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Keeping Eugene Green

A DIVISION OF PUBLIC WORKS

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April 6, 2010

To: Ridgeline Trail Stakeholders and Interested Parties

Re: Use Decision on the Ribbon Trail

As you probably know, the Eugene Parks and Open Space Division (POS) has been reviewing the Ribbon Trail and engaging with trail users and interest groups over the past several months in order to make a decision about whether to allow bicycles on the Ribbon Trail. This letter summarizes that process and the considerations that led to a decision to limit use on this trail to hikers only. For some of you, this decision will be the outcome you hoped for, and for some it will not. My hope is that, either way, this letter will help you understand how and why we came to this decision.

Policy Review

We reviewed the policy framework for trail usage and associated planning documents, including the Hendricks Park Forest Management Plan, the PROS Project and Priority Plan, and past policy decisions related to bicycling on trails in the Ridgeline Park system.

In the early 1990's the City made a decision to limit bicycle access in the Ridgeline Park system to a couple of trails east of Fox Hollow Road. This decision was driven by complaints from hikers about safety issues, loss of tranquility, and damage to the trails from bicycle use, primarily during the wet season.

The Parks Recreation and Open Space (PROS) Comprehensive Plan was drafted in 2005, but was legally challenged soon after. As a result, the PROS Comprehensive Plan is not in effect, and has no official bearing on future park development. An associated document, the PROS Project and Priority Plan was adopted in 2006, and survived the legal challenge. Therefore, it stands as the only adopted policy document guiding future park development. The PROS Project and Priority Plan does not address the Ribbon Trail explicitly. It does list the following as a Priority 5 (lowest priority) project in the South Eugene planning sub-area: "Develop mountain biking trails and free-riding designated areas."

The Hendricks Park Forest Management Plan is the only park master plan that was adopted by the City Council. Therefore, any changes to the plan must be approved by the City Council. The Hendricks Park Forest Management Plan explicitly prohibits bicycling on unpaved trails within the park. The north end of the Ribbon Trail enters Hendricks Park about 600 feet from the nearest paved trail inside the park, and there is no other outlet at the north end of the Ribbon Trail.

We also reviewed the Ridgeline Area Open Space Vision and Action Plan. This document was endorsed by the Eugene City Council and other groups as a vision document. It contains no policy. Rather, this document is intended to provide a framework for coordinating efforts among several local agencies and groups to obtain funding for park and open space development. The concept map in this document shows the Ribbon Trail as a "shared use"

trail. The text of this document says that trails shown as shared use trails “will be built to a standard that would also accommodate mountain bikes where feasible.” The document does not identify those “shared use” trails on which mountain bike use is feasible.

POS staff also reviewed planned transportation connections in the vicinity of the Ribbon Trail. POS was told that EWEB planned to construct a new water line from the north end of Spring Blvd at 30th Avenue to 29th and Central Blvd in the summer of 2010. This water line would pass through a public-owned parcel and the route would be graded and surfaced with gravel to accommodate bicycle use.

Trail Review

Several POS staff walked the trail to review the layout, slope, construction, sight lines, intersections, and character of the trail shoulders. Staff then met to discuss the trail condition and its suitability to accommodate both hikers and bikers. Staff concerns included tight corners and steep slopes at the south end, side slopes within the trail bed that might lead to trail degradation in wet conditions, and limited space for hikers or bikers to move aside to allow safe passage. Staff also noted the relatively short length of the trail (~3,000 feet), and its relative isolation from other bike-accessible forest trails.

Stakeholder Discussions

In early October 2009, we met with representatives of five cycling advocacy groups: Greater Eugene Area Riders (GEARS), Lane County Mountain Bike Association (LCMBA), Disciples of Dirt, Safe Routes to School, and the Lollipops women’s cycling group. This group supported allowing bicycles on the Ribbon Trail. Key interests of this group included a commuter route to LCC that avoided the long hill on 30th Avenue, providing longer runs for mountain bikers, and expanding the trail system where mountain bikes are allowed. Regarding the Ribbon Trail, the group expressed two main objectives: providing a safer and easier commuter route to the top of the 30th Avenue hill, and providing an additional trail-riding recreational experience for mountain bikers.

In early October and mid-November 2009 we met with the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee (BPAC). This group had mixed opinions about allowing bicycles on the Ribbon Trail. Some members argued for more trails for bicycles including the Ribbon Trail, while others felt that the trail would not be safe for both hikers and bikers. A motion to support allowing bicycles on the Ribbon Trail did not garner support, and it was followed by a motion to make no recommendation, given the wide range of opinions in the group. The group did express a desire to see POS work toward a larger network of bicycle accessible trails, not necessarily including the Ribbon Trail.

In mid-November 2009 we met with the Friends of Hendricks Park Board. The Board Members did not support allowing bicycles on the Ribbon Trail. They expressed concerns about managing bicycle use in the park at the northern terminus of the trail in the park. The group also did not support paving additional trails in the park to accommodate bicycle use, citing environmental and habitat impacts as a key concern.

In late March 2010, we met with representatives of the Obsidians. The Obsidians own property next to the Ribbon Trail, they are key users of the Ridgeline trail system and they are regular volunteers in Ridgeline trail maintenance projects. This group did not support allowing bicycles on the Ribbon Trail, citing concerns about safety and visibility, especially at the south end of the trail. On April 7, 2010, the Obsidians Board passed a resolution in opposition to allowing bikes on the Ribbon Trail.

Options considered

In the various internal discussions and stakeholder discussions, various options were suggested and discussed, including:

- Pave the portion of the trail within Hendricks Park, and open the Ribbon Trail to bikes
- Amend the Hendricks Park Forest Management Plan to allow bikes on unpaved trails, and open the Ribbon Trail to bikes
- Open the Ribbon Trail to bikes, but allow only walking in the Hendricks Park portion
 - Construct a turnstile to force riders to dismount and walk in the Hendricks Park portion
 - Put prominent signage stating that riders must dismount
 - Construct a gate of some kind to force riders to dismount
- Close the Ribbon Trail to all use until a system wide study of trail access can be completed
- Allow bikes on the Ribbon Trail only on certain days
- Allow only hikers on the Ribbon Trail, and review this status as part of a system wide review of trail use and access in the Ridgeline system

Decision Factors and Conclusions

1. *Policy framework*; our decision needs to be consistent with adopted policy direction.

We concluded that our decision needs to conform to existing policy, rather than rewrite policy to accommodate the decision. Therefore we have ruled out the option of amending the Hendricks Park Forest Management Plan.

2. *Safety for all trail users*: our decision should maximize safety for all trail users.

Based on our conversations with a variety of stakeholder groups, there are enough concerns about safety of allowing both hikers and bicycles on this trail that we cannot with confidence recommend both uses on this trail.

3. *Site suitability*: our decision should be based in part on whether the Ribbon Trail is physically suitable for use by both bicycles and hikers.

Both POS staff and a range of interest groups identified the same characteristics of the Ribbon Trail as making its suitability for both hikers and bicycles questionable.

4. *Maintenance Considerations*: our decision should minimize on-going costs for maintenance of the Ribbon Trail.

Many of the options considered had increased maintenance requirements for gates, turnstiles, signage, and wear and tear on trails. With our operating funding for maintenance shrinking, we concluded that we cannot take on additional maintenance requirements.

5. *Community needs*: our decision should be based on a broad consideration of community needs related to trails, and how those needs can be best met.

From the bicycling community we heard two primary desires: (1) a commuter route to the top of the 30th Avenue hill for bicyclists en route to LCC, and (2) general expansion of opportunities for mountain bikers to ride trails in an attractive natural setting within or close to the urban area, to avoid the need to drive somewhere outside the city for this recreational experience.

Regarding the commuter route, we concluded that the imminent construction of a new connection from 30th Avenue at Spring Boulevard to 29th and Central will significantly improve bicycle access to the top of the 30th Avenue hill, and provide a viable bicycle commuter route.

Regarding the need for general expansion of mountain biking opportunities in the urban area, we concluded that making a decision on this site alone, outside the context of a larger consideration of trail access needs and issues is not the most effective manner to identify the most suitable trails. Sites or trails other than the Ribbon Trail may better accommodate the larger needs related to bicycle access in the Ridgeline trail system.

While we cannot commit to a time line for conducting a system-wide trail access study, given the current budget picture and other priorities already identified in the PROS Project and Priority Plan, it is our intent to conduct such a study when it is feasible.

Thank you for taking the time to read through this letter. If you have questions or comments, please feel free to contact me at neil.h.bjorklund@ci.eugene.or.us

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Neil Björklund". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Neil Björklund,
Eugene Parks and Open Space Planning Manager