

POLITICAL PEDALERS: BOULDER MOUNTAINBIKE ALLIANCE USED ITS MUSCLE IN 2006 (DAILY CAMERA)

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By Clay Evans

When the Boulder Mountainbike Alliance was formed in 1991 (as the Boulder Offroad Alliance) it was a small, unassuming group whose members mostly just wanted to help build a mountain bike trail here or there.

It wasn't until 2000 that a few members proposed a somewhat radical idea: Let's get political.

"For the first 10 years of our existence, all we wanted was to do work on trails and make nice with the (public) agencies," says BMA president Mike Barrow. "But we made a conscious decision to become politically active in 2000, and ever since then, things have gotten better. There is a direct correlation between being politically involved and the successes that we've reaped."

In 2006, the group changed its name — in part to avoid confusion: "offroad" is a term more often associated with motor vehicles — organized thousands of hours of volunteer muscle to construct and improve local trails, found its first corporate sponsor in REI and continued to flex its political muscles, lobbying city and county open-space departments to keep the interests of mountain bikers in mind.

Among the group's biggest accomplishments last year, Barrow says, were its efforts to pressure the Boulder County Parks and Open Space Department into building a connector between the Heil Ranch open space and Lyons and construct an additional loop for mountain bikers at Heil Ranch. The group also helped to overturn a long-standing ban on mountain bikes on city of Boulder open space west of Colo. 93 near Eldorado Springs, despite fierce opposition from other interest groups.

"We were involved in the trail study (on the Eldorado Mountain-Doudy Draw open space). Now we've got to go out and help build those things," Barrow says. "

BMA provided 637 volunteers who did 2,752 hours of trail work, working on trails all over the county, from the Brainard Lake area to Mud Lake near Nederland and Marshall Mesa. BMA also set up a "mountain bike patrol" on the West Magnolia trail system on U.S. Forest Service land west of Boulder.

"Since 1991, we have documented 16,237 volunteer trail work hours to the trails in Boulder County. That's over eight man-years," Barrow wrote in a recent e-mail to the 1,100 people on the group's e-mail list.

Andria Bilich has worked on alliance trail crews for three years and last year became a trail crew leader.

"The way I look at BMA, it's not really a social organization so much as an advocacy organization," Bilich says. "It serves the purpose of basically representing the voices of mountain bikers. I've felt really disenfranchised in many ways, so it's nice to have a voice through BMA."

And while public agencies may not always agree with BMA's every goal, they applaud the group for getting involved and working with other interest groups, even those with which they may disagree.

"They put their money where their mouth is," says Mike Patton, director of the city's Open Space and Mountain Parks Department. "They show up, they are helpful and productive, and they turn people out (for volunteer projects). It's not a case where we always agree ... but they have an appreciation for the overall interests, and not just their own."

Now, Barrow says, the alliance is "on the verge of being victims of our own success." With many needs and opportunities — working with Boulder for access to other open-space areas and keeping the pressure on the county to complete the Heil-Lyons connector among them — Barrow says the group's major need now is for more active members.

"Our problem isn't money" — besides REI, the group is sponsored by just about every local bicycling shop, the Boulder Area Trails Coalition, and a smattering of restaurants — "it's people," Barrow says. "We need to step it up this year or miss all these opportunities that are low-hanging fruit right now."