

NEARING COMPLETION ON THE WEST TSA (THE BLUE LINE)

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By Bill Briggs

Almost two years ago, in January of 2009, the City's Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP) Department began a process designed to assess trails, trail sustainability, visitor access, and natural resource protection in the West Trail Study Area (TSA). Regarded as the crown jewel of the Open Space system, the West TSA extends from Eldorado Springs Drive to Linden Avenue and includes all Open Space property west of Broadway – the Flatirons, Green Mountain, Bear Peak, Chautauqua, Mt. Sanitas, and the many spectacular landmarks of Boulder's mountain backdrop. That long process appears to be on a final approach for landing.

With two previous trail study areas, the OSMP staff with community input generated recommendations about trail use, modified them based on public meetings, and obtained approval from the Open Space Board of Trustees (OSBT). For the West TSA, the OSMP staff decided to try a different approach – one that most people admitted was a bit of an experiment. The idea was to select a group of volunteer citizens whose charge was to produce a set of recommendations on all matters related to trails in the West TSA; that group was called the Community Collaborative Group (CCG, last acronym!). Selected in a rambunctious meeting on September 15, 2009, the CCG members comprised four caucuses representing conservation (5 reps), recreation (5 reps), neighborhood (3 reps), and cultural interests (1 rep). The CCG also consisted of two OSMP representatives for background support plus a set of alternates.

And then the work began. For three months CCG members familiarized themselves with previous OSMP management plans, inventory reports, and relevant research. They went on field trips and learned about habitat suitability models. They studied existing conditions for recreation, natural, and cultural resources. They were taught about trail-building techniques and costs. For another two months, the CCG representatives pored over maps and walked the trails in order to formulate desired future conditions and identify key destinations. Throughout these five months, the CCG members fulfilled their roles as representatives by communicating with their constituent groups through public meetings, email lists, and web sites. And equally important, despite widely differing opinions and perspectives, the CCG members learned to communicate with each other and form functional relationships that would be essential in the next stage of the process.

In April 2010, the process entered a new phase as CCG members began formulating specific recommendations about building new trails; rerouting and maintaining existing trails; and closing or designating social trails and access trails into nearby neighborhoods. They proposed regulations for equestrians, dogs, and mountain bikes for each trail. They discussed trail signage, historical features, and trailhead improvements. Working through the summer on an increasingly demanding schedule, each caucus assembled a packet of recommendations. Needless to say, many of the recommendations in these packets were incompatible.

In October 2010, guided by the remarkable negotiating skills of CCG facilitator Heather Bergman, the representatives began the grueling process of giving and taking, horse-trading, and compromising. The goal was to reach complete (100%) consensus on as many recommendations as possible. In some cases, consensus could be reached only by combining seemingly unrelated issues into one super-package held together by multiple concessions. Issues on which unanimous agreement could not ultimately be reached (such as a mountain bike route from Chautauqua to the south Mesa Trail) were sent to the OSMP staff as non-consensus items.

A spectator of the final CCG negotiating sessions could not help but be moved by the high drama of these intense four-hour meetings. Much agonizing and teeth-gritting took place as representatives wrestled with their own personal convictions and the (often conflicting) desires of their constituents. More than a year of difficult work was finally converging on these final high-pressure decisions. Equally impressive was the admirable level of civility that was maintained throughout the negotiations. If they didn't know it already, the CCG members had mastered the art of agreeing to disagree.

It's too early to say much about the final outcome. The preliminary recommendations of the CCG will be presented to the public (at a December 6 open house) and the OSBT (in a study session on December 15). The CCG will meet in a final negotiating session on January 6 before presenting its final report to the OSBT on January 19. The final TSA report, which includes the CCG recommendations plus the OSMP staff recommendations on non-consensus items, will be presented to the OSBT on February 23. Regardless of the specific details of the final report, we know it will be the product of compromise. As a consequence, it's safe to say that no CCG member will get everything s/he desired, and it is certain that each member will have given up something that s/he truly hoped for. The hope is that averaged over the West TSA, and indeed over the entire Open Space system, all users can find gains and improvements. The greater hope is that moving forward, Open Space users can adopt the tolerance and respect for other users that CCG members cultivated among themselves.

Regardless of the feelings that people may have for the content of the final CCG report, it is important that we all stand back and acknowledge the prodigious effort that produced that report. We can all reach consensus on that point! It would be difficult to estimate the number of hours of strenuous work, late-night study, emotional overdrafts, lost sleep, and frustrating emails – in addition to full-time jobs and family lives – that went into this project on the part of both the OSMP staff and CCG members. The volunteer CCG members particularly deserve our gratitude and admiration for a truly extraordinary act of public service.

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