



**SEATTLE PARKS
AND RECREATION**

**100 Dexter Avenue North
Seattle, Washington 98109**

Board of Park Commissioners

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Diana Kincaid	Yazmin Mehdi, Vice Chair
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January 26, 2015

Dear Mayor Murray and City Councilmembers:

Thank you again for your leadership in working to secure a stable funding source through the Seattle Parks District. Your visionary leadership is inspiring not just to our work, but to parks leaders nationally, and Seattle residents and visitors owe you a debt for decades to come. We are excited to work with you over the coming years to steward the public's trust and high expectations for our beloved Seattle parks.

Your leadership and involvement with many other park policies is also appreciated and respected. Today we are writing with an idea for your consideration about the Beacon Bike Park pilot project, now called the Cheasty Trails and Bike Park (CTBP).

Given how contentious the CTBP process has been, we hesitated sending this letter, preferring to allow the PAT to complete their deliberations. However, we uniformly felt like the framing of the PAT discussions strayed away from the values that guide us as a citizen's commission and that led us to approve the pilot project. Therefore we felt compelled to raise these concerns to your attention. The process contemplates our reviewing the PAT recommendations as they come to Council, but out of respect to you and the members of the PAT, we feel obliged to relay our thoughts earlier, to avoid unnecessary surprises. We do this as your appointed stewards of the Parks Legacy Plan, who look holistically at the entire City's parks and open space assets, consider how best to use them and provide collaborative advisory guidance based on that thorough and studious engagement.

Our recommendations can be summarized as the following:

- develop a comprehensive trails plan for the CTBP to provide the best opportunity for public access and pilot-project learning, and
- place a city-wide moratorium on biking trails within green spaces and/or natural areas for the period of the pilot study.

Background

In January of 2014, the Board of Parks Commissioners (Park Board) unanimously advised moving forward with the CTBP a pilot-project that would install a comprehensive trails network in Cheasty's forested parkland that includes mountain biking facilities. We recognized that combining forest restoration with active recreation uses would raise concerns in our community, yet Cheasty presented an opportunity to advance the Parks Legacy Plan's guiding values of "access, opportunity and sustainability" while promoting the City-wide outcomes of "Healthy People, Healthy Environment, Financial Sustainability, and Strong Communities."

In a growing city as large and complex as Seattle, we are often searching for ways to advance many of these values and outcomes in tandem, creating urban parks that have a variety of appropriate uses and values that strengthen one another. As our City continues to grow and as different recreation needs emerge, we will continue to unearth conflicts as we seek to provide park opportunities for all ages and all people. We felt the proponents of the CTBP recognized this and offered a compelling case for why their project advanced several parks and open space system goals simultaneously:

1. **Providing Access.** For Southeast Seattle residents, access to green space and recreation opportunities is at a premium. This is a public health problem, and local epidemiological data demonstrate the resultant disparities: lower public health indicators in the areas surrounding Cheasty than in many other areas of the city. Currently, there is no public access provided to these forested parklands. We strongly believe that our open spaces should serve as many members of the public as possible, while also providing appropriate management of cultural and natural resources, and thus were immediately attracted to the idea of providing access for *both* pedestrians and cyclists to this public asset.

For the families that live in Rainier Vista, we saw the chance for the CTBP to become a powerful asset both as a place for recreation and as a pedestrian linkage to Beacon Hill. While many Rainier Vista families come from cultural traditions that have viewed forests with discomfort, a recent focus group held at the Boys and Girls Club revealed strong support for the bike park and a near-unanimous desire to have pedestrian connections through the space, particularly to connect to Kimball Elementary School.

2. **Promoting Sustainability.** The forested parklands along Cheasty Boulevard are dominated by a canopy of invasive plants that are a distant echo of our native coniferous forest. Fortunately the Green Seattle Partnership (GSP) volunteers, like the CTBP proponents, have been working to clean up and restore this forest. By coupling the CTBP trail build-out with forest restoration, the proponents chose to leverage one user group to advance the city-wide goals of the Green Seattle Partnership, creating a healthy urban forest. In fact, over the past year, the CTBP proponents have already begun to restore the forest. From the perspective of urban forest health, this strategy will provide greater coniferous forest canopy without losing the existing deciduous canopy, and will provide for a more ecologically-diverse forest floor, cleared of invasives.

The potential to simultaneously strengthen an under-performing forest, invest in stewardship and transform a "scary" forest into a safe, welcoming, place for families to play and learn seemed like an opportunity that the Park Board needed to explore as a pilot since it so elegantly leveraged creative community partnerships to achieve many of the aspirations voiced in the Parks Legacy Plan.

3. **Creating Opportunity.** By introducing a new way to access these forested parklands, the CTBP could create new ways for Seattle's residents to experience the magic of nearby nature. And with the forest restoration work, that nearby nature could be more ecologically diverse than what is there now. For pedestrians looking to traverse the hillside, kids who just received their first bike from BikeWorks, teens looking for a healthy way to recreate and adults looking to practice mountain biking skills, the space offers a profound opportunity to create a high-value, high-performance resilient urban forest.

As the Park Board weighed the pros and cons of whether to allow the CTBP as a pilot, we saw areas of the conceptual plan that needed refinement. We were assured by Parks staff that they would work with the community to revise the conceptual trail map using professional design guidance, best management practices and current science to arrive at a comprehensive trail master plan. With that assurance, we recommended that the CTBP be tested as a pilot project to provide access to these public lands via bicycle and pedestrian paths and to understand whether this new use helped or hurt overall forest and ecological health. We requested a three-year pilot from the first new trails being built to allow the plantings to establish. Whatever the results of the pilot project at Cheasty, we also recognized the critical importance of providing quiet, forested places within the Seattle parks and open space system where users can experience our natural areas without active recreation interruption.

After we advised approval of the entire conceptual plan, the project proponents secured a Department of Neighborhoods (DoN) grant to build a perimeter trail, in essence securing funds to build phase one of the project. As part of the conditions of disbursing those funds, a Project Advisory Team (PAT) was created, a public facilitator was hired and a licensed landscape architect was retained to assist with the perimeter trail's design. The PAT was instructed to only consider the perimeter trail that the DoN grant funded.

Unintended Consequences

As the PAT process has unfolded, we have heard concerns from several quarters regarding the PAT's constraint of only considering and vetting the perimeter trail. These concerns include:

- **Constrained Access.** By only building the perimeter trail, significant user groups are effectively denied the opportunity to use the space, notably the students and parents living in Rainier Vista and served by Kimball Elementary. From both a Race and Social Justice and Safe Routes to School perspective, we have concerns about this lack of access. Additionally, parents with young kids or several kids may find a long perimeter trail unmanageable as they try to provide effective supervision.
- **Endangered Sustainable Stewardship.** The one aspect of the plan that everyone agrees on is the importance of forest restoration. Our hope was that by having the bike park partners be the

implementers and stewards of the forest, the plants would thrive at the same time that the bike park took root. In fact, the volunteers in Cheasty recorded the second most GSP volunteer hours of any restoration area last year. By only developing the perimeter trail, current plans may hinder this goal. Best practices for mountain bike trail-building—tested and developed over several decades in forests around the world—recommend using fall line loops to provide riders of various skills with appropriate challenges so that they do not build their own trails. Without planning for and accommodating these users, we fear that desire lines will be created through the forest, potentially damaging newly planted natives.

- **Safety.** Safety becomes an issue on two fronts when the conversation is limited to the perimeter trail. First, the long distance and relative isolation of segments of the perimeter trail may present some challenges from a crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) perspective. Second, without thoughtful professional planning for fall line trails, *ad hoc* trails may create unsafe junctions with the perimeter trail.

Proposed Path Forward

For the reasons outlined above, we recommend a comprehensive trails plan for the CTBP that effectively and appropriately balances two goals: creating and stewarding a healthy, sustainable, ecologically-diverse, wildlife-friendly urban forest and providing new opportunities to access the urban forest with a safe, ecologically-sensitive, inclusive and maintainable physical trails plan for the forest. The Park Board fully anticipates that the interior bicycle and pedestrian trails, described in the original conceptual plan, will be constructed as part of the pilot project leveraging the partnerships developed by CTBP proponents to implement the larger trails plan.

Since this is a pilot, we want to rearticulate our recommendation to place a city-wide moratorium on any other expansion of biking trails within green spaces or natural areas for the period of the pilot study. This will allow the Mayor, Council, Park Board, members of the PAT and other interested observers to fully evaluate the pros and cons of this approach to providing access to our City's forested park lands.

Thank you for your kind attention to this matter.

Sincerely,


Tom Tierney, Chair
Board of Park Commissioners

cc: Christopher Williams
Paula Hoff
Doug Critchfield
Jon Jainga