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Ranch project closely watched **Wyoming property borders Fort Collins' newly acquired open space**

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Local officials are keeping track of planning efforts for an expansive Wyoming ranch near prized open space areas owned by Fort Collins and Larimer County.

The Belvoir Ranch, an 18,800-acre spread owned by the city of Cheyenne, touches a corner of Larimer County's Red Mountain Open Space and lies north of Soapstone Prairie Natural Area owned by Fort Collins.

Cheyenne officials have launched a process to develop a master plan for the ranch that is expected to last about a year. Potential uses for the land include a wind farm and a landfill as well as recreation facilities, said Mike Abel, the city's planning services director.

Any development on the property is not likely to be visible from Red Mountain or Soapstone because of the lay of the land and "buffer" areas that already are in place, Abel said.

"There is a lot of acreage there," he said. "Anything that goes in will be miles away."

Cheyenne bought most of the Belvoir Ranch in 2003 for \$5.9 million with an eye toward tapping into its groundwater supply and finding a potential site for a landfill, Abel said.

Whether a landfill on the property will ever be needed is not clear. Technological advances may extend the life of the city's current facility, he said.

The city is drilling test wells on the ranch to measure its capacity for water as it leases grazing rights on the property to local ranchers, he said.

In 2005, Cheyenne bought 1,800 acres of the Belvoir Ranch that borders Red Mountain from the Nature Conservancy. The land, which is on the north side of a geological feature, known as the Big Hole, is protected through a conservation easement.

As Larimer County shapes its plans for Red Mountain, it will work with Cheyenne to develop trail systems that connect from both sides of the border, said Meegan Flenniken of the county parks and open lands department.

The trail system also will connect to Soapstone, which is directly east of Red Mountain.

"We feel very comfortable that will happen in the future," she said.

Soapstone, which Fort Collins bought in 2003 for \$11 million, is protected on the Wyoming side by a deed restriction on about 3,000 acres still controlled by the Soapstone Grazing Association, said Mark Sears, natural areas manager for Fort Collins.

Red Mountain and Soapstone are expected to be open to the public in 2009, Sears said.

Fort Collins and Larimer County are considered "stakeholders" in how Belvoir Ranch will be used and will be included the planning process, Abel said.

"We want to have the benefit of their experience," he said. "We are adjacent property owners and we should be working together."
