

## **FINDING COMMON GROUND WITH BIKES ON TRAILS (DAILY CAMERA)**

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We all know the feeling of anxiety. It is a mix of uncomfortable feelings that can include uneasiness, worry, and fear. In Boulder, the topic of mountain biking creates anxiety among some trail users. A review of public comments about mountain biking in City of Boulder Open Space shows that many who oppose allowing bicycles access to singletrack trails cite anxiety as their primary motivation. Many are afraid that shared-use trails will no longer be safe for themselves, their children, or their dogs.

They are afraid that adding mountain bikes to the system, even on just a single north-south connector trail would irrevocably degrade their open space experience. They invoke images of mountain biking as depicted in far too many advertisements, movies, and magazines: that of armor-clad adrenaline junkies in full-face helmets riding at breakneck speed.

When it comes to Boulder Open Space, the reality is a far cry from this image of mountain biking, cultivated to sell cars and energy drinks to men in their teens and twenties. Boulder citizens that seek limited access for mountain bikers on City of Boulder Open Space are typically mature, family folk that enjoy mountain biking for the staggering sense of a natural connection that comes from flowing across the land, who seek both the physical and mental health benefits that come from the low impact, rigorous exercise that cycling provides, and revel in the sense of awe that comes from experiencing so much of this vast, beautiful place in only an afternoon.

We are responsible outdoor recreationalists that respect other users; hikers, dog walkers, runners, and equestrians, because we are also hikers, dog walkers, runners and equestrians. We treat others as we wish to be treated. We are courteous and careful, and in control.

For years, communities across the United States have successfully managed shared-use trails that include mountain biking. The preeminent examples include some of Boulder's fiercest competitors for the most livable city in the United States. This includes Park City, Utah, Flagstaff, Ariz., Bend, Ore., Asheville, N.C., Stowe, Vt., Fort Collins and many others. Each of these communities started their inclusive efforts with a sense of anxiety and hesitation, because the trail users in those communities did not really know what would happen once the mountain bikers were given access, and that uncertainty is often the root of fear. The first step that every community had to take involved trust. Trust that the trail users would respect each other. Belief that we can move beyond fear and stereotypes and have a civilized conversation as neighbors and partners in support of the natural places that we all love.

The next step was more concrete, trail users and land managers worked together in assuring that the popular shared-use trails would be designed to safely accommodate a variety of users. Good sight lines and mellow grades kept mountain bikers from surprising other users, and

collaborative education efforts informed the trail user community of proper trail etiquette and what to expect from their trail experience. The Boulder MountainBike Alliance and the Open Space and Mountain Parks Department have worked together successfully on volunteer trail work projects, peer-to-peer education efforts, and even trail design for many years now. This collaborative experience lies ready to be tapped to proactively address the challenges that may arise from even small changes in open space management.

Over time, in many places just like Boulder, it became clear that there was nothing to fear. Communities of responsible adults and families that enjoy experiencing nature by bike have proven to be indispensable partners in managing public lands, educating trail users, providing trail-side assistance, maintaining trails, rerouting unsustainable and environmentally damaging trails, rehabilitating the landscape, and much, much more. These communities have proven that bringing mountain bikers into the fold of public lands stewardship is the best way to eliminate anxiety and fear and build a broader, more inclusive open space community.

In the Boulder mountain backdrop, mountain bikers are not asking for universal access; we are not unreasonable; we do not want to take away the special experience of others. Rather, we want to enhance the user experience, provide that experience to a neglected class of trail users, and build a bigger community in support of open space.

The time has come to overcome anxiety and fear and let experience prove that we can be neighbors and friends and support open space, even if we enjoy it in different ways. We must take the first step in overcoming fear together — that means we must learn to trust and to understand one another.

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