

# Seattle Urban Forestry Commission

Peg Staeheli, Chair • Tom Early, Vice-Chair  
Gordon Bradley • Leif Fixen • Jeff Reibman • Erik Rundell • Steve Zemke

April 2, 2014.

Mayor Ed Murray and Councilmember Jean Godden  
Seattle City Hall  
600 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
Seattle, WA 98124

RE: Cheasty Greenspace Mountain Bike Trail Pilot Project

Dear Mayor Murray and Councilmember Godden,

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 Urban Forestry Commission has received a number of letters of concern and public comment from neighbors and other stakeholders. Mark Mead of the Parks Department gave a presentation and answered questions before the Commission on February 5, 2014.

We heard concerns about two main issues:

**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 or pedestrian cross trails or meeting places.
3. A wildlife permeable fence should be placed on the interior side of the bike trail to stop bikes entering the interior of the greenspace while allowing wildlife to pass through.
4. A baseline for wildlife and plants should be completed before trail use begins.
5. The four season data collection of impacts and changes should be extended to at least five years, consistent with similar regulatory protocols.
6. Any volunteer mountain bike trail work shall be done in conjunction with comparable restoration work being completed on habitat restoration of the forest.
7. A long term memorandum of understanding (MOU) shall be reached with bike trail proponents regarding construction costs, volunteer work, habitat restoration efforts, and trail maintenance.
8. A goal of no net loss of habitat should be stated as part of the MOU.
9. A competitive obstacle course should not be added.

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 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 25, 2014 , Mark Mead acknowledged that the approval of this pilot project was outside the Parks Department normal procedure of being reviewed at three public meetings due to flexibility 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 Parks 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 percent of park land that falls under the April 2009 Seattle Parks Classification 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>

The Commission is very concerned about any conversion of natural areas and greenspaces in our urban forest to more active uses which can impact the habitat and wildlife protection in these areas. These areas are unique and very limited in urban environments. The Commission is 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.

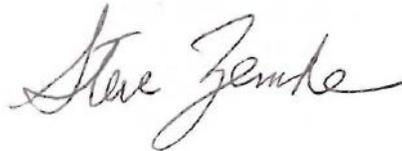
The Cheasty Greenspace mountain bike pilot program must not be a backdoor approach to change long standing park designations and the public process that established these natural areas and greenspaces in the city. Legal issues are potentially involved in how many of these lands were purchased through public votes and the ability to change their designated uses after purchase to other uses. The Commission strongly supports the Parks Department efforts to restore our Seattle parks and their natural areas and commend you on your progress to date. The Commission asks 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.

Some of our requests, such as the five year monitoring effort, will require additional dedicated funding for the Parks Department. We believe funding such efforts will be important to take advantage of what can be learned from this pilot program.

Sincerely,



Peg Staeheli, Chair  
Urban Forestry Commission



Steve Zemke  
Urban forestry Commissioner

cc: Council President Burgess, Councilmember Bagshaw, Councilmember Clark, Councilmember Harrell, Councilmember Licata, Councilmember Rasmussen, Councilmember O'Brien, Councilmember Sawant, Jill Simmons, Christopher Williams, Nancy Ahern, Miles Mayhew, Mark Mead, Joanna Nelson de Flores, Eric McConaghy

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