

BIKES ON TRAILS: SPACE FOR COMPROMISE (DAILY CAMERA)

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Erika Stutzman, for the Camera editorial board

A group of dedicated community members came together with a shared goal of improving one of Boulder's most treasured aspects: Trails on city open space. They were going to make recommendations to the Open Space Board of Trustees specifically about western trails, where mountain bikes have been banned since the early 1980s.

The Community Collaborative Group was formed last fall and has been meeting nearly weekly. Volunteers for study and advisory groups of course have their own biases and specialties, but they have one major thing in common. Each has something better to do than serve on a volunteer committee that meets almost every week.

Some options: Catch up on e-mails, play with kids, hang out with friends, call their mothers, stare at the sky, practice yoga, read books, run errands or go out to eat.

On Monday, after calling a session to address mountain bikes -- the most controversial aspect of western trail use -- they threw in the towel.

The City of Boulder has 144 miles of open space trails, with 48 miles open to cyclists. And despite the fact that mountain bikes were, from the outset, clearly going to be the most contentious part of the trail study, the deck was stacked against them.

Out of 15 group members, five represented people who use the trails for recreation. One of these represented mountain bikers.

One, out of 15.

The cyclists didn't ask for full access to western trails. They didn't ask for Mesa Trail. They didn't ask for Chautauqua. They didn't ask for parking lots. They sought 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.

Well, if that is a feasible plan, we aren't going to hear about it from the group. It is frustrating, but not surprising, that if you stack dog walkers, residents and conservationists against one cyclist, introducing bikes on a trail where bikes haven't been will receive unfair consideration.

There are many sides to consider, but when the rhetoric gets so heated against the dangerous, lightning-fast, irresponsible and disrespectful cyclists, thoughtful debate goes out the window. And for those of us that stroll on trails where bikes are allowed, the above-described cyclists are so rarely seen that one wonders how they became the crux of the conversation.

Do some behave badly? It would be disingenuous to pretend they don't. But they are the minority -- just like the number of children who would yank a strolling doggies' tail or wander off the trail into protected habitat; the number of hiking dog owners who won't pick up poo; the number of joggers who run abreast and don't let runners or cyclists pass.

Environmental concerns are important, but open space trails are not pristine natural environments. We advocate for shared spaces when possible -- but making cyclists into the bogeymen does not further the discussion about possibilities on trails.

The trustees will issue a decision on trail use in January. Without a recommendation from the group that's been meeting for a year in order to make one.