

Revised Draft

4/1/14

Seattle Urban Forestry Commission Concerns about Cheasty Greenspace Mountain Bike Trail Pilot Project and Protection of Natural Areas in City Parks.

The Seattle Parks Board has made a decision to incorporate a mountain bike trail pilot project in the Cheasty Greenspace which is on the east slope of Beacon Hill in South Seattle. The Seattle Urban Forestry Commission has received a number of letters of concern and public comment from neighbors and others. Mark Mead of the Parks Department gave a presentation and answered questions before the Seattle Urban Forestry Commission on Feb 5, 2014.

There are two issues here.

1. The specific mountain bike pilot project at Cheasty Greenspace.
2. Public policy regarding utilization and acceptable activities in greenspaces.

**Issue 1: Regarding the specific mountain bike trail pilot proposal at Cheasty Greenspace we believe that:**

1. Any mountain bike trail should be on the perimeter of the greenspace
2. The interior habitat area of the greenspace should be kept intact with no bike cross trails or meeting places in the interior
3. A fence be considered on the interior side of the bike trail to stop bikes entering the interior of the greenspace while allowing wildlife to pass through
4. The four season data collection of impacts and changes be extended to at least 5 years, consistent with what other projects elsewhere have entailed
5. A seasonal baseline for wildlife and plants be completed before trail use begins
6. Any volunteer mountain bike trail work be done in conjunction with comparable restoration work being completed on habitat restoration of the forest
7. That a long term memorandum of understanding be reached with bike trail proponents regarding construction costs, volunteer work, habitat restoration efforts and trail maintenance
8. A competitive obstacle course not be added as it would not be compatible with the site
9. Potential neighborhood parking problems be addressed
10. Overall there is no net loss of habitat

We raise these concerns in regards to the mountain bike pilot project because of the need to minimize any impact on the habitat and wildlife value of the Cheasty Greenspace. The Cheasty Greenspace Vegetation Management Plan done in July 2003 notes that:

*“Cheasty Greenspace has notable wildlife value. Although it has a relatively large amount of edge habitat due to the geometry of the greenspace, much of the wildlife habitat value of Cheasty Greenspace lies in the preservation of some forested interior habitat – a rarity in an urban landscape. Another important function provided by the greenspace is its potential to connect habitat fragments that might otherwise be isolated – possibly preserving persistence and increasing population sizes for some wildlife species.”*

Cheasty Vegetation Management Plan -

<http://www.seattle.gov/parks/horticulture/vmp/Cheasty/VMP.pdf><http://www.seattle.gov/parks/horticulture/vmp/Cheasty/VMP.pdf>

**Issue 2: Based on the discussion of this issue with Mark Mead, members of the public and related documents like the Seattle Parks Classification System and the Best Management Practices for Natural Areas, the Urban Forestry Commission offers the following additional observations and concerns about this project and future changes in habitat and wildlife protections in our urban forest areas in our Parks.**

At the Cheasty Mountain Bike Pilot Project Public Meeting on March 26, 2014, Mark Mead when questioned acknowledged that the approval of this pilot project was outside the Parks Department normal procedure of being reviewed at three public meetings due to a “loophole” in Parks policy that allowed the Parks Superintendent to bypass this process in certain cases. Changing the use and designation of a natural area to include a mountain bike trail has the potential to significantly alter what previously stated Park Department policy is on natural areas and raises significant concerns about possible conversion of other classified natural areas in our parks to more intensive use.

Cheasty Greenspace is part of the approximately 14% of park land that falls under the Seattle Parks Classification in April 2009 as a “Natural Area/Greenbelt”. That classification notes that *“Natural areas are park sites established for the protection and stewardship of habitat and other natural systems support functions. Some natural areas are accessible for low impact use. Minimal infrastructure may include access and signage, where it will not adversely impact habitat or natural systems functions ...”*  
[http://www.seattle.gov/parks/parkboard/briefings/park\\_classifications\\_attachment.pdf](http://www.seattle.gov/parks/parkboard/briefings/park_classifications_attachment.pdf)

The 2005 Best Management Practice Chapter on Natural Areas notes that *“Natural areas are characterized as being largely undeveloped landscapes, thickly vegetated with native plant communities, and used primarily for passive recreation. Natural areas are considered to have limited or minimal human disturbance and provide habitat for plants, mammals, reptiles, birds, insects, amphibians and sometimes fish in an urban setting. In contrast, developed parks have formal landscapes and include active recreation for sports.”*  
<http://www.seattle.gov/parks/projects/BMP/chapter5.pdf>

We are very concerned about any conversion of natural areas and greenspaces in our urban forest our parks to more active uses which can impact the habitat and wildlife protection in these areas. These areas are unique and very limited in urban areas. We are concerned about what this changed usage means to the sustainability of the habitat and wildlife inherent in these few natural areas in Seattle’s urban forest and how these might be diminished in the future by changing the use of these areas from passive to more active uses like mountain biking.

The Cheasty Greenspace mountain bike pilot program must not be a backdoor approach to change long standing park designations and the public process that established these natural areas and greenspaces in the city. Legal issues are potentially involved in how many of these lands were purchased through public votes and the ability to change their designated uses after purchase to other uses. We strongly support the Parks Department efforts to restore our Seattle Parks and their natural areas and commend you on your progress to date. We ask that you involve us and the public in any future decisions that affect the nature of Seattle’s urban forest in our Parks via changed uses from current definitions of what is a natural area or greenspace and what activity is permitted in these areas because of our concern for protecting Natural areas and wildlife in Seattle’s urban forest..