

Guest column: Our shared trails, ripe for user conflict

By Sarah Heilbronner

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In connection with its re-assessment of land use in the West Trail Study Area, the Board of Trustees of Open Space and Mountain Parks has charged a group of volunteers known as the Community Collaborative Group (CCG) with looking into new mountain biking routes in south Boulder, among other issues. The CCG, which consists of representatives of recreation groups, neighborhoods, cultural groups, and conservationists, has been discussing various ideas for months. In mid-May the neighborhood representatives of the CCG met with residents of south Boulder neighborhoods. Not previously aware that these proposals were on the table, I was shocked to hear that the CCG was considering opening trails adjacent to my neighborhood to mountain biking and installing new parking lots at quiet trailheads.

As a mountain biker I applaud the CCG's attempts to identify a trail for bikes linking Chautauqua with Marshall Mesa. But as a runner, a hiker and a conservationist I am concerned that finding an appropriate route which would not exacerbate erosion, congestion and user conflict will prove challenging.

These proposals take us back to the future. Mountain biking was once permitted along the Mesa trail but was banned in the late 1980s because of trail erosion, congestion, and user conflict. Mountain bikers lobbying for renewed access have carefully avoided suggesting re-opening the Mesa trail.

But what is left? There is little room for new trails between the Mesa trail and south Boulder neighborhoods, and new trails would only exacerbate erosion and interfere with habitats. The route being proposed by members of the CCG is a logical alternative: a mixed-use path which would run east of NCAR on the Bear Canyon trail, cut up Fern Meadow (locally known as the "Sound of Music Hill") via a new trail, and continue on part of the North and South Shanahan loop.

Putting mountain bikes on existing wide fire roads like the Bear Canyon trail and sections of the Shanahan loop makes sense from the point of view of congestion and erosion control. However, the vast majority of these trails would amount to nothing more than unpaved roads: totally boring for most bikers.

Laying a new trail cutting across the Sound of Music Hill, a scenic vista and a fragile ecosystem which suffers from three months' flooding during the annual snowmelt, would only exacerbate erosion. It would also be an eyesore to residents on Stony Hill Road. Yet this section of the proposed biking route would be one of only two interesting bits for bikers. The other would be the narrow, winding, hilly section of the South Shanahan between the water tank and the weather vane, where hikers would have no

choice but to move off the trail (if they had time to do so) to avoid collision.

The North and South Shanahan trail loop is heavily used by runners and hikers. On a sunny Tuesday in May between 10 and 11 a.m. -- hardly rush hour on the trails -- I ran into 35 of my closest friends. During the summer when mountain bikers would be most interested in the trails, many of us bring our children for hikes. Residents bring dogs in all seasons. Congestion could become an issue if bikes were introduced. Where there is congestion there will inevitably be user conflict.

My neighborhood is a quiet one, populated with hikers, runners, and mountain bikers. We are averse to conflict and slow to mobilize. But on this issue we are united: while finding existing trails for mountain bikers to enjoy the beauty and diversity of south Boulder is an admirable goal, the North and South Shanahan loop and the Bear Canyon trail are totally inappropriate as multi-use trails. Permitting biking there would forever change our daily enjoyment of these trails on foot.

We are also concerned that some CCG members want to install new parking lots in south Boulder to serve trailheads. One has already been taken off the table, thankfully. The other proposed lot on Greenbriar Boulevard would surely blot a pristine meadow. Aside from the aesthetic drawbacks, experience at other south Boulder trailheads suggests that a new lot will be full to capacity and overflowing as soon as it's constructed. Development of a parking lot on Greenbriar, right across the street from a Skip bus stop, flies in the face of Boulder's attempts to encourage the use of alternate forms of transportation. Bike racks, by all means, but no parking lots, please.

Our thanks go out to the CCG volunteers who have worked tirelessly to find appropriate compromises between hikers, mountain bikers, and conservationists. The CCG has its work cut out for it, no doubt: the task of finding a place to put mountain bikes in south Boulder is a challenging one. The North and South Shanahan trails and the Bear Canyon trail need to be taken off the agenda, however, just as the Mesa trail has been. Our representatives need to return to the drawing board to seek another route that would not lead to erosion, congestion, and user conflict on enjoyable south Boulder trails. Perhaps it is simply not possible to squeeze such a route into this narrow and valued corridor.

Sarah Heilbronner lives in Boulder.