

REFUTATION OF ARGUMENTS AGAINST BICYCLING IN WEST TSA

This document expresses and addresses most of the arguments used by opponents of bicycling in the West Trail Study Area (TSA) of the Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP). We organize the arguments into four main categories: User conflict, impacts to nature, philosophy, and management.

ARGUMENTS ABOUT USER CONFLICT

Argument: Hiking and biking incompatible.

Allegations:

Hiking and bicycling are fundamentally incompatible because of different speeds, narrow trails. Trails with dogs, small children, the elderly, and people with disabilities are not places for bikes.

Refutation:

The argument is stated as an absolute, which makes it wrong. It is true that trail-sharing can be more challenging in more crowded places. In un-crowded places user conflict is rarely an issue.

Statistics don't support existence of large amounts of conflict in Boulder. The North Foothills Trail has high levels of shared use and there are not large volumes of complaints.

On properly designed trails, the speed differential is not very great. Narrow, rough trails promote slower speeds. User conflict is more likely on trails that are wide, open and smooth. For example, Boulder Creek Trail is perhaps the most problematic trail in Boulder County. Safety is sometimes a real problem on paved paths. This is much less true on the slower speeds of dirt paths.

Common courtesy usually prevails. Most bicyclists are courteous. There will always be some rude people, but through education and enforcement Boulder can create a peaceful, co-existing community of muscle-powered trail users.

Where there is a will to share, there is a way.

Argument: Safety

Allegations

Bicyclists will collide with or "run over" hikers. Bikes are especially dangerous to children and the elderly.

Refutation

There is little or no evidence of injuries caused by cyclists to hikers on Boulder's shared-use trails. Bicycles are not like motorized vehicles. They are not that fast, not that powerful, not that massive. Mountain bike brakes are capable of stopping a fast bike in a very short distance.

Safety issues exist with dogs and horses, perhaps more than with bikes because they are animals. Yet they are considered acceptable, not banned from open space.

Still, perception of safety is important. We don't want people's experiences to be burdened by worries that they will get hit by a bike. So there should be ample hiking-only trails for those who are worried about safety.

Argument: Displacement

Allegation

Introducing bicyclists makes hiking trails less desirable to hikers, displacing them from the trails.

Refutation

As a description of a sociological phenomenon, this allegation is to some extent true. Some hikers who don't want to share will choose to not use shared-use trails. It is also false to some extent because many hikers don't mind sharing trails with cyclists.

Cyclists are currently 100% "displaced" from these trails. The displacement of some hikers should not mean all bicycling should be banned. Bicyclists pay taxes, appreciate nature, cause equal impact to nature, and share this community. Bicyclists should not be second-class citizens and hikers do not deserve 100% priority.

Argument: Bicyclists will drive cars and park in the neighborhoods

Allegations

If we allow bicycling, every bicyclist in Denver metro area will drive to Shanahan Ridge and park in the neighborhood. Any alleged reduction in driving is illusory. Boulder cyclists will still drive to the trailhead.

Refutation

Trails for bicycling in the West TSA will not be that attractive compared to more the exciting mountain bicycling in many other open space areas and the nearby national forest. Therefore it's likely the majority of users will be cyclists who live close to the area.

In contrast, The West TSA has fabulous hiking and this attracts many visitors from elsewhere. This hiking in open space is touted as one of Boulder's great assets, a reason to visit here and spend money. That tourism arrives by car and people on foot often park in the neighborhoods.

Generally, hikers *must* park closer to open space than bicyclists. Hikers are the ones most likely to cause neighborhood parking congestion. If we think it's okay for hikers to drive to the open space and park around and near it, why is it not okay for bicyclists to do this?

The current proposal would not allow bikes through access points from adjacent roads in Shanahan Ridge and most other adjacent neighborhoods. The limited access points would make people more likely to park vehicles in designated trailheads.

The city can easily implement permit parking restriction if parking becomes a significant issue.

If you live within a reasonable riding distance from the trailhead, riding pavement to the trailhead is easy and much less hassle than loading the bike into the car and finding a parking place.

Many mountain bikers strongly desire car-free experiences. They highly value a day not using the car at all.

ARGUMENTS ABOUT IMPACTS TO NATURE

Argument: Bikes Cause More Impact to Nature

Allegation

Bicycling is more harmful to natural ecosystems than hiking. Bicyclists travel farther in a day than hikers. Bicyclists surprise critters. Bicycling hurts plants when riders tread over them.

Refutation

All users affect flora and fauna.

Science increasingly shows the impacts to plants and animals of hiking are about the same as the impacts of bicycling.

Bicyclists go faster and further, but hikers spend more time in habitat and are much more likely to go off trail. Off-trail travel means it is hikers who are more likely to trample vegetation and disturb animals' hiding places. The unpredictability of off-trail travel can be a significant impact to wildlife. Bicyclists can startle wildlife with a quick, silent approach. Hikers are genetically known to some critters as "bi-pedal predators who eat us."

The differences in nature impacts among hikers, bicyclists, and equestrians are trivial compared to the real environmental problems facing Colorado, like urban sprawl, energy, water conflicts, weeds, and non-native, invasive organisms.

Argument: Increasing Recreation is Bad for Nature

Allegations

Trails fragment habitat. Outdoor recreation impacts flora and fauna. The West TSA is "a narrow ribbon of land." The West TSA is a refuge for wildlife. New trails will cause increased use and upset balance of humans-nature. "New users will ruin nature."

Refutation

The West TSA is indeed a refuge for wildlife compared to the city adjacent to it, and it has some unusual, critical ecosystems such as its southeastern area of nearly-pristine tallgrass prairie. It is also true that all forms of human outdoor recreation causes impacts to natural ecosystems.

Given that we all cause problems, what makes it okay for one group to cause those problems and another group, whose impact is about the same, to be disallowed? Why do people think we should allow hikers to fragment ecosystems but fragmentation means bikes should be banned? Perhaps the answer is an underlying assumption that bikes have greater impact. But science is proving that to be false.

Given the increasing science against the differential impact assumption, many bicycling opponents have abandoned that allegation. But they still feel that there is "so much impact already" that no additional use or users should be allowed. For them, the balance of values skews extremely toward nature. Some would just as soon prohibit all people from the West TSA.

One bike opponent speaking at a CCG meeting spoke honestly. To paraphrase him: "In a way it's unfair for all these problems of natural impact to come down on bicyclists. But that's what I think has to happen."

The problem with the "nature-first, trails are bad" approach is that habitat preservation needs allies in the human, political ecosystem and humans need to visit nature to become its advocate. Furthermore, humans need Nature.

Most environmentalists would state that a great ill in modern civilization is the way our paved, constructed environment alienates people from nature. Humans need natural experience because that's in our genes. Nature is our nature. The Sierra Club, Audubon Society, and OSMP have extensive outdoor recreation programs with the explicit aim of getting people into natural places so those people become nature's allies. Constituency is critical to preservation.

OSMP has already predicted that the number of visitors will increase as human population increases. It appears this will occur regardless of whether bikes are allowed in the West TSA. This will be a management challenge. Some sort of limits on the numbers of people at one time may eventually become necessary. But the problem of managing increasing numbers does not in itself justify discrimination between hikers and bicyclists.

While outdoor recreation causes natural impacts, on the other side of the ledger are these facts and ideas:

- Outdoor recreation combats obesity.
- Outdoor recreation is a foundation of our local economy, employing many people and attracting businesses.
- Outdoor recreation is the historical and contemporary foundation of the conservation movement.
- Humans need natural experience.

When it comes to questions about the balance between competing good values, democracies often use elections as a means for the public to make choices. Politicians with authority will ultimately make the choices. The wise choice here should favor a managed, limited opening of the West TSA to a constituency that loves nature and will act for its protection. The current bike ban and general negativity toward bicycling expressed by too many people in Boulder alienates a large, important constituency. Bicyclists can be a best friend of open space, but only if treated fairly.

Argument: Visual impact

Allegations

New trails will be additional scars on landscape. We would see lots of bicyclists.

Refutation

Trails are indeed an impact on natural beauty, but they create far less visual impact than the roads which already penetrate the West TSA. And, of course, turn 180-

degrees and you are looking at a city, with homes directly adjacent to this beautiful landscape.

Yes, we don't want too many trails, mainly for reasons of habitat protection. But when it comes to visual impact, you cannot see most of the trails unless you are on them. Vegetation obscures most singletracks.

As for "seeing bicyclists," beauty is in the eye of the beholder. You may find colorful clothing wonderful while I prefer the staid. This is not remote Wilderness. Visitors to the Boulder open space are going to see a lot of other people.

ARGUMENTS ABOUT PHILOSOPHY

Argument: Appropriate Versus Inappropriate Experiences

Allegations

Bicyclists want an "adrenaline-charged" experience while hikers want a quiet, serene experience.

Refutation

"Adrenaline" is a hormone released by alarm or fear which provokes in animals a fight-or-flight reaction. It is extended by bicycling opponents to mean that cyclists have inappropriate motivations or feelings while riding. We would simply retort that bicycling is exciting.

It's true that downhill bike racing is more about the riding than the scenery, but that applies to a tiny fraction of mountain biking journeys. Bicyclists and hikers seek very similar experiences: We both want peaceful, human-powered travel, exercise of our bodies, connection with nature, and enjoyment of beauty. If there is something inappropriate about the exercise part, then we should prohibit running in the open space. If there is something inappropriate about getting excited by silent, non-polluting, muscle-powered movement through natural places, then we should never let equestrians gallop.

Argument: Bicycles not appropriate in "The Gem".

Allegations

West TSA is "The Gem" of Boulder open space and therefore bikes do not belong. Bikers want gratification now. The West TSA is not a piece of dirt to be ridden through. There is a "right way" to enjoy and appreciate nature. Bicycling is mechanical.

Refutation

This is a philosophy or values argument. It offers no facts, just opinion. In that regard, it is not much different than opinions like, "Inter-racial marriage should be banned," or "Women should stay in the home," or "The rich should pay equal taxes as the poor." In these arguments, there is no *evidence* that one view is more valid than another. They are just different values. It's "My world versus your world."

In the West TSA case, to say that bikes don't belong just because it's "The Gem" is to say that bicyclists are second-class citizens on public lands.

This debate seems much like religious disagreements, like Protestants versus Catholics, or Shiites versus Sunnis. Some people seem to feel "Cyclists don't pray right."

Bicyclists and hikers are probably more like each other than any other groups. This may be a reason for the conflict, as we humans sometimes reserve our greatest enmity for the people who are much like ourselves, but just a little different.

The Open Space Charter considers bicycling a legitimate use. So a Boulder law, passed by direct election of its citizens, has already made an important value statement.

Regarding the idea that bikes are "mechanical", the word really means "motorized" in the context of public lands management. Consider the Code of Federal Regulations for National Forest Wilderness: They define "mechanized transport" as "propelled by a non-living power source." (36CFR Sec.293.6(a))

Argument: The West TSA belongs to future generations.

Allegations

It was purchased by citizens that believed in preservation and the long-term value of natural places. Because it is important to future generations, we should prohibit bicycling.

Refutation

Actually, it was purchased by people who pay sales tax in Boulder, including many non-residents who work here or visit. Still, we totally agree with the future generations argument, except that it points to a different conclusion.

Who are the future generations? It appears many of them will be riding bicycles. Mountain biking seems to attract young people more than hiking does. Bicycling leaders strongly support open space preservation and want more of it. To maintain and enlarge the constituency for land preservation, we need to be more inclusive, to not push away people who love nature and want to enjoy low-impact, nature-based recreation.

ARGUMENTS ABOUT MANAGEMENT

Argument: Unsustainable trails

Allegations:

Local trails were never built for high-impact activities like mountain biking. Bikes cause rapid erosion and ruin the experience for hikers.

Refutation:

Scientific research has shown that hiking causes about as much trail erosion as bicycling, and both cause less than horses. By far the biggest cause of trail erosion is trail designs that do not properly handle water or are too steep.

Modern trail design and construction techniques can greatly reduce erosion and the need for trail maintenance.

In Boulder, the bicycling community wants to only have access to well designed trails. There are many miles of poorly designed, hiking-only trails now suffering significant erosion and we do not want to be blamed for that.

Argument: Bikes banned in 1980s for good reason.

Allegations:

We tried mountain bikes in the 1980's. It didn't work then, it won't work now. All the reasons that apply today applied then.

Refutation:

Implied in the allegation is the idea that in the early 1980s the City Council and Mountain Parks managers had knowledge and experience in these issues. They did not.

When bikes were banned from the Flatirons, mountain biking was a very new activity. No managers on Earth had knowledge and experience in managing mountain bicycling. Boulder's ban on bicycling in the Flatirons may have been the first closure of trails to mountain bicycling anywhere. It was certainly one of the first.

In the decades since, the constituency has grown very large. Millions of Americans enjoy mountain biking. Managers around the world have learned techniques of trail design that mitigate conflict and erosion. Managers have employed a wide variety of educational techniques to teach the visiting public how and why to share trails.

The IMBA Rules of the Trail, now widely adopted and accepted by nearly all mountain bikers, did not exist when bikes were banned from the West TSA. IMBA did not exist.

An example of how things have changed: In mid-1980s, a Boulder Mountain Parks manager told the brand-new *Mountain Bike Magazine* that one reason for the ban was that cyclists would go around, not over, the water bars. Today, many bicyclists enjoy going over water bars, bikes are much more capable of going over obstacles, and managers increasingly do not use water bars because they can cause more erosion than they prevent.

Another example of change is snowboards, which arrived on public lands after mountain bikes. Snowboarders caused user-conflict with skiers at ski areas -- and they still do. The conflict has now spread to the backcountry. Yet in the snow-sports world, this is not considered a reason to ban snowboarding. They are accepted, even embraced, and are becoming ubiquitous. At ski areas, snowboards contribute to the local economy. In the backcountry, snowboards are just as non-motorized as cross-country skiers.

Argument: Multiple use does not mean bikes everywhere

Allegations

Bicycling is already allowed on a reasonable and sufficient percent of trails. There are too many shared-use trails already. (Springbrook is bad).

Refutation

Yes, multiple use does not mean every use in every place. But the percent of shared-use trails is currently at 34% of trail miles, and none of those miles are in the classically beautiful, highly desirable, gem of open space, the West TSA. Most of the shared-use miles are not high quality bicycling experience.

Opening some bicycling routes in West TSA does not mean bikes will be everywhere. Most trails will remain hiking-only.

Argument: Valmont Bike Park meets the need.

Allegations

The City is spending a lot of money on Valmont Bike Park. That is where bicyclists should go. The City is doing enough for off-pavement bicycling.

Refutation

Valmont is a totally different experience. It is not nature-based recreation. It is a place for skills, tricks, and physical play. Many children will use it for riding fun. But it does not provide the experience of nature on a bicycle that most mountain bikers seek. Many cyclists who use open space will never visit Valmont Bike Park.

If mountain biking was only about "rad", thrills, and tricks, Valmont Bike Park would be sufficient and bicyclists would not want trails in open space. But what

the great majority of bicyclists really want is peaceful, human-powered experience of natural places.

Argument: The Camel's Nose

Allegations

If cyclists get some trails in West TSA, they will want more.

Refutation

This is true to some extent. Everyone always wants more.

Given the currently politics, if the current request is approved, it is unrealistic to expect that further access will be granted in the foreseeable future.

This City Council and future City Councils must continually consider the proper balance of uses on all lands under their jurisdiction.

The current balance between shared-use and hiking-only is unreasonable, given the fact that bicycling causes no more impact to Nature than hiking.

Argument: Compromise proposals are not compromises or are unworkable. Management does not work.

Allegations

Regulations allocating trails on alternating days to different groups don't work.

"Fido can't "hold it" every other day." Narrow trails. Enforcement nightmare.

Bikers will demand numerous access points along the way.

Refutation

We are not asking for alternating days management. We want full-time access to a limited number of trails.

Narrow trails mean slower speeds and less user conflict.

No new access points are requested or needed.

"Fido" poops only in the open space?

Argument: Poaching

Allegations

We see bike tracks on closed trails. So mountain bikers routinely use closed trails.

They are an irresponsible group of people.

Refutation

The argument generalizes about the character of mountain bicyclists based on the actions of a very few.

The cyclists who ride the closed trails almost invariably do so at night, and very few cyclists ride trails at night. (If nighttime recreation is a problem for wildlife, all people should be prohibited at night, not just cyclists.)

Should we have no hunting because some people poach wildlife? No automobile driving because some people speed or cause accidents?

Some hikers cut switchbacks, causing trail degradation. Some hike in Habitat Conservation Areas without a permit. The poaching argument would therefore lead to the conclusion that hiking should be prohibited.

Argument: CU Students Unmanageable

Allegations

Students are transient, here only four years. Therefore they don't have time to learn the rules. They are not here long enough to gain appreciation and respect for Boulder open space. They will be an enforcement nightmare.

Refutation

The student body of CU is diverse, but is generally of a high caliber. Incoming students have generally shown higher achievement levels compared to many other schools. They come here to learn and study very difficult topics. These are people who cannot learn the rules of open space? While there are some dissolute "partiers", most are serious students. They are generally responsible participants in our society. The generalization that CU Students are more likely to cause problems insults them. We should be careful about making such allegations about people we invite to our community, people who contribute a lot to our local economy and culture.

The open spaces of Boulder are also one of the marketing points for CU. Some students choose CU because of its proximity to mountains and nature. These people are likely to want to enjoy the West TSA in a responsible manner.

--by Gary Sprung