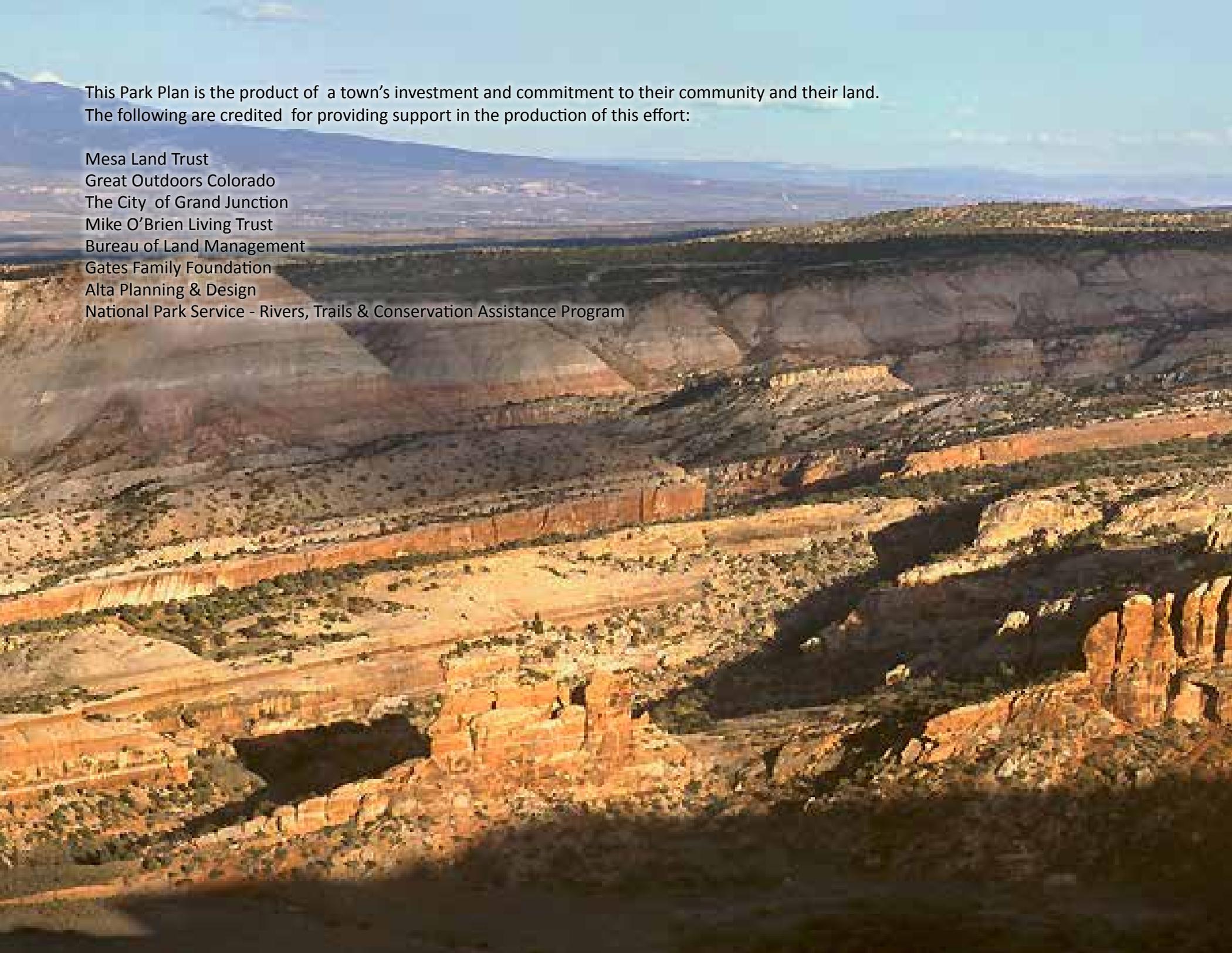




Three Sisters Park DRAFT Master Plan

Grand Junction, Colorado *January 2015*



A wide-angle landscape photograph of a desert canyon. The foreground shows rugged, layered rock formations in shades of orange, tan, and grey. The middle ground features a deep valley with sparse green vegetation and a winding road. In the background, a vast, flat valley floor stretches towards distant, hazy mountains under a clear blue sky.

This Park Plan is the product of a town's investment and commitment to their community and their land.
The following are credited for providing support in the production of this effort:

Mesa Land Trust

Great Outdoors Colorado

The City of Grand Junction

Mike O'Brien Living Trust

Bureau of Land Management

Gates Family Foundation

Alta Planning & Design

National Park Service - Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program

A landscape photograph showing a wide view of Monument Road. The foreground is dominated by a steep, layered rock formation with a reddish-brown hue. The road itself is visible as a dark line winding through the valley below. The background features rolling hills under a clear blue sky.

A Community's Vision

Preserve the landscapes and views along Monument Road for our community's enjoyment, the enhancement of our quality of life, and support of our local and diversified economy.



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LEFT: Three Sisters Park provides a wide range of experiences for visitors.



I. INTRODUCTION

Preserving the Experience of the Land

The open lands along Monument Road have served as a recreational destination since the early 1900s. Today, locals and trail users from all over the world frequent the Lunch Loop trail area. The area continues to grow in popularity, experiencing over 120,000 visits in 2013.

The development of the Three Sisters Park is an important opportunity to expand and diversify outdoor recreation for Grand Junction residents and visitors while preserving the natural landscape. Recreation opportunities and Park management will support a diverse population of visitors and will help to protect, restore and maintain the natural resources of the site. As part of a large network of public lands accessible by trail from the urban center of Grand Junction, Three Sisters Park will provide an extraordinary community experience of non-motorized trails, connections with nature, and healthy active lifestyles.



LEFT: Looking down on the Monument Corridor from the top of the Three Sisters Park.

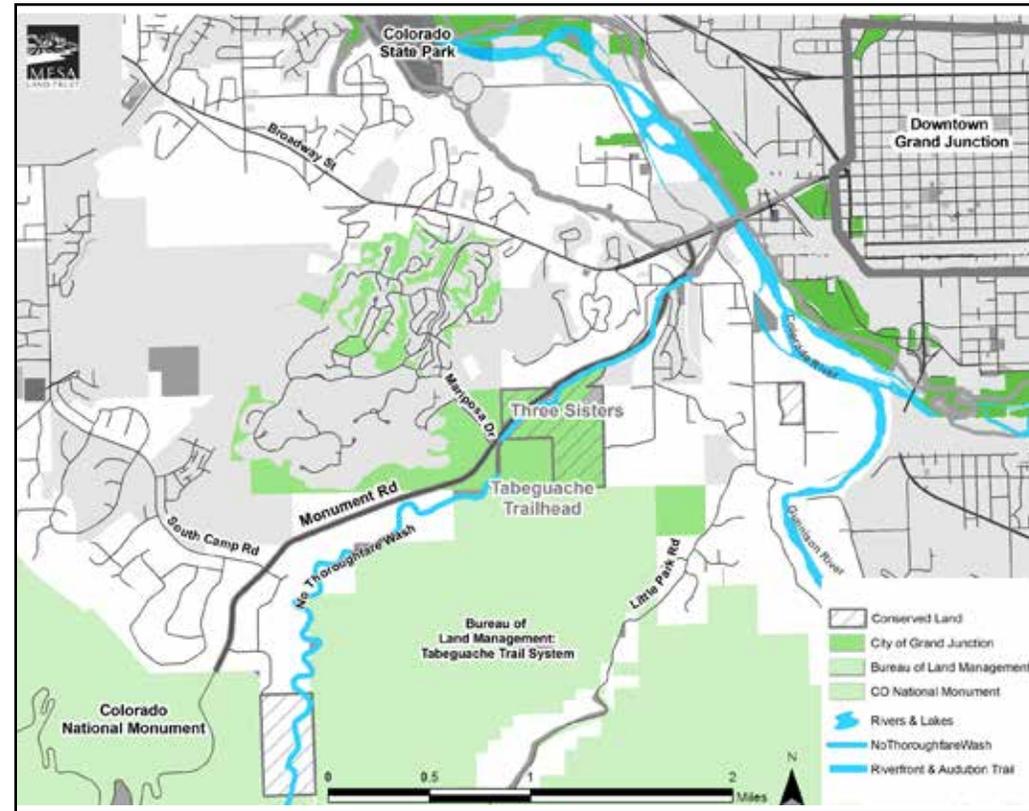
The Three Sisters Park consists of 193 acres adjacent to existing BLM and City owned land and offers spectacularly wild landscapes close to town.

In addition to trail users, visitors include a wide range of volunteers and students that help build trails, restore native vegetation, and conduct natural resources research projects that all contribute to the ongoing stewardship of the land.

The goal of this Three Sisters Park Plan is to enhance the visitor experience by:

- *Creating a seamless network of sustainable multi-use trails throughout the City owned parcels and BLM Tabeguache/Lunch Loop Trails*
- *Outlining suggested facility improvements*
- *Increasing and enhancing safe and appropriate trail access points, including improved bike access from town to Lunch Loop Trail network.*
- *Outlining strategies for preserving conservation values*
- *Maintaining recreational facilities through longterm community stewardship.*
- *Protecting the viewshed along Monument Road, the gateway to the East Entrance of the Colorado National Monument.*
- *Increasing family- friendly and beginner trails at Lunch Loop.*
- *Developing interpretive opportunities to experience the wildlife, plant life, geology and archaeology on the land.*

The Mesa Land Trust conducted an extensive public process to create this Park Plan. The plan was then reviewed and approved by the Mesa Land Trust Board of Trustees, the City of Grand Junction Parks and Recreation Advisory Board and Grand Junction’s City Council.



RIGHT: Monument Corridor Map. Monument Road connects great amenities – downtown, riverfront trail, Lunch Loop, Colorado National Monument and neighborhoods.



II. SITE DESCRIPTION & AREA CONTEXT

The Three Sisters Park is part of the Uncompahgre Plateau in western Colorado, a distinctive large uplift of the Colorado Plateau. It is located approximately 1.5 miles southwest of Grand Junction along Monument Road and consists of three land parcels which include the Three Sisters and the two Bookends properties. All three of these properties were acquired by the Mesa Land Trust, conserved forever as public open space through a conservation easement, and deeded over to the City of Grand Junction. The park is adjacent to extensive acreage of public land managed by the BLM (Bangs Canyon/Tabeguache Special Recreation Management Area) and additional parcels held by the City of Grand Junction. Three Sisters Park has added almost 200 acres to the extremely popular Lunch Loop trail area. Not only does it add contiguous publicly accessible acreage to the corridor along Monument Road, but the Three Sisters' gentle terrain allows for more diverse trails for beginner, youth and family friendly skill levels that service a broader range of trail users.

The Three Sisters Park is managed in partnership with the Bureau of Land Management, the City of Grand Junction, and the Mesa Land Trust, each providing resources strong and unique to their organization to create a seamless network of single track trails that are enjoyed by users of all ages and skill levels.

i. GUIDING PLANNING EFFORTS AND STUDIES

Three Sisters Park is the culmination of several planning efforts. From

LEFT: Remnants of historic uses can be found on Three Sisters Park.

2010 until 2012, Mesa Land Trust entered into negotiations with the Three Sisters' landowners, working collaboratively with the City of Grand Junction and the BLM, and purchased the 130-acre property. As a non-profit organization with 30 years of experience in negotiating land conservation transactions, the Land Trust used its expertise in grant writing, fundraising, and community outreach to secure this opportunity to meet the community's wishes of protected views and expanded trails in the Lunch Loop area. In 2014, the Land Trust purchased two more parcels along Monument Road, again responding to the community's vision for the area. These two properties, called the Bookends because they flank either side of the Lunch Loop area, added another 63 acres to the public open space.

The following planning efforts and public engagement have guided this process to preserve land, views and expand outdoor recreational opportunities along Monument Road.

- **The City of Grand Junction's Redlands Area Plan (2002)** states the importance of preserving areas of outstanding scenic and natural beauty, encourages residential development to be designed to maintain the open vistas, and places value on open space corridors and areas for recreational, transportation and environmental purposes.

- **The Conservation Easements (2012, 2014)** placed on each of the three properties outline non-motorized recreational and educational permitted uses of the property that will not diminish or impair natural, scenic, open space, wildlife habitat and recreational resources of the Three Sisters Park. The easements also summarize the types of improvements that can be made to the properties and outline a cooperative management plan for the City of Grand Junction and Mesa Land Trust. This will ensure that the conservation values of the properties are preserved and protected in perpetuity and that the property remains open to the public.



RIGHT: Native plants such as cactus surprise visitors with vibrant bursts of color.



- **The Community’s Vision for Monument Road** derived from a 2013 public visioning process conducted by the Mesa Land Trust. The success of the Three Sisters acquisition in 2012 inspired the community to ask if more could be done to preserve and build upon our outdoor experiences along Monument Road that are close to home and prevalent in our every-day life. As a result, the Mesa Land Trust held public meetings to ask what our residents would like to see along Monument Road. This process yielded support to create additional open space, preserve more views, build more trails, and work towards the construction of an off-road multi-use path that would make it safe and enjoyable to ride a bike or walk along the Monument Road corridor.

- **The Baseline Study**, completed by Rare Earth Sciences, LLC in 2012 and 2014. This document identifies existing plants and wildlife, natural resources, geologic characteristics, opportunities for outdoor recreation and education, and the benefits of public open space on the Three Sisters and Bookends properties. The plant communities found are consistent with mixed short semi-desert shrubland, pinyon-juniper woodland, greasewood shrubland, mixed grassland, and tall semi-desert shrublands. The Baseline will be used to assist in determining trail placement, location of structures, and educational features.

i. COMMUNITY PROFILE AND RECREATIONAL TRENDS

A Recreational Attraction for those Near and Far

Though the Three Sisters and the Bookends have always been privately owned, for generations local residents have ridden their bikes, walked their dogs, shot their guns, driven their jeeps, ridden their horses and explored these properties.

Today, the Lunch Loop and Three Sisters trails experience over 120,000

LEFT: Trailbuilding at Three Sisters Park is a collaborative effort.

visits a year. The Lunch Loop area is a major attraction for locals; dog walkers, riders, and runners are on the trails in the mornings before work; in the evenings after work the parking lot is full with local riding and running groups; youth and families come for the bike park. These trails that offer spectacular trail experiences close to town are primary to our local quality of life and, along with expansive iconic views of desert and sandstone landscapes, make the Grand Valley vibrant and attractive place to live.

Many choose to gather in the parking lot to ride or run or hike together. In addition to the many informal meet-ups, there are numerous groups that meet on scheduled nights for group events.

- The Endoholics
- The Single Track Sisters
- The Striders
- The Grand Valley's high school mountain bike team
- Colorado Mesa University's Cross Country Running & Mountain Biking Teams
- Local high school cross country runners
- Local Climbers
- Informal gatherings of trail users

Visitors from all over the world mountain bike on these renowned trails. Spring and fall are particularly busy seasons for the area trails due to the dry, warm weather that draw people from all over the United States to enjoy trail adventures while many other recreation locations are cold and wet. Users also make the most of favorable conditions through the winter as well as the cooler summer mornings and evenings.

RIGHT: Three Sisters Park and the Tabeguache Recreation Area offer mountain bikers endless opportunities for adventure.





III. SITE MASTER PLAN

This siteplan for the City owned land at Lunch Loop area formalizes sustainable multi-use single track areas and determines zones for specific visitor activities. The Plan also incorporates concerns, suggestions, and issues raised during the public process that drove the design of this plan. In 2012, a professional open space planner (Alta Planning and Design) was contracted to create a planning strategies document for Three Sisters Park. The Three Sisters plan was devised from a series of stakeholder meetings at which people from the community voiced hopes and concerns for the trail development of the property. Stakeholder groups expressed the need for preserving the natural beauty of the landscape, removing the unsustainable trails and jeep roads that scarred the hillsides, building sustainable trails that also left much of the land untouched, providing a buffer zone along residential properties, and addressing potential parking issues at proposed trail access areas, to name a few. The Three Sisters plan was ultimately approved by the City’s Parks & Recreation Advisory Board, City Council, and the general public.

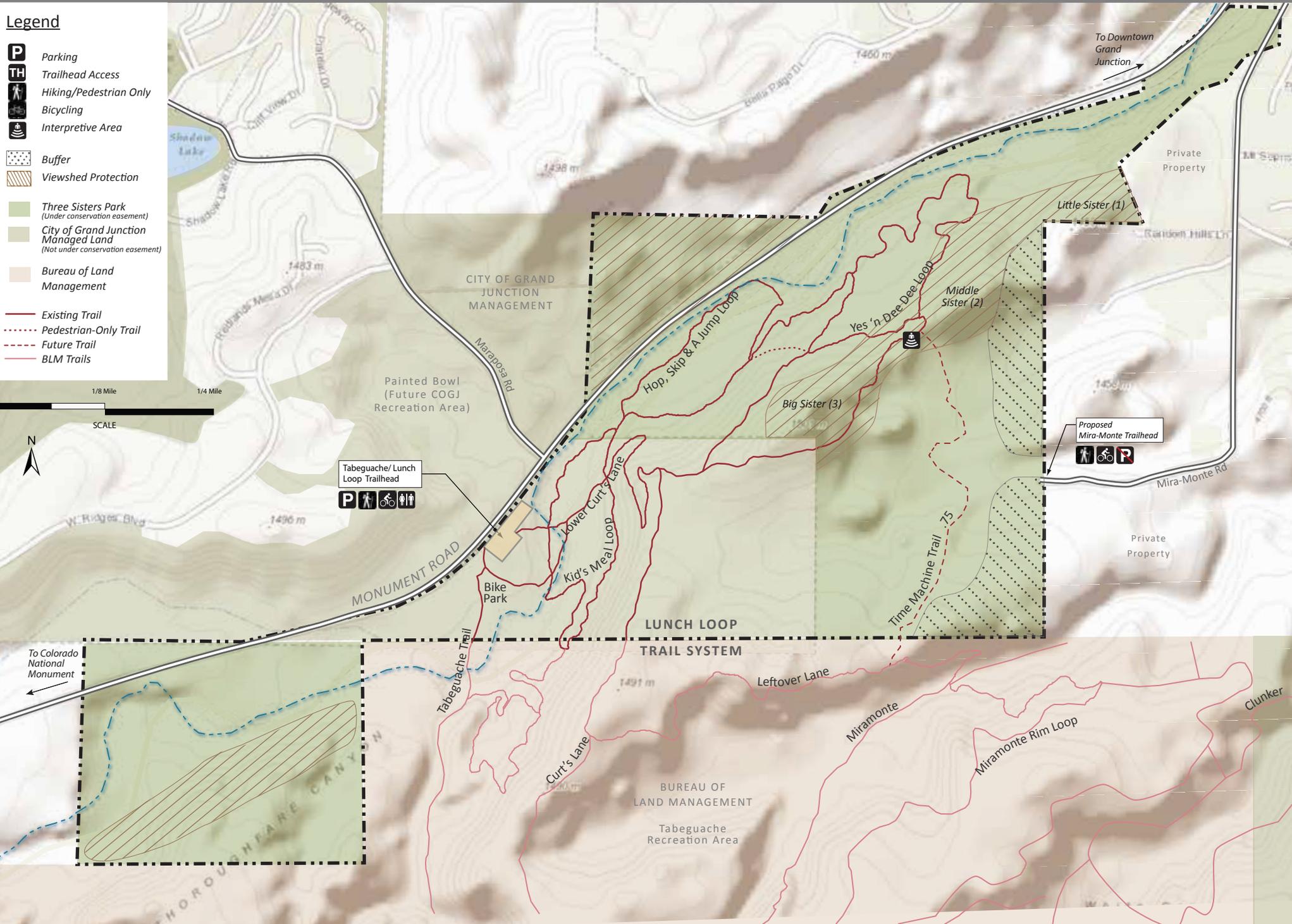
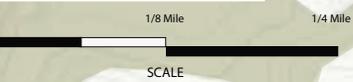
With the incorporation of the Bookends properties into Three Sisters Park in 2014, the Mesa Land Trust received a grant to work with a professional park planner at the National Parks Service (Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program) to create the Three Sisters Park Plan. This Plan included public input from the Monument Road visioning process, BLM and City input, as well as open house public reviews into a masterplan for the entire Park.

LEFT: The rugged beauty of the Monument Corridor.

Three Sisters Park, Grand Junction CO

Legend

-  Parking
-  Trailhead Access
-  Hiking/Pedestrian Only
-  Bicycling
-  Interpretive Area
-  Buffer
-  Viewshed Protection
-  Three Sisters Park (Under conservation easement)
-  City of Grand Junction Managed Land (Not under conservation easement)
-  Bureau of Land Management
-  Existing Trail
-  Pedestrian-Only Trail
-  Future Trail
-  BLM Trails



Plan Elements

Trail Recreation

Family and Youth Friendly Trails

Family and youth beginner trails are important additions to parks and allow a broader range of ages and abilities to enjoy the park. They provide family experiences of parks that often lead to more individual experiences. In addition, youth and beginners have the opportunity to learn a variety of skills and graduate to more advanced trails and longer distances. Three Sisters Park also includes mountain bike learning trails with instructional signage and gentle climbing and rolling trails for all abilities.

Pedestrian trails

Because Three Sisters Park and Tabeguache/Lunch Loops are such popular mountain bike areas, it is important to also provide slower paced recreational options where hikers can have a quieter,

meandering experience. Pedestrian-only trails provide safe alternatives for pedestrians and dog walkers by diverting pedestrians from steep, fast and narrow mountain bike trails. Pedestrian-only trails are planned for the hilltops of the Three Sisters which minimizes erosion and allows for a slower footpath experience.

Trail Development

Additional trail development on the Bookends properties (anticipated through 2015) will follow the same process on the Three Sisters. The BLM, COPMOBA, the larger mountain bike community and the Mesa Land Trust will work collaboratively to design and construct mountain bike trails that adhere to the community's goals for visitor experiences on these properties.

These goals ensure that:

- 1) Natural and cultural resources are protected
- 2) Trails are not seen as scars on the landscape but designed to maximize natural beauty of the landscape
- 3) Trails are built sustainably

Greater Access

The construction of natural surface trails across the Three Sisters property in 2012 and 2013 immediately reduced congestion along two main access trails to the adjacent BLM trail system. The acquisition of the Bookends properties will greatly expand access to existing trails as well as add to the trail base.

A key desired future park access is from Mira-Monte Road, that will allow neighborhood residents to reach trails from quiet side streets. This access will not have parking associated with it though formalizing it with a map and regulatory information would eliminate the illegal trespassing that currently occurs in order to access the Tabeguache/Lunch Loops Area.

LEFT: Three Sisters Park is unique in that it provides trail conditions for riders of all ages and abilities, allowing families to make mountain biking a family activity.



Interpretation & Education

Interpretation and education provide opportunities for new experiences at the Lunch Loop area. Six themes have been identified in the area: recreation, wildlife, plants, geology, culture, stewardship & restoration. Potential methods of delivering information include graphic signs, interpretive walks, smart phone technology, and more formal instruction. Retired scientists and local experts volunteer as interpretive guides. These guides lead natural resource hikes for the public.

An informal gathering point for interpretive talks has been identified on the east side of the saddle between the middle and big Sister. This location could be pursued for the addition of naturalistic shade and seating opportunities consistent with the conservation easement.

View Protection

Some areas, such as ridgelines and the tops of the Three Sisters will have less recreation opportunities to keep highly visible areas free of trails. In this way, the natural vegetation will thrive and provide seamless, contiguous landscape corridors. In these areas, pedestrian-only trails provide those on foot a serene experience of the vast landscape.

Buffers

Landscape buffers were put in place along the east boundary of the Three Sisters property in order to protect the neighbors from trail noise and ensure their privacy. This buffer will be maintained and considered in all future park planning.

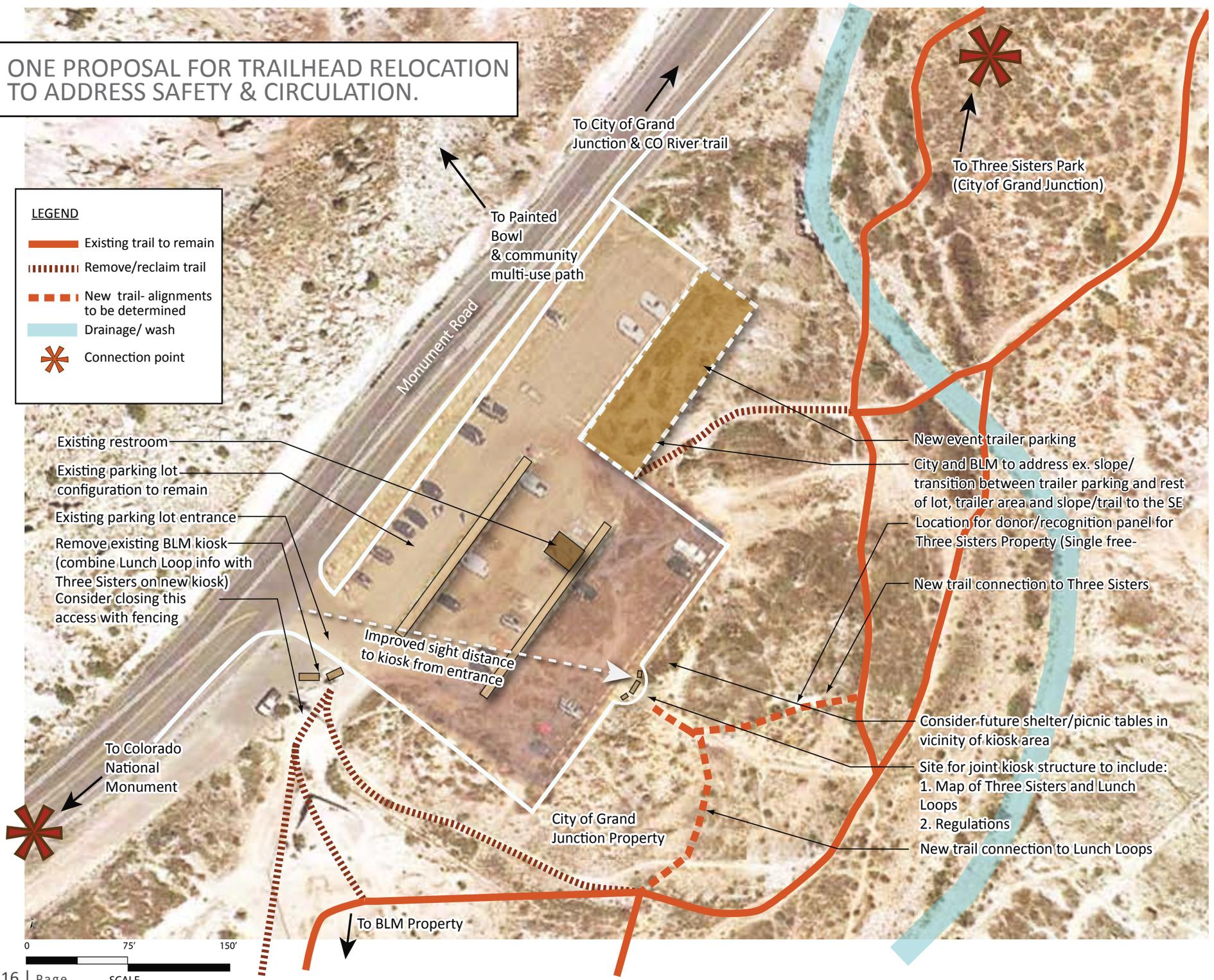
RIGHT: Three Sisters Park engages visitors in a wide range experiences.



ONE PROPOSAL FOR TRAILHEAD RELOCATION TO ADDRESS SAFETY & CIRCULATION.

LEGEND

-  Existing trail to remain
-  Remove/reclaim trail
-  New trail- alignments to be determined
-  Drainage/ wash
-  Connection point





Trailhead & Parking Area

Use of the Lunch Loop parking area and main trailhead has grown exponentially over the past five years. The City has responded to increased use by expanding the parking lot, installing restroom facilities, and providing an area for trailer parking. There are a number of options for providing additional parking, including parking across the street in the Painted Bowl Area (City-owned land) or adding overflow parking to the southwest corner of Three Sisters Park. These needs will continue to be addressed as surrounding City of Grand Junction land is developed to allow for greater use of adjacent public lands, including the Painted Bowl area to the north of Monument Road.

The following trailhead safety concerns have developed as a result of the popularity of the trail area:

1) A greater number of users, including youth and people with dogs milling about the parking area and strolling over to the trailhead which

is located at the entrance to the parking area

- 2) More vehicles pulling into the parking lot off of Monument Road
- 3) An increase in traffic along Monument Road that necessitates people who are driving into the parking lot to do so at higher than safe speeds to avoid the oncoming high speed traffic
- 4) The location of the trail head that draws people, children, and dogs toward the parking entry potentially putting trail users at risk as vehicles speed into the parking area

The City, the BLM, and the Mesa Land Trust have already discussed a different location for the trailhead kiosk that will re-direct trail users away from gathering around the entrance of the parking lot. Moving the kiosk location provides an opportunity to re-design a kiosk of signs that will provide important and varied information for trail users of the entire area, including Tabeguache/Lunch Loops and Three Sisters Park. Trail reroutes in the trailhead area will also be considered to address the potential kiosk relocation.

LEFT: The Lunch Loops/Tabeguache Trailhead parking lot siteplan. This parking lot serves BLM trails as well as the Three Sisters Park.



IV. CONNECTIONS

The Monument Road corridor that connects downtown Grand Junction to the Colorado National Monument provides tremendous opportunity for expanding safe, accessible, and enjoyable outdoor activities that draw residents and visitors of all ages and backgrounds. Connecting downtown Grand Junction with the corridor's existing trail-based recreation areas and neighborhoods with multi-use paths further promotes family activities, healthy and active socializing, and engages our younger generations with nature.

A shared use path along Monument Road was first identified in 1997 by the Urban Trails Committee. Since then, Mesa County and the City of Grand Junction have identified gaps between existing paved paths that inhibit connectivity and reduce safety. The lack of a path along Monument Road today presents a significant gap between existing paths that link the Audubon and Riverfront Trails, neighborhoods, and Lunch Loop area trails, and downtown.

The Mesa Land Trust continues to acquire land and easement along Monument Road that will facilitate the placement of this shared use path. Closing this gap will greatly improve connectivity in the area, link existing trails, increase safety, and encourage recreational riders and pedestrians of all ages to engage in healthy activities outdoors.

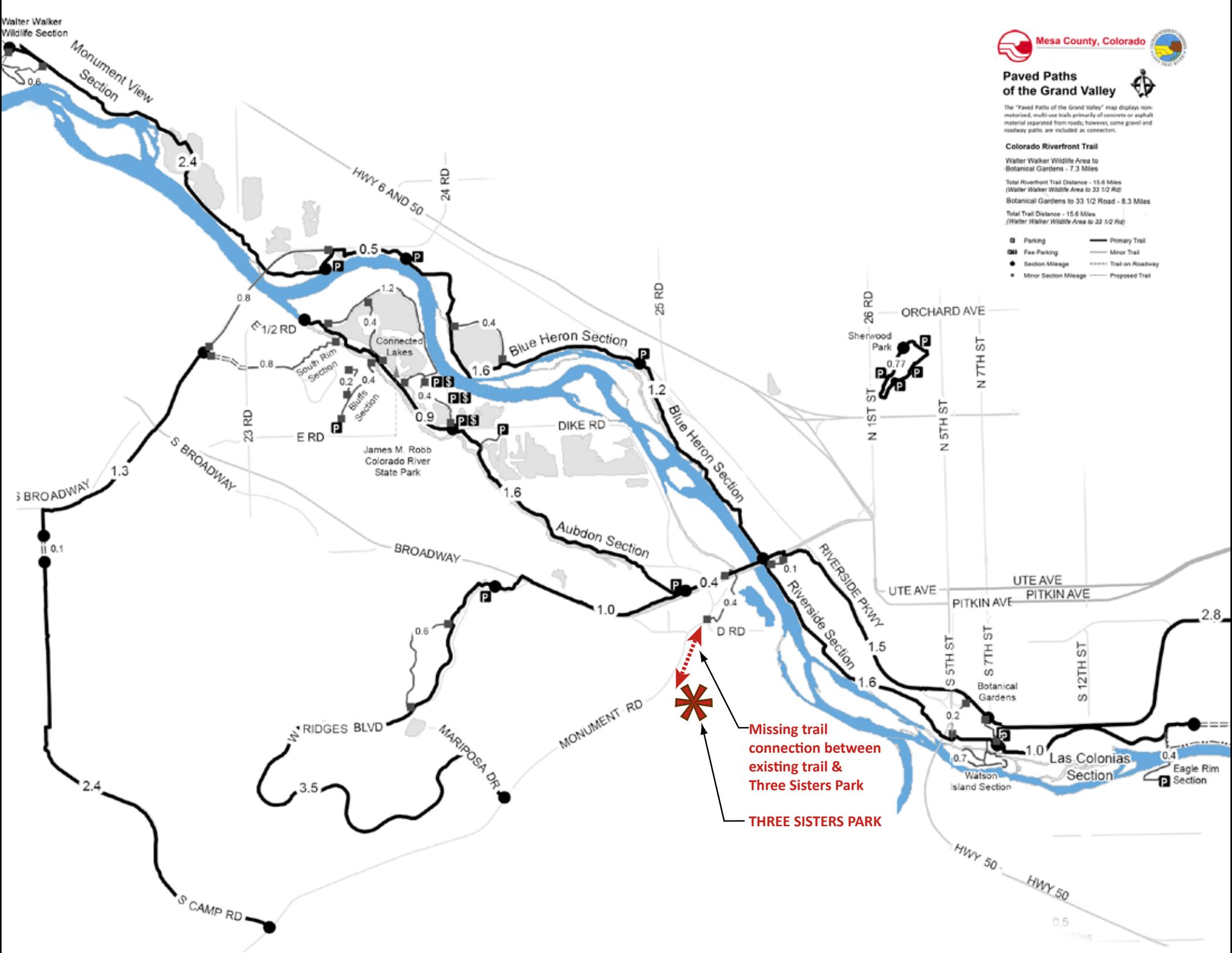
LEFT: A rendering of what the shared-use sidepath might look like along the Monument Corridor. RIGHT: Existing paved path connections within the Grand Valley and the close proximity of Three Sisters Park. Map courtesy of Mesa County.

Paved Paths of the Grand Valley

The "Paved Paths of the Grand Valley" map displays non-motorized, multi-use trails primarily of concrete or asphalt material separated from roads; however, some gravel and roadway paths are included as connectors.

Colorado Riverfront Trail
 Walter Walker Wildlife Area to Botanical Gardens - 7.3 Miles
 Total Riverfront Trail Distance - 15.8 Miles
 (Walter Walker Wildlife Area to 33 1/2 Rd)
 Botanical Gardens to 33 1/2 Road - 8.3 Miles
 Total Trail Distance - 15.8 Miles
 (Walter Walker Wildlife Area to 33 1/2 Rd)

- Parking
- Fee Parking
- Section Mileage
- Minor Section Mileage
- Primary Trail
- Minor Trail
- Trail on Roadway
- Proposed Trail



Missing trail connection between existing trail & Three Sisters Park

THREE SISTERS PARK



V. RESTORATION & STEWARDSHIP

Restoration Efforts

The Mesa Land Trust developed a restoration plan with the assistance of students and faculty from local Colorado Mesa University for Three Sisters Park. The plan prioritizes restoration sites and recommends restoration techniques for each site and is used to direct volunteers and local organizations in restoring the landscape; a landscape worn by over-use for over a hundred years by cattle, small coal mining operations, jeeps, target shooters, and informal trail users.

The original baseline study for the Three Sisters, completed in 2012, provided a basis for identifying critical natural resources and plant life; field studies were conducted to identify priority sites and local experts were enlisted to determine best restoration practices. In addition, a plan was created to develop a seed bank for the property using local volunteer experts; other local volunteers will propagate native plants that will be planted in high priority restoration sites.

Objectives of the Restoration Plan:

- Restore Soil and Site Stability
- Mitigate Site Erosion
- Mitigate Compaction of Former User-Created Trails and Roads.
- Restore Vegetative Cover and Biotic Integrity
- Restore Vegetation
- Provide Sustainable Recreation Opportunities and Infrastructure
- Enhance Recreation Opportunities through Sustainable Trails

LEFT: Contiguous public land provides valuable habitat for wildlife.

- Mitigate and Control Invasive Species Invasion

Restoration activities will include:

- **Trash cleanup** of old shooting areas and dumping sights
- **Tamarisk removal and revegetation:** Tamarisk Coalition removed Tamarisk and Russian Olive. Mesa Land Trust will work with local groups to plant native species where invasives were removed.
- **“Pulling-in”** of old social trails and jeep roads which will require crews, tools, and possibly machinery.
- **Erosion mitigation:** Some of the old unsustainable social trails that will be eliminated will require rock work and construction of bars that will prevent further water erosion.
- **Re-vegetation** which will include planting of seeds, propagating plants from seed bank, transplanting native plants on the property in priority sites. Research of grasses, juniper, native plants to generate best practices for re-vegetation.

Community Stewardship & Local Efforts

Volunteers and local community programs are essential to the success of trail building, maintenance, and restoration on public open space throughout Mesa County. Volunteers and students promote a caretaking ethic that instills respect for the land among trail users, encourages volunteerism and a sense of civic responsibility, and builds community. Volunteers and community organizations may contact the Mesa Land Trust to schedule participation in a community stewardship effort. All ages and skill levels are encouraged.

Partners & Resources

Land Managers

Mesa Land Trust
Bureau of Land Management

RIGHT: Eagle Scouts are one of many community members who complete valuable stewardship work at Three Sisters Park

City of Grand Junction Parks and Recreation Community Stewardship Partners

COPMOBA
Hilltop’s Youth Crew
Junior Service League
Local chapters of the Boy Scouts of America
Colorado Mesa University
Tamarisk Coalition
Great Ole Broads of the Wilderness
Western Colorado Conservation Corps
Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado
Grand Valley Trails Alliance
Aridlands Natural Resoure Partners
Westwater Engineering
Individual volunteers





V. PARK MANAGEMENT

The Three Sisters Park is managed in partnership with the Bureau of Land Management, the City of Grand Junction, and the Mesa Land Trust, each providing resources strong and unique to their organization, to create a seamless network of single track trails that are enjoyed by users of all ages and abilities. The City of Grand Junction and the BLM will act as operational managers of the Three Sisters Park, as they already cooperatively manage the City-owned property at the Tabeguache/Lunch Loop trailhead area. A Memorandum of Understanding between the City and the BLM defines this partnership and delineates responsibilities among both parties for the operational management of the properties.

Site improvements and any development that occurs on the property, including trail construction, the addition of educational facilities, signs, etc. will require approval by the Mesa Land Trust in accordance with the Conservation Easements. The Easements will ensure that the conservation values of the property are preserved and protected in perpetuity and that the property remains open to the public. The conservation values of the Three Sisters and the Bookends include natural, scenic open space, wildlife habitat, and recreational resources. Furthermore, as holder of the Conservation Easement, Mesa Land Trust will steward the Three Sisters Park to

LEFT: Evening mountain bike rides are a popular past time in Grand Junction. Image by Sarah Withers.

ensure that maintenance of the property meets Easement guidelines. The types of site improvements and itemized restrictions on the use and development of the property are outlined in the Conservation Easements.

All trail development will follow the BLM trail design criteria and will be directed by trained crew leaders. The Mesa Land Trust will encourage volunteer participation in trail construction, trail maintenance and the returning of the existing unsustainable social trails back to natural vegetation. Other community stewardship partners will participate in restoration activities.



ABOVE RIGHT: Revegetation has been an important activity to accompany trail building.
RIGHT: Chris Pickens of the BLM and David Livingston, leading the Hilltop Youth Corps.

FINAL PAGE



Image by Malcolm Childers.

“To have a place, to live and belong in a place, to live from a place without destroying it, we must imagine it. By imagination we see it illuminated by its own unique character and by our love for it.”

-Wendell Berry (author and farmer)