

GUEST OPINION: MOUNTAIN BIKERS ARE WELCOME IN BOULDER (DAILY CAMERA)

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By MICHAEL F. BROWNING

This is written in response to Jason Vogel's recent guest commentary (Camera, Nov. 10) regarding the City Council's decision not to open Anemone Hill to mountain bikes. The premise of the article is that the city has not been fair to mountain bikers and that they have been treated unjustly.

This premise is not supported by the facts. The city spent in excess of \$7 million acquiring and developing the new Valmont Mountain Bike Park that opened this summer, and that costs a \$150,000 a year to maintain. The vast majority of the new trails constructed in the city's open space in recent years have been opened to mountain bikes. The city is working on acquiring and constructing a connector trail for mountain bikes from Eldorado Springs to the extensive mountain bike trail system at Walker Ranch, and from Boulder Canyon up Chapman Drive to Flagstaff Mountain, at the costs of additional millions of dollars. The council also re-affirmed its commitment to engaging with county, state, and private landowners to find additional links from the city to surrounding mountain bike trail systems.

Nor do mountain bikers lack biking opportunities near Boulder. Marshall Mesa, Dowdy Draw, Walker Ranch, and Betasso Preserve, Springbrook, Heil Ranch and many other areas previously closed to mountain bikes have been opened to them — often driving out other users. Forty-nine miles of trails in the city's open space program are now open to bikes, and an additional 69 miles in Boulder County open space lands. There are an additional 313 miles of trails and unpaved roads on Forest Service lands in Boulder County. User conflicts are real, particularly in the urban interface. In recent surveys conducted by the open space staff, ninety percent of user conflict complaints related to mountain bikes and 43 percent of all trail users felt that mountain bikes made their experience less pleasant. Although mountain bikers profess a willingness to "share" the trails, they have the speed and weight advantage. Mountain bikers complain about sharing when the shoe is on the other foot and they are asked to "share" the roads with cars and motor bikes.

As for Anemone Hill, the area contains highly suitable habitat for black bears and Abert's squirrels. Contrary to Vogel's contention, trails for hikers were reduced not expanded. A new switchback trail to provide a hiking loop was rejected by the city — for good reason. Numerous social hiking trails are being closed — again, for good environmental reasons. The "narrow" open space "camp" derided by Vogel supported these closures, without whining, in recognition of the environmental values that were involved. In contrast, the BMA proposed a newly constructed mountain bike trail that would have required blasting and caused erosion in areas of Highly Suitable Habitat.

It should also be noted that the BMA, many of whose members do not live in Boulder, is heavily funded by the for-profit mountain bike industry. Allowing additional mountain bike use in the

West TSA, the crown jewel of the city's open space unit, would no doubt be good for business, but bad for the environment. This small area already receives two million user visits a year. Introducing an entirely new user group would be disastrous, exacerbate existing parking and user conflict issues, and overload an already threatened ecosystem. It would also attract bikers from across the Front Range who would drive to the trailheads, thereby increasing traffic, trail congestion, and carbon emissions.

The recent elections re-affirmed Boulder's commitment to preservation. Three strong conservationists were elected to the council and received by far the highest number of votes. The open space charter emphasizes preservation not recreation. Conservationists maintain that open space should be managed to protect its natural values and be left intact for future generations. Mountain bikers seem to believe that they are the future and that the future is now. That is a recreational perspective, not the conservation perspective of Aldo Leopold or John Muir.

Mountain bikers are an important user group, but they are only one of many. They are to be commended for volunteering to help construct and maintain mountain bike trails, but they are dwarfed by the number of Boulder citizens that volunteer without regard to special interests and without expectation of personal reward. We all must work to preserve and protect our open space land, for the good of the land, not just ourselves.

Lastly, let's not forget that mountain bikers are welcome throughout the West TSA, including Anemone Hill. They simply need to leave their bikes at home occasionally and enjoy a quiet walk through nature, in one of the few serene areas that still exists. Doesn't that seem reasonable?

Michael F. Browning is a member of Save Open Space Boulder.