

## **IT'S ABOUT MORE THAN BIKES (OPEN LETTER FROM BILL BRIGGS, OSBT CHAIR)**

February 27, 2011

On February 23, the Open Space Board of Trustees (OSBT) met to discuss and approve the West Trail Study Area (TSA) Plan. In relatively quick order, the Board approved 99% of the Plan, which is a testament to the thorough work of the Community Collaborative Group and the Open Space staff. Four hours into the meeting, it all came down to one final question: whether or not to approve a mountain bike trail on the southeast end of the West TSA, from Greenbriar to South Boulder Creek West Trailhead to South Mesa Trailhead. The trail was not approved by the Board and I cast one of two dissenting votes.

My purpose in writing is not to defend my vote, except to say that I believe this trail - a 2.7-mile connector trail (not a destination trail, but a trail that could be used by local people for safe off-road access to points south) on the east boundary of the 10,000-acre West TSA (to avoid environmental impacts and preserve the majesty of the tall grass prairie) that was separated from nearby hiking trails (to minimize user conflict and allow safe passage for all users) - I believe this trail is defensible and entirely within the bounds of the Open Space Charter and the Visitor Master Plan. But reasonable people disagreed on the proposal, and I certainly respect the judgment of my Board colleagues.

Rather, my purpose is to express a greater concern that slowly developed in the days leading up to the decisive Board meeting. During that time, I read several hundred email messages, listened to several hours of public objurgation, and attended many interest-group meetings. With all of this input as evidence, I saw clearly that the people supporting mountain bike use in the West TSA form a broad representative sample of Boulder itself: young professionals, family people, Chamber of Commerce members, bankers, teachers, doctors, nurses, attorneys, stewards of our Open Space, and business owners and employees generating sales tax revenue to fuel the Open Space program. Much like the renegade rock climbers of the 1960s and 1970s, who ultimately became business, political, and educational leaders, people who mountain bike today are already very much a part of Boulder and will be a vital part of its future.

Unfortunately, in those same email messages, public comments, and meetings, I heard mountain bike enthusiasts dismissed as a "narrow-minded band of selfish vigilantes" and as a "small inconsiderate bunch of arrogant kids" (among other epithets). To be sure, the majority of mountain bike opponents have been thoughtful and civil. But the amount of demonizing and stereotyping I heard was unsettling, as were the many arguments that ultimately reduced to, I oppose mountain bike(r)s, because I don't like (or understand) mountain bike(r)s. Once this tone and attitude gains hold and becomes acceptable, it only gets worse. And here is why we should be concerned.

The most recent OSBT meeting is not the end of the mountain bike discussion. City Council will take a stand on the West TSA Plan in a month. Then the OSMP will begin deliberation of the North TSA and East TSA, each of them at least two-year processes, and the issue of mountain

bike use will certainly arise again. If we don't collectively make our thoughts and words more inclusive and less divisive, we can anticipate years of social and cultural conflict that will damage Boulder in many ways. Ultimately, it's about more than mountain bikes. In Boulder of all places, surely we can summon an acceptance of people, groups, and lifestyles that may differ from our own, especially when they contribute to the community without violating its essential values. Such an affirming attitude is necessary if we are to move forward on the many challenges facing the City.

In closing, it might be worth answering a question that was asked repeatedly of OSBT members: Why did you not just accept the staff recommendation to ban mountain bikes from the east half of the TSA? My answer is that the OSBT has another level of responsibility beyond approving every recommendation its staff makes. That responsibility is to assimilate the superb research and reports that the staff provides; be sure that all proposals are within the boundaries of the Open Space Charter and other relevant guidelines; and then (the difficult part) make decisions that are as representative as possible in order to foster a spirit of tolerance and community for all to see.