

Without approval to pump its water through Larimer County, Thornton is building a pipeline to nowhere in Weld

By [Tyler Silvy](#) | tsilvy@greeleytribune.com |

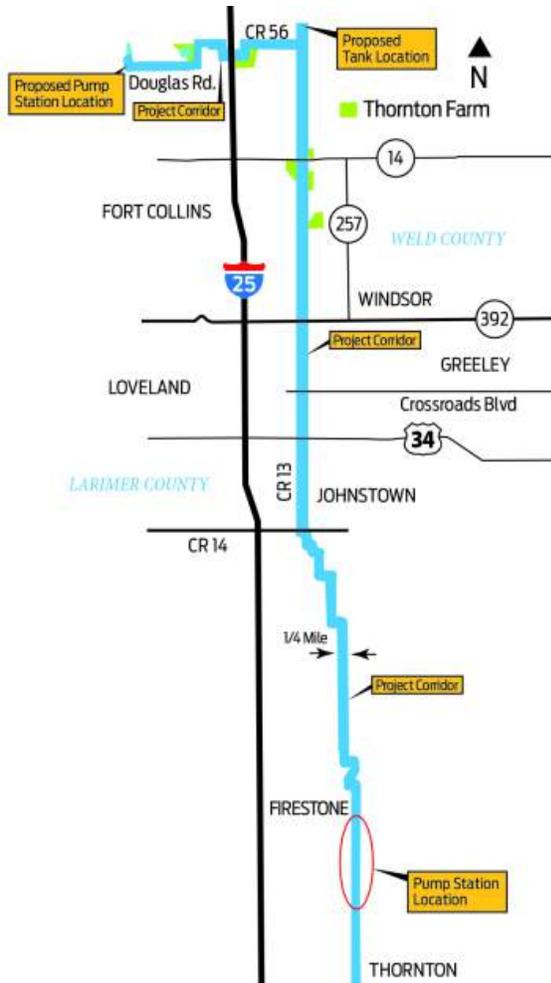
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During the next few years, the city of Thornton likely will build some 60 miles of water pipeline through Weld County, including parts of Windsor and Johnstown this year. Now, it's a nonexistent pipeline. Leading to nowhere. Carrying nothing. The water that would flow into the pipeline is from reservoirs north of Fort Collins in Larimer County, about five miles away from the northernmost point of the Weld County portion of Thornton's planned pipeline. And Larimer County commissioners three weeks ago rejected the city's planned pipeline route through their county. That route was part of an ambitious plan, decades in the making, to pump water from the Poudre River to Thornton. Thornton has spent about \$150 million, starting in the 1980s, systematically buying and drying Weld and Larimer county farmland, negotiating with landowners and working out the engineering necessary for the planned \$400 million project. But no magic trick, and no amount of money alone, will move that water into Weld County. Thornton officials know that, and they sat down with The Tribune a week ago to discuss their options. Here they are, from most to least likely: **Possibility 1: Lawsuit** The most likely next step for Thornton is to sue the Board of Larimer County Commissioners. That happens somewhat frequently in land use cases. The lawsuit would take place in Larimer County District Court and would ask a judge to review county commissioners' reasoning in rejecting the planned pipeline. Thornton hasn't yet filed a lawsuit. City officials are waiting for the commissioners' official, written findings and resolution on the decision. "We'll have to see what's written first," said Mark Koleber, Thornton Water Project director. Larimer County Commissioner Tom Donnelly said he's not sure when the commissioners officially will approve their findings and resolution. They technically have until nearly the middle of May to do that. Then the clock starts for Thornton to file its lawsuit. Should it choose to do so, it will have 28 days from the time commissioners issue their official findings and resolution. There are numerous ways legal action could play out, but it's unlikely to be quick. **Possibility 2: Get Greeley's help** Greeley's 100-year-old water treatment facility, the Bellvue Water Treatment Plant, is undergoing renovation near the mouth of the Poudre above Fort Collins. It's not too far away from the reservoirs where Thornton would stage its water before pumping it down to Thornton. Greeley also has extra pipeline capacity. It recently installed a new, 60-inch water pipeline that runs alongside another 27-inch pipeline to bring treated water from the Bellvue Plant to Greeley. Could Greeley's treatment plant and pipeline infrastructure provide a way for Thornton to get its water through Larimer County?



Project Manager for Greeley's Bellvue

Pipeline, Dan Moore crouches alongside one of the large pipes used to complete the project while in Laporte. (Tribune file photo) Koleber said Thornton representatives have had preliminary discussions with their counterparts from Greeley. The discussions are apparently getting pretty serious. Greeley City Manager Roy Otto confirmed officials from both cities will formally meet within the next two weeks. It's unclear how much the Greeley option would impact the project's total cost. That's because Thornton would have to buy space in Greeley pipelines and reimburse Greeley for the cost of treating water. Even if those negotiations went smoothly, Thornton would still have to build a pipeline anywhere from 1-10 miles in length, as well as a pumping station, to get its water to Greeley's Bellvue Treatment Plant. Greeley's tentative suggestion involves developing a more robust non-potable water system that could be used to water its residents' yards. Greeley would take some of its water that is currently treated and routed through its treated water pipelines out of that system and flow that water down the Poudre River before capturing it closer to Greeley and using that for outdoor watering. That would free up space in the pipelines for Thornton water while keeping more water in the Poudre. **Possibility 3: Poudre River Option** Environmental advocates, including Gary Wockner of Save the Poudre and Save the Colorado, say this is the easiest, cheapest, and most environmentally friendly option. They ask: Instead of taking water out of the Poudre north of Fort Collins via the Larimer County Canal, why not let mother nature do its thing for free. That would run the water down the Poudre all the way to Windsor in Weld County. When asked about the Poudre River Option, though, Thornton officials scoff. "It doesn't make the list," Koleber said. "We lose water. We lose water quality. We lose use of storage. We have to change the decree – there's a list of things." Thornton officials worry about Fort Collins runoff and wastewater degrading the quality of Thornton's water. Beyond that, running the water down the Poudre would cost the city 1,200 acre feet of water per year, Thornton officials estimate. That's \$18 million per year, and untenable for Thornton officials. **What's next** In early 2019, there is no lawsuit. There is no agreement with Greeley. And there's no plan to push Thornton's pristine water down the Poudre through Fort Collins. So, regardless of the next steps, Thornton will begin building its pipeline along the Weld-Larimer county line. The city will start this year with pipeline sections in Johnstown and Windsor, where approval from the Board of Weld County Commissioners is not needed.



This map shows the initial planned route for the Thornton pipeline. The section in the north that juts west into Larimer County was recently rejected by the Board of Larimer County Commissioners. (Tribune graphics department). Thornton already has an intergovernmental agreement with Windsor. This past week, Thornton declared eminent domain against one Windsor landowner. Thornton officials insisted that was a last resort. Those officials are still working with Johnstown, and don't have permits to build yet. They'll also need permits from Firestone. Thornton will come before the Weld County Planning Commission in April to seek approval for its southernmost Weld County portion of the pipeline. That portion would run from southwestern Weld County, through unincorporated Frederick and Dacono, as well as Firestone proper. But the plan is about more than just permits. Thornton still has right-of-way to purchase along its route (it has just 16 percent of the needed right-of-way or easements), and it's possible more eminent domain will be used. One problem, Koleber said, is the price Thornton is willing to pay for a water pipeline – it's well below what oil and gas companies are willing to pay. If and when the first section is complete, it will represent 14 of the 70 miles of pipeline needed to bring Poudre River water to Thornton. It will be a pipeline headed somewhere, at some point. – Tyler Silvy is a content manager for *The Greeley Tribune*. Reach him at tsilvy@greeleytribune.com. Connect with him at [Facebook.com/Tyler Silvy](https://www.facebook.com/TylerSilvy) or [@TylerSilvy](https://twitter.com/TylerSilvy) on Twitter.