

Seattle Urban Forestry Position Paper on Cheasty Greenspace Mountain Bike Trail Pilot Project
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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. The first is response to the specific proposal at Cheasty Greenspace and the second is regarding public policy regarding utilization and activities in greenspaces.

Regarding the specific mountain bike trail pilot proposal we believe that:

1. Any mountain bike trail should be on the perimeter of the greenspace
2. The interior habitat area of the greenspace be kept intact with no bike cross trails or meeting places in the interior.
3. That a fence be considered on the interior side of the bike trail to stop bikes entering the interior of the greenspace.
4. That the seasonal data collection of impacts and changes be extended to at least 5 years, consistent with what other projects elsewhere have entailed.
5. That a seasonal baseline for wildlife and plants be completed before trail use begins.
6. That 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. That a competitive obstacle course is not compatible with the site.
9. That potential neighborhood parking problems be addressed
10. That overall there is no net loss of habitat

Based on the discussion of this issue with Mark Mead, members of the public and related documents like the Cheasty Greenspace Vegetation Management Plan, the Urban Forestry Commission offers the following additional observations and concerns about this project.

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>

Cheasty Greenspace 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. Larger areas may have small sections developed to serve a community park function”

We question whether mountain biking is considered a low impact activity. The park also is long and very narrow so that a trail around the perimeter basically would impact the entire greenspace habitat by its activity.

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>

Converting the Cheasty Greenbelt to a Mountain Bike Park as proponents propose also raises questions as to the original intent when these lands were purchased. An audit dated Feb 25, 1997 by the City of Seattle of the Open Space Program partially funded by a 1989 King County Open Space Bond measure showed some 10.3 acres of land purchased as a natural area and an additional 7.1 acre as a greenbelt. Converting the north section of the Cheasty Greenspace to active use as a mountain bike park raises a legal issue as to what voters approved when they passed the King County Bond issue.

We are concerned about the conversion of natural areas and greenspaces to more active uses which can impact the habitat and wildlife in these areas. We are concerned about what this changed usage means to the city in terms sustainability of the values and resources inherent in the urban forest and how these might be diminished in the future by altering the current designations of park uses to active uses not currently designated in natural areas.

The Cheasty Greenspace mountain bike pilot program must not be a backdoor approach to change long standing park designations and public process that established natural areas and greenspace and greenbelts in the city. We strongly support the Parks Department efforts to restore Seattle Parks and their natural areas and commend them 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 via changed uses from current definitions of what is a natural area or greenspace.