

OPEN SPACE DEPARTMENT GRAPPLES WITH ALLOWING BIKES ON TRAILS WEST OF BOULDER (DAILY CAMERA)

By LAURA SNIDER
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If you go

What: The Community Collaborative Group will discuss whether mountain bikes should be allowed on open space in Boulder's West Trail Study Area — which stretches from Linden Avenue south to Eldorado Springs Drive.

When: 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. Sept. 13. Public participation will be limited to one hour and space at the meeting may be limited, so people interested in the issue are encouraged to contact representatives on the Community Collaborative Group beforehand. For a list of group members and their contact information, visit WestTSA.org.

Where: East Boulder Recreation Center, 5660 Sioux Drive, Boulder

More info: WestTSA.org

Arguments for and against

Mountain bikers are asking for access to a connector trail that would link Baseline Road to Eldorado Springs Drive. Here are a few of the arguments for and against the connection:

Mountain bike supporters

The requested trail would avoid the most popular areas — including Mesa Trail and Chautauqua Park — and the most fragile habitat areas.

Opening the area to mountain bikes would not cause more traffic or parking issues, because bikers could ride from their homes.

The proposed trail would only open up about 7 percent of the area's trails to mountain bikes.

Mountain bike opponents

Allowing mountain bikes into the area will pose a safety hazard to hikers.

Bikes would damage the already heavily used trails in the area.

If the trails west of Boulder are opened up to bikes, the experience of enjoying nature will be degraded.

By the start of 1983, a new kind of outdoor recreation craze was sweeping Boulder.

"Recently, bicycles — on streets and on trails — have taken on a new style," an opinion columnist wrote in the Jan. 16, 1983, edition of the Daily Camera. "'Clunkers,' 'stump jumpers,' or 'trail bicycles' are marvelous creations of strong flexible frames, low gears and broad, knobby tires."

These newfangled "mountain bicycles" were perfect for snowy streets, dirt roads and trails. And during the first years of the '80s, so-called stump jumpers were cruising along some of the best trails the city of Boulder had to offer.

The opinion column in early 1983 went on to predict an explosion in people wanting to try this new kind of biking — and an increase in the impacts: "As clunker numbers increase, so will the

pressure on our delicate open space and wilderness trails, unless we act now to redirect their use.”

A few days later, the City Council voted to ban mountain bikes on all of Boulder’s trails. Months later, some areas of city land were reopened, but the open space directly west of town — which runs from Chautauqua south to Eldorado Springs and encompasses the iconic Flatirons — has remained closed ever since.

Now, Boulder’s Open Space and Mountain Parks Department is asking a group of residents to decide whether mountain bikes should again be allowed on that land. On Sept. 13, the department’s Community Collaborative Group — which is made up of 15 volunteers who represent a wide range of open space users, including dog owners, naturalists, hikers and adjacent neighbors — will grapple with whether to allow the bikes and, if so, where.

Visitor Master Plan directive

In 2005, the Boulder City Council passed the Visitor Master Plan, which provides a vision for how the city’s open space will be managed into the future. The plan called for the Open Space and Mountain Parks Department to take a more detailed look at how visitor use should be handled in five “trail study areas.” Work on the West Trail Study Area began last year.

“For the West TSA, there is language in the Visitor Master Plan that directs us to explore the feasibility of mountain bike opportunities west of Highway 93,” said Dean Paschall, manager of public process and communication for Open Space and Mountain Parks.

To grapple with the often-controversial issue of how visitors should be allowed to use the West TSA, which stretches from Linden Avenue to Eldorado Springs Drive, the open space department formed the Community Collaborative Group last fall.

Since then, the group has put in countless hours working to come to consensus on each painstaking management detail: Where should dogs be allowed? Are there appropriate places for new trails? How should fragile ecosystems be protected? And, of course, should mountain bikes be allowed and where?

But the question of mountain bikes is so divisive — and people on both sides of the debate feel so passionately — that the Community Collaborative Group decided to dedicate a specific meeting to discussing the issue on Sept. 13.

A north-south corridor

At the meeting, Mark McIntyre, who represents mountain bikers in the collaborative group, will present his constituents’ proposal: a connection that would allow bikes to get from Baseline Road to Eldorado Springs Drive via a series of existing dirt service roads and trails as well as a few new connections.

McIntyre's preferred route would start east of Chautauqua Park and head south on Enchanted Mesa before crossing Kohler Mesa and Skunk Canyon. The route would then skirt the National Center for Atmospheric Research to the east, head south across Shanahan Ridge and turn east again to connect with the South Boulder Creek Trailhead. The mountain bike connection would then continue southwest and end at the South Mesa Trailhead.

McIntyre and the other members of the Community Collaborative Group agreed last fall not to speak to the press while the group was still trying to come to consensus on how the area should be managed. But Jason Vogel, president of the Boulder Mountainbike Alliance, said he and his group helped craft the final proposal.

Vogel said the heart of the proposal is the creation of a corridor that would allow mountain bikers to get from the middle of Boulder to the established mountain bike areas south and north of town.

"We need a way to get people from the city centers out to the open space areas," Vogel said. "Our request is actually incredibly modest. What it would turn into is maybe a single trail corridor."

More importantly, perhaps, is to make clear what the mountain bikers are not asking for, according to Vogel.

"We absolutely do not want access to all the trails in the West TSA," he said. "We have never advocated for that. And we have specifically said, 'Do not put us on the Mesa Trail. Do not put us in Chautauqua.' The user conflict generated from that would create too great a backlash."

Mountain bikers are also not asking for new trailheads, additional parking or exclusive use to any trails, according to McIntyre's proposal.

Changing the experience

But some open space users argue that the ban should stay in place and that bikes shouldn't be allowed on any trails in the West TSA. A group that formed to fight bike access — called Save Open Space Boulder, or SOS Boulder — say mountain bikes would pose safety risks to other trail users and that they would fundamentally change the open space experience.

"Where bikers have taken over the trail system, hiker use has dropped off," said Mike Browning, a member of the group. "The user experience is degraded when you have bikers around."

SOS Boulder also points out that mountain bikers already have access to many other trails on public lands surrounding Boulder that may not be as ecologically fragile as the trails directly west of Boulder.

“The West TSA is really the gem of the open space system,” Browning said. “It’s a fragile interface between the wilderness and the city that’s already under tremendous pressure from hikers and runners.”

The Community Collaborative Group will consider both sides of the issue at its Sept. 13 meeting and then try to come to a consensus. If the group can’t do that immediately, they can choose to form a subcommittee that will study the issue further and bring a compromise back to the group. And if consensus still can’t be reached, the Open Space and Mountain Parks Department will step in to decide, said Paschall, a city spokesman.

“Our commitment really is to a community conversation and coming to a community consensus,” he said. “It’s our hope that the CCG, which is made up of incredibly bright and well-informed community members, will be able to see beyond the positionalism and seek win-win solution.”

The final decision — whether it’s made by the Community Collaborative Group or the department — will ultimately have to be approved by the Open Space Board of Trustees and, likely, the City Council.

<https://www.dailycamera.com/2010/09/03/open-space-department-grapples-with-allowing-bikes-on-trails-west-of-boulder/>