

# Greater Observatory Mesa Area Trail Plan

2025



City of Flagstaff Open Space Program

# Executive Summary

## Background

The Observatory Mesa Natural Area (OMNA) is beloved by the community for its natural beauty and recreational value. The community's passion for our natural areas, combined with OMNA's close proximity to downtown Flagstaff and twelve adjacent neighborhoods, has resulted in high use in the area, including unauthorized uses and associated impacts. The desire to address these impacts while providing diverse recreational experiences in the area motivated the creation of the Greater Observatory Mesa Area (GOMA) Trail Plan. The GOMA planning area is approximately 4,000 acres, generally bounded by the mesa's slopes on the south and east, and OMNA boundaries on the north and west sides. The three landowners in this area, the City of Flagstaff, U.S. Forest Service, and Lowell Observatory are partners in this Trail Plan.

The documented need for a formal trail system in GOMA guided the purpose of this plan. Planned management actions identified in the *Management Policies for Legally-Designated Open Space Properties* (2020) direct managers to "Establish a Trail System Plan for OMNA, in partnership with adjacent landowners, state/federal agencies, local organizations, and other stakeholders." (page 71). The community's interest in the property is also well documented from the 2004 voter-approved bond initiative that allowed for the property's purchase, the 2017-2018 Flagstaff Trails Initiative identifying planning on Observatory Mesa as a priority, and the over 3,800 individual comments received during this planning process.

## Purpose and Goals

The purpose of the GOMA Trail Plan is to establish a formal, managed trail system that aligns with Flagstaff Open Space Program, Coconino National Forest, and Lowell Observatory management policies and reflects community desires to provide a balanced trail system on Observatory Mesa Natural Area and surrounding Forest Service lands.

Our goal is to create a well-managed trail system with wayfinding signage and sustainable alignments that protects cultural and natural resources and provides a variety of quality outdoor recreation experiences for the community. Based on robust public input and assessment, the plan identifies a non-motorized trail system with sustainable alignments, updated signage, and increased access and parking while ensuring healthy wildlife habitats and cultural resource protections by establishing ecological zones, restoring unsustainable unauthorized trails, and closing abandoned roads to reduce motorized impacts in the area.

## Plan contents

The plan includes a three-phase approach for priority implementation and a section for long term strategies. The plan's priorities include conceptual alignments that provide a range of outdoor recreation experiences, management guidelines for the final completed trail system, and recommendations for the restoration of currently disturbed areas and unauthorized trails. The proposed trail system provides a higher density of trail loops near formal access

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points and where people use trails the most frequently, identifies longer loops for more remote experiences, and designated areas with no new trails to protect habitat and wildlife migration. All elements of the Trail Plan promote ecological conservation commensurate with the Arizona State Land Department sale and can be implemented once approved and funded.

OMNA was established via a conservation easement held by Arizona State Parks & Trails. The agreement guarantees that no more than 20 acres total is eligible for development (including trails) in perpetuity to ensure the conservation value of the property. This proposal identifies 7.8 acres for trail development within the OMNA boundary, for 39% of the total available 20 acres. When considering trail development versus road and trail restoration, the net change in recreation infrastructure on OMNA and U.S. Forest Service lands is an increase of 5.4 miles.

This proposal was created in partnership with land managers from the City of Flagstaff, Lowell Observatory, and the Coconino National Forest. The Coconino National Forest reviewed this trail plan, and the long-term intent is to establish a cross-jurisdictional agreement between the Coconino National Forest and City of Flagstaff that would permit the City to implement and maintain trails on Forest Service property. This partnership will improve trail system connectivity, leverage resources for plan implementation, and support effective cross-jurisdictional land management.

Lowell Observatory is interested in retaining undeveloped land within its property to benefit the organization and the Flagstaff community. This plan includes long-term recommendations, currently with no timeline established, for the Lowell Observatory property that can provide passive recreation opportunities and increase connectivity for the overall trail system. Additional long-term elements include utilizing railroad underpasses for trail connections and conceptual Flagstaff Urban Trail alignments which will be pursued when the timing is right for additional conversations.

The final Trail Plan will be adopted by the City of Flagstaff, reviewed by the Coconino National Forest, and considered by Lowell Observatory when appropriate and will be used to direct future management and trail implementation.

In summary, this plan proposes as priorities:

- Approximately 20 miles of additional natural-surfaced single-track trail
- Approximately 8 miles of trails for adaptive uses
- The addition of 2 more formal access points, which will result in a total of 8
- Recommendations for trail signage for wayfinding, regulations, and etiquette
- Additional parking for residents and visitors along Route 66 near the Public Works Yard and at the western boundary on Forest Road 515
- Restoration of 4.1 miles of unauthorized trails and 10.5 miles of abandoned roads
- Implementing two educational zones for interpretive signage for the purpose of increasing student and adult awareness of environmental, cultural, and historical significance

# Priority Trail System

