces.

Additional trails will be considered to improve the visitor experience, better access the Thumb and Needle, to replace trails that were poorly designed and damage the environment, or to avoid sensitive areas.

Any new trails will be designed to meet hiking trail standards, will be limited to three feet in width and composed of natural surfaces.

Critical wildlife habitat, including any raptor nesting areas, will be identified and trails will be built or closed to avoid these areas. Any new trails will also be set back from neighboring property boundaries, to avoid trespass and other conflicts.



## 5 Climbing

Climbing is a popular activity at the proposed Thumb Open Space. Thumb Open Space will permit bouldering and roped climbing, on designated crags. The Town will neither install nor maintain climbing routes and climbers will be participating at their own risk.

### 5.1 Existing Climbing

Bouldering, or climbing on large boulders, without ropes or other gear attached to rock to prevent injury or assist with the climb, occurs on the property. Bouldering often involves a crash pad, or dense pad, almost like a mattress, that the climber places under the route, in case of a fall. Crash pads are lightweight, designed with backpack straps, and are carried to and from the site by the climber.

There are currently 18 bouldering “problems”, or routes, at the proposed Thumb Open Space, based upon Mountain Project, an online climbing guide.

Free climbing, or climbing larger rocks, without using equipment to aid in the upward movement, also occurs at the proposed Thumb Open Space. Free climbing can be divided into sport climbing, which involves attaching quickdraws (carabiners and webbing) to a bolt on the rock and then through the rope and traditional climbing, which involves placing small pieces of removable steel or removable camming devices into the rock cracks and attaching a quickdraw and rope.

Based on Mountain Project, there are over 30 free climbing routes on the proposed Thumb Open Space. Some of these routes are designed for beginner climbers and others are designed for advanced climbers.

## **5.2 Staging Areas**

Staging areas are generally improved flat rocky or bare ground areas beneath free climbing routes or boulder problems. Staging areas provide a safe surface while belaying or watching climbers and limit impacts from people standing or sitting while others climb.

Staging areas could be improved at the base of the most popular climbing and bouldering routes to improve the visitor experience and protect natural resources.

## **5.3 Future Climbing**

Existing climbing routes that are not safe, are poorly laid out, do not provide a good climbing experience, or harm natural resources may be closed and all fixed hardware removed.

Future climbing routes, fixed gear (such as rappel anchors) and bouldering areas will be considered to improve the visitor experience, to replace routes or gear that was poorly designed or in need of replacement, or to avoid sensitive areas. The Town will neither install nor maintain any climbing routes, so a framework for climbing-route establishment and maintenance will need to be established.

Critical wildlife habitat, including any raptor nesting areas, will be identified and routes will be established to avoid these areas. Any new free climbing or bouldering areas will be set back from neighboring property boundaries, to avoid trespass and other conflicts.

An evaluation and mapping of all existing bouldering and free climbing areas should be conducted as part of the management planning process. Any new climbing areas should also be evaluated before the management plan is completed.

## **6 Youth Programming and Use**

Research shows that spending time in nature is essential for brain development, creativity and imagination. It also confirms that kids that interact regularly in the out-of-doors are more

mentally acute, physically healthy, socially adept, and more likely to maintain a positive disposition toward the environment and natural resources later in life.

Youth programming such as guided hikes and climbs could be scheduled through the Estes Valley School District, local after school programs, the Estes Valley Recreation and Park District, or other partners.

Research shows that kids that spend time in nature are more physically, mentally and emotionally healthy.

Teachers, parents and kids should participate in the management planning process to ensure the Thumb Open Space can serve the youth of our community.

## **7 Other Human-Powered Uses**

Motorized uses, such as ATVs, will be prohibited, because of the small size steep topography of the proposed Thumb Open Space, the noise and land disturbance that motorized uses create and the limits on trailhead for trailer parking.

Motorized uses, such as ATVs, will be prohibited.

Overnight camping will be prohibited, because of the risk from fire, impacts to the land and potential for trash. Administering a camping permit system is also infeasible for the Town of Estes Park.

Horseback riding will likely be prohibited, due to the short trail system and lack of trailer parking. Hunting will be prohibited for safety.

Human-Powered uses such as cross-country skiing, mountain biking, dog walking and trail running will be considered during the management planning process. Criteria such as compatibility with hiking and climbing uses, impacts to the land and consistency with the vision of the Thumb Open Space will help determine if additional non-motorized uses will be permitted.

## **8 Access**

Access through the proposed Thumb Open Space will be limited to designated trails, bouldering areas and climbing routes. Focusing access onto improved trails protects natural resources and sensitive environmental areas and improves the visitor experience by providing trails that are safer and more enjoyable.

### **8.1 Pedestrian and Bicycle Access**

Bicycle access is provided via public roads and pedestrian access may be available via rights-of-way and through neighboring Bureau of Reclamation properties.

During the development of the management plan, a limited number of neighborhood access points may be considered to ensure neighbors can easily access the property. Neighborhood access points will be restricted to protect natural resources and sensitive areas, prevent trespass and reduce annual operation costs with maintaining neighborhood access points.

## **8.2 Motorized Access and Trailheads**

Motorized access to the proposed Thumb Open Space currently occurs at two locations.

Trailhead Area 1:

Area consists of property owned by the Town of Estes Park and the Bureau of Reclamation. The Town's Water Division recently acquired a 0.25-acre parcel as part of its acquisition of the Prospect Mountain Water Company. This parcel is currently used for parking for the platted trail that goes through the proposed Thumb Open Space. In addition to the gravel parking area, the property contains trees, boulders and a small wooden structure that serves the former Prospect Mountain Water Company. The Town's Water Division is investigating changing the existing building.

There is potential to park approximately 6 to 8 cars on Town property only. The parcel will need added material and grading to enhance the parking area and 6-10 trees will also have to be removed. Additional trees and other landscaping elements could be installed to improve the parking area.

The Bureau of Reclamation owns the land adjacent and west of the Town property. The Bureau of Reclamation property is also currently being used for parking. Based on the evidence of parking, about 8-12 cars have historically parked on the Town and Bureau of Reclamation properties. If these additional spots are desired, an agreement would be required with the Bureau of Reclamation.

As part of the future management plan, the parking layout and driveway access geometry will be detailed on a proposed site plan for Trailhead Area 1.

A kiosk with trail rules, a site map, leave no trace principles, and a monument sign to identify the trailhead from Peak View Drive, could be installed to formalize this trailhead and better serve the public.

The proposed Thumb Open Space could be a leave no trace open space and no trash cans would be provided. If dog walking is permitted, a dog bag dispenser and a trash can could be provided.

Motorized access could be limited to Trailhead Area 1.
--



## Trailhead Area 2:

The area that is being used to access the northeastern portion of the property is within the proposed Thumb Open Space. This area is popular with the climbing community as it provides the most direct access to the Thumb and Needle.

An underground water tank located in this area has been decommissioned and based on input from the Town of Estes Park's Water Division, there are no plans to repurpose the tank.

About 2-3 cars can park in this location now, without blocking the road and gate to the towers on top of Prospect Mountain. The abandoned tank could be removed and the site could accommodate approximately 15 cars. The gravel portion of Curry Drive would need to be graded with approximately \$5,000 to \$10,000 in added materials. The cost of tank removal is unknown at this time.

Due to the additional construction and maintenance costs and based on concerns from some neighbors about traffic on Curry Drive, the motorized access could be limited to Area 1.

### **8.3 Gates**

A single gate across Curry Drive, near Trailhead Area 2, prevents motorized access to the top of Prospect Mountain. If motorized access to the proposed Thumb Open Space is limited to Trailhead Area 1, another gate can be added where the Curry Drive pavement ends, thus preventing motorized access to Trailhead Area 2.

Alternatively, the current gate could be relocated to where the Curry Drive pavement ends. This will prevent undesired travel up the unmaintained road, end the illegal dumping that has plagued the area over the years and potentially stop the illegal camping and fires. Access agreements and maintenance responsibilities of Curry Drive need to be confirmed to better understand the consequences of installing or moving any gates.

### **8.4 Enforcement**

The proposed Thumb Open Space is within Town limits and is patrolled by the Town's Police Department. Peak View Drive is owned and maintained by the Town east of the Water Division's pump house parcel. Larimer County owns and maintains the remainder of Peak View Drive westward to Mary's Lake Road. The Town also owns and maintains Curry Drive from Peak View Drive to the end of the pavement. Curry Drive and Peak View Drive are both too narrow to accommodate parking along the roads without blocking the traffic lanes. The Estes Park Municipal Code prohibits parking on paved roadways except where sufficient width and

markings are provided. If necessary, “No Parking” signs could be installed to discourage parking and assist law enforcement with traffic control.

The management plan will establish rules and regulations for the permitted uses within the Thumb Open Space. Enforcement of these rules can be accomplished with a multi-phase approach of education and patrols. The Town of Estes Park Police Department is committed to ensuring proper use of any Town property through education and enforcement.

## **9 Insurance and Liability**

The Town maintains property and casualty insurance that covers all Town premises and operations through the Colorado Intergovernmental Risk Sharing Agency (CIRSA). The Town has reviewed with CIRSA the potential addition of the Thumb Open Space, including the trails and climbing features, and there are no concerns with coverage. Town casualty insurance would cover any losses on the site for which the Town is found to be legally liable.

## **10 Commercial Uses**

The Estes Valley Land Trust’s conservation easements currently prohibit commercial uses on properties that compose the proposed Thumb Open Space. Commercial uses that harm the land, interfere with the public recreation or educational use of the property, or are inconsistent with the vision for this property will be prohibited.

Commercial uses that harm the land, interfere with public recreation or educational use of the property, or are inconsistent with the vision for this property will be prohibited.

Commercial uses related to hiking, climbing or other permitted non-motorized uses of the proposed Thumb Open Space could be considered. These uses may include climbing instruction or guiding. The Thumb has been used for teaching kids climbing techniques or providing climbing opportunities for visitors and locals, who do not have proper equipment or technique needed to climb safely.

During the management planning process, a concessionaire agreement may be considered that limits the number of vehicles and paid climbers that can access the proposed Thumb Open Space.

## **11 Promotion and Advertising**

The Thumb Open Space would be a great addition to the portfolio of parks and open spaces offered by the Town of Estes Park. However, with its limited size, the visitor experience and natural resources could be spoiled by over use.

A simple principle that could guide the promotion of the Thumb Open Space, is that it primarily serves as a local park.

A simple principle that could guide the promotion of the Thumb Open Space, is that it primarily serves as a local park. Therefore, the Thumb Open Space will be listed on the Town's website among other town-maintained parks, and local promotion will be limited. This would prevent the Thumb Open Space from being actively promoted by the Estes Park Visitor Center or

Visit Estes Park.

Out-of-town hiking and climbing guidebooks and websites may continue to promote the Thumb Open Space as a climbing destination, but based on the size of the area, it is unlikely it will be a regional or statewide destination.

Similarly, the Thumb Open Space is not likely to be a regional or statewide hiking destination because of its small size, compared to other well-known and longer trails in the region.

The management plan could include guidelines related to how the property will be publicized so that the Estes Park community is aware of this hiking and climbing destination, but the primitive visitor experience is limited and natural resources are protected.

## **12 Anticipated Costs**

The cost to the Estes community for the Thumb Open Space project can be divided into two general categories: one-time acquisition costs and ongoing operational costs. The Estes Valley Land Trust has negotiated a bargain sale from the owner who has discounted the property from \$820,000 to \$600,000. This is \$220,000 below fair market value.

The total upfront project cost is \$699,186 which includes land acquisition, amending the conservation easement to prohibit residential development and allow trail improvements, and improving the trailhead and trails.

The Estes Valley Land Trust and Access Fund have committed \$65,000 in cash towards this project. The land trust, Access Fund and Rocky Mountain Conservancy have committed \$35,586 in in-kind services towards this project.

The Land Trust is asking the Town to contribute \$241,700 cash and \$6,900 in in-kind services toward to startup of this project. The remainder of the funds would be secured through a GOCO grant, authored by the Estes Valley Land Trust and submitted by the Town.

### **Simple Financial Breakdown**

GOCO	\$350,000
<b>Town of Estes Park</b>	<b>\$241,700</b>
Access Fund (Committed)	\$50,000
<u>Estes Valley Land Trust (Committed)</u>	<u>\$15,000</u>
Total Cash	\$656,700

Access Fund In-kind (Committed)	\$7,500
Rocky Mountain Conservancy In-kind (Committed)	\$27,636
Estes Valley Land Trust (Committed)	\$450
<b><u>Town of Estes Park In-kind (Trailhead Improvements)</u></b>	<b><u>\$6,900</u></b>

Total In-kind	\$42,486
---------------	----------

Project Total	\$699,186*
---------------	------------

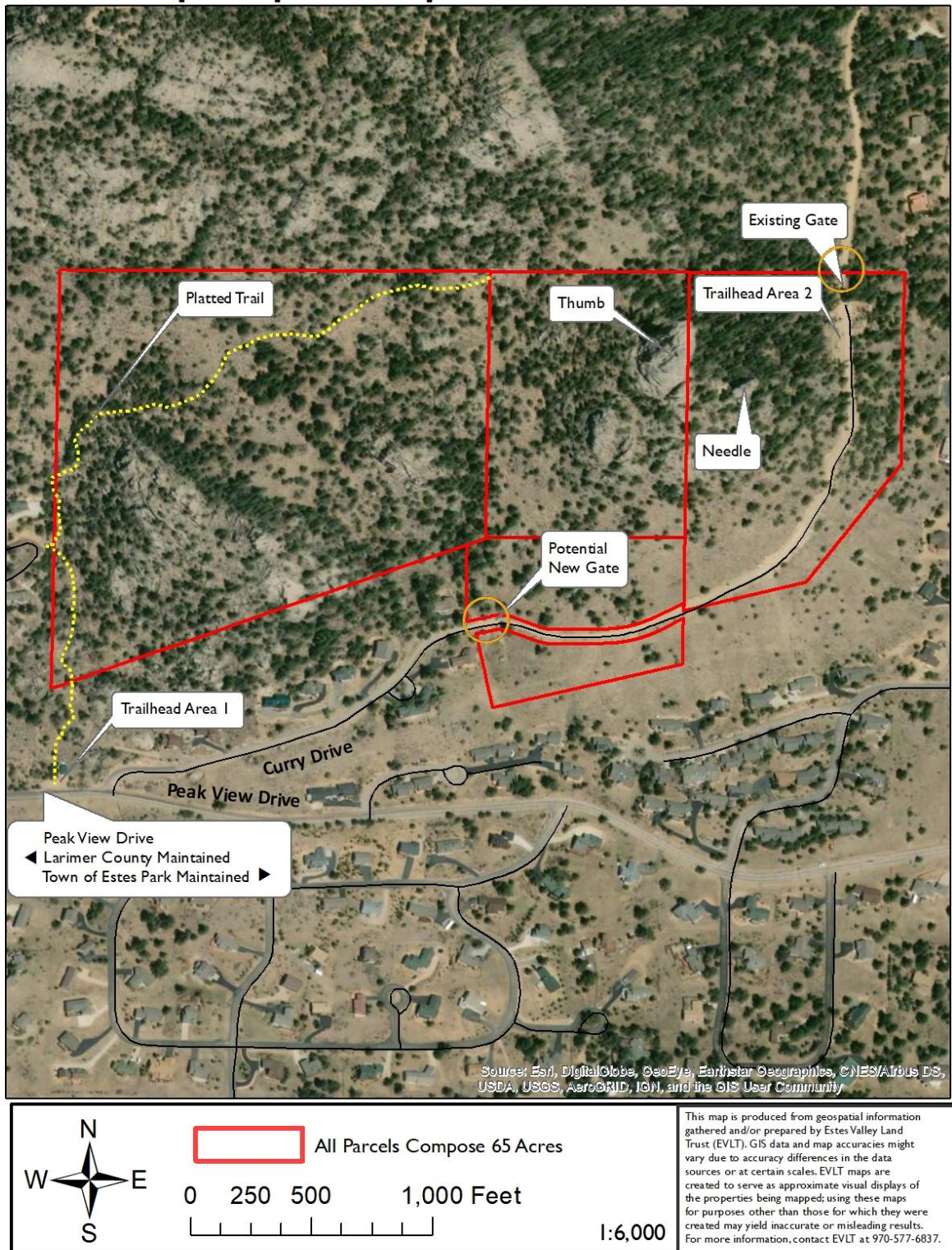
\*The development of a management plan by a consultant could cost up to an additional \$30,000 if this work is not done in house.

After the initial purchase and improvement to the project site, ongoing operation and maintenance effort is required. The Town's Public Works Parks Division will absorb the yearly maintenance costs estimated to range from \$3,300.00 to \$5,300.00 depending on usage and weather impacts. This includes two weekly trash walks during the summer seasons and trail/parking lot maintenance when needed.

The Town's noxious weed contractor anticipates an annual cost of about \$4,500.00 in each of the first three years to get the weeds under control. In the following years, an average annual cost of \$1,000.00 to \$2,000.00 is estimated to maintain compliance with the Town's noxious weed standards. The rugged terrain and natural trail design elevate the weed control costs, as manual application with backpack sprayers is expected, as opposed to UTV or ATV mounted sprayers.

## APPENDIX I – SITE MAP

### Thumb Open Space Proposal





## APPENDIX II – PHOTOS



Kids climbing at the Thumb.



A family enjoying a day at the Thumb.





Views of the Continental Divide from the proposed Thumb Open Space.



Trailhead Area 1, off Peak View Drive.