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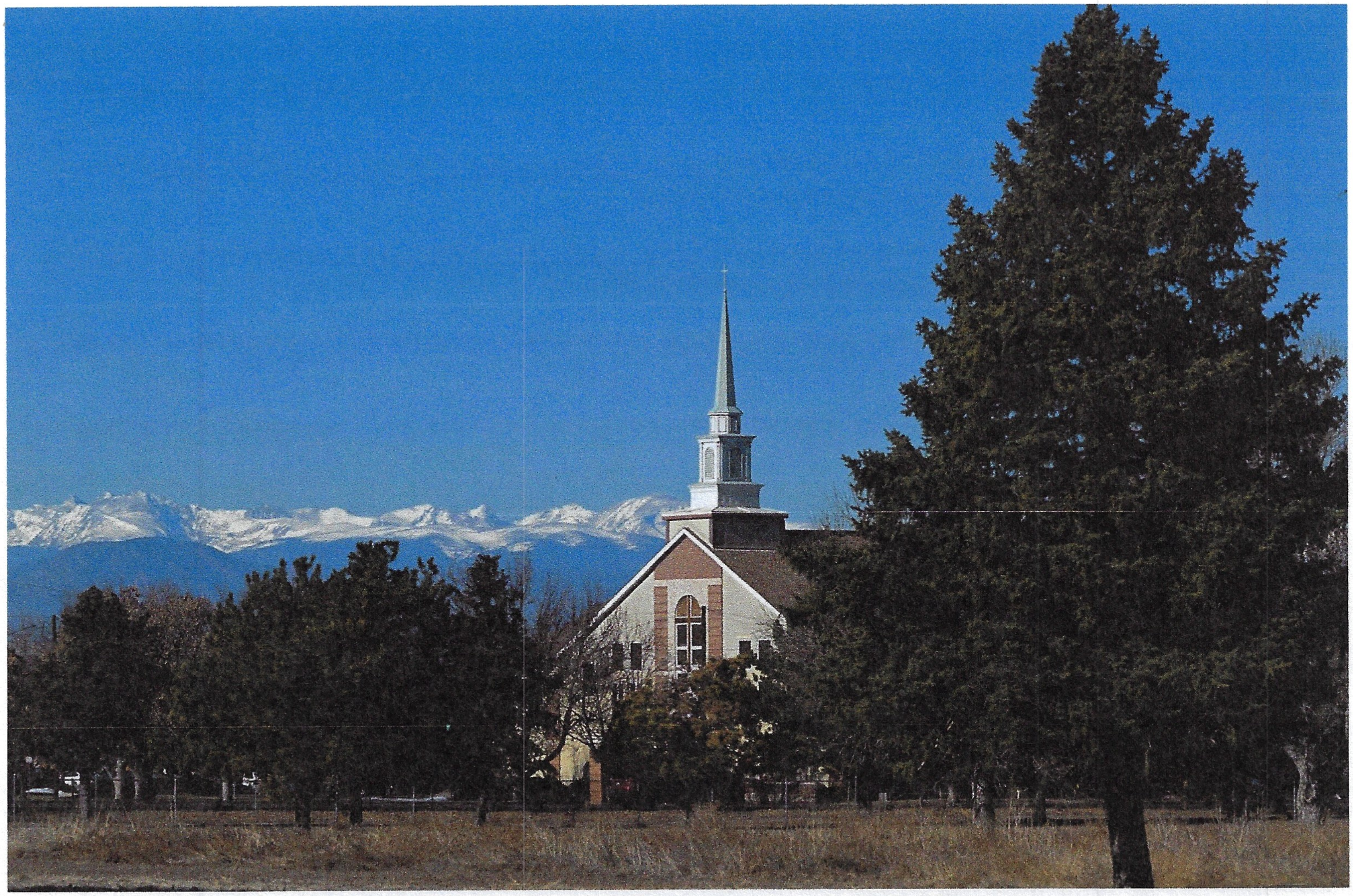
PARK HILL PARK

Former golf course tabbed for $70M buildout in bond package



Views of the snow-capped mountains can be seen to the west from the former Park Hill Golf Course in Denver on Jan. 15. After acquiring the plot through a land swap — a deal still being finalized — Denver has referred a bond package to the November ballot that would include $70 million to turn the land into a large city park. HELEN H. RICHARDSON — DENVER POST FILE

BY ELLIOTT WENZLER

EWENZLER@DENVERPOST.COM

The long-awaited conversion of the former Park Hill Golf Course into a park is set to receive a major investment beginning next year if Denver voters approve the city's $1 billion bond package in November.

Denver Parks and Recreation, which is still working to finalize the acquisition of the land, would get $70 million to transform the golf course into one of the largest parks in the city.

It's not yet clear exactly what the dollars will be used for, because the city hasn't finished a detailed plan for amenities at the 155-acre park. The new park, though, is likely to need major infrastructure updates.

The park allocation flew somewhat under the radar as City Council members debated which projects should be included in the $950 million bond proposal. The council approved the package's five bond questions for the ballot Monday after weeks of back-and-forth with the mayor's office over the process.

Save Open Space Denver, a group that has opposed new development on the land in favor of green space, was pleased to see the project included in the bond.

"We are happy with the $70 million allocation," said Penfield Tate, a former state senator and mayoral candidate. "I think it's safe to say we wish it was more."

The property has long been a source of tension among Denverites, some of whom wanted to see the land partially developed with housing while others pushed to keep it as open space. But Denverites handily rejected a plan to develop the land in 2023, and the site has been closed since.

In January, Mayor Mike Johnston announced the city would acquire the property through a land swap with the owner, Westside Investment Partners, for property out by Denver International Airport.

Although the council approved the agreement in May, the deal is still under a 90-day due diligence period before it's finalized. That will happen in early October at the latest, said city spokesman Jon Ewing.

Officials initially said they would aim to open the park this summer with minimal enhancements, but that milestone may not happen until early fall, he said.

Parks and Recreation is working to develop a full-area plan, executive director Jolon Clark said. That includes potential amenities it has solicited ideas for.

"What we're working with the community on right now is: Where do those things go? How does it interact with its nearby neighbors?" he said during a July 28 council meeting. "And what are the things that might be different and special about this regional park than other parks?"

Clark also said the department will need to make repairs on the property.

"There are concerns that the irrigation system has been vandalized and damaged," he said. Parks and Recreation also will have to set up lighting throughout the park, he said.

Tate said originally, his group estimated the cost for the entire park conversion project to be $125 million, in part because of the poor condition of the infrastructure there.

"Major work needs to be done," he said, referencing damage to the clubhouse and the irrigation system.

Mayor Mike Johnston told Denver Post journalists this week that he anticipates the $70 million will finance the entire buildout.

"It's not the Cadillac version, but it is 155 acres of a fully functional, accessible park," he said of what the bond project would bring.

Denver has a park fund filled by a 0.25% dedicated sales tax, but Johnston said using that bucket to pay for the buildout would take far too long.

"There have been three citywide votes of every Denver resident on this topic," he said. "To say, 'We'll work on this, but we'll bring it to you in six installments over eight years,' I think, would not be a reasonable response."