

BOULDER OPEN SPACE ADVISORY GROUP REFLECTS ON CHALLENGES

February 5, 2011

By LAURA SNIDER

What is the CCG and the West TSA?

The Community Collaborative Group was made up of 15 volunteers who represented a range of open space users, from conservationists to mountain bikers to dog owners. The group also included three neighborhood representatives and one open space staff member.

The group worked for more than a year to come up with recommendations for the West Trail Study Area, the land west of Broadway stretching from Linden Avenue south to Eldorado Springs Drive. The West TSA, as it's called, is the third trail study area to be worked on by the open space department under the direction of the department's Visitor Master Plan, which was passed by the Boulder City Council in 2005.

The CCG's recommendations include which social trails should be designated or closed, where dogs should be allowed and where equestrians can ride. Any issues that the CCG could not come to consensus on — including whether mountain bikes should be allowed, and if so, where — were left to open space staff to decide.

You can read both the CCG's recommendations and the staff's recommendations at westtsa.org. The City Council will have to ultimately approve both sets of recommendations before they are finalized.

In September 2009, the city of Boulder's Open Space and Mountain Parks Department decided to kick off its planning for the iconic land west of Boulder using an entirely new strategy.

The concept was to avoid, at least in part, the inevitable passionate public debate that follows any department proposal for making even the smallest changes to trails in the city's mountain backdrop — including Chautauqua, the Flatirons and Sanitas — by putting the public in charge of creating the proposals.

So nearly a year and a half ago, the Community Collaborative Group was born. The members, selected through a caucus process, encompassed the factions that are typically at odds when it comes to how open space should be managed: those that prize conserving natural resources above opening lands to more use, and those that support greater recreational opportunities.

In January, the recommendations of the 15-member volunteer group — all of which were made by consensus — were accepted by the Open Space Board of Trustees after, literally, hundreds of hours of work. Now, after a couple of negotiation-free weeks, members of the group — who agreed not to speak to the media during the process — finally have a moment to reflect on whether they think the process was worthwhile.

“It was totally worth it. Even though, almost every meeting was a pain, and at a lot of meetings, I felt like we weren’t going to get anything done — again,” said Johannes Rudolph, who represented hikers in the process. “In the end, the fact that we were able to forge these agreements across party lines ... was unbelievable.”

A huge commitment

When the members of the CCG agreed to represent their constituents in the process, most did not realize what kind of time commitment they had just made. Group members sat through exhaustive presentations by the department before they even began the process of presenting proposals and then negotiating final recommendations.

“I would say, probably no one who signed onto the CCG recognized how much time it was going to take,” said Peter Bakwin, who represented trail runners, equestrians and anglers. “My estimate was that every member of the CCG put in at least 300 hours and some much more than that.”

Bakwin said if the process was used again, he’d recommend spending less time up front listening to recommendations and more time diving into the negotiations over the most contentious issues.

Conservation vs. recreation

The CCG process has come under some criticism for giving both the conservation caucus and the recreation caucus five members. That’s because the conservationists tended to vote as a block, while the members representing recreation groups did not always have the same interests.

“The recreation groups have inherent conflicts between them,” Bakwin said. “There are obvious potential conflicts between horses and bikes, and dogs and bikes.”

But Karen Hollweg, who represented conservationists, said it’s a mistake to think of all conservationists as the same.

“We are not a monolithic group,” she said. “There are the nature photographers. There are the bird watchers. There are the people who want quiet space by themselves and there are people who enjoy outings with groups.”

Hollweg said she also thinks the process was valuable partly because the recreation and conservation interests were forced to work so closely together.

“We all grew to know and respect one another,” she said. “I don’t think you can be engaged that intensely that long without gaining respect for one another.”

Open space involvement

Another frustration from the start was the involvement of the open space department. On the one hand, the department, which had a representative in the group, has rich expertise in the issues being talked about by the CCG, and on the other hand, the whole idea behind creating the group was to let the public steer the process.

In particular, the fact that the department was responsible for making recommendations for issues where the CCG could not come to consensus created a tricky situation.

“We needed OSMP to be a part of it. We needed OSMP to present their proposals,” said Rudolph. “But it’s always a slippery slope. If someone knew what OSMP wanted, they could say ‘non-consensus’ and know what they were going to get. That was a delicate dance.”

Going forward

It may be too early to tell if the CCG process worked — at least from the perspective of whether the public at large will accept the final recommendations as a fair compromise between different user groups.

But Mike Patton, executive director of Open Space and Mountain Parks, said he believes the group did “an excellent job.”

“They came up with solutions to tough issues that were creative, insightful and good,” he said. “It was tough work. ... And it made you feel pretty good that people in the community were so invested that they were willing to work that hard on the process.”

Even so, department officials would likely tweak things if they decide to use another CCG process in the future.

“We would probably do things differently,” he said. “We’ve never done this before, but it was an idea worth trying and we learned a lot.”

<https://www.dailycamera.com/2011/02/05/boulder-open-space-advisory-group-reflects-on-challenges/>