

Minutes of the Meeting: March 3, 2022

Board members present: Brian Wetcher, Sandra Starbuck, JoAnn York-Gilmore, Kit Gerwels, Nick Stowe

Staff present: Bob Vaux, Steve Phillips, Darby Jordan

Guests with Zoom names: Charlie Drew, Ed Clausen, Richard Mellon, Richard Bergner, Bruce Rustad, Bret Andrich, Kevin Welch, Austin Hanks, Asa Deane, Ken Schimke, Jake Hardenbergh, Jim Taylor, Zoe Slabodnik, Nate Schwark, Tabb Stringer, Nicholas MacDonald, Michelle McPhee, Gina Gillespie, Jim Taylor, Josh Gates, Matt Hixson, Patti Pattee, Seth Kiser, Julie Slater, Tim Maricich

Meeting held by Zoom and called to order at 6:04PM, 35 Zoom connections at this time

Minutes: February minutes were unanimously approved as submitted.

Public Comments: opened for anything NOT on the agenda, there was no response.

E-bike Use Policy in the ACFL

Bob reviewed the number of written comments previously submitted and distributed to the Board as of the 24th of February, when the comment period was closed. There have been 108 individuals that have commented, with 60 being pro ebike and 47 opposed, as well as one informational submission. All were thoroughly read and considered by Parks staff and the Forest Board. He asked the public to share any new and unexpressed comments.

Public Comments

~Bret Andrich stated that he had provided four submissions to share data and his opinion. He expressed that he is in favor of allowing ebikes in our trail system.

~Seth Kiser agreed with Bret and said that the bikers, specifically ebikers, are helping to maintain and clean trails after storms. He would like to have ebikes allowed on the trails.

~Michelle McPhee stated that she did not write a letter but wanted to go on record stating that Class I pedal assist ebikes should be allowed on the trails. In her travels across the US and Europe, she has not noticed damage to trails.

~Kevin Welch spoke about the large number of trails on his private property and was initially skeptical of ebikes and their damage to trails. He has now allowed them and has not noticed additional trail damage or safety issues. He

was previously anti-ebike and has changed his opinion after seeing firsthand that there was not additional damage.

~Zoe Slabodnik been with Trail Builders since 2019 and spent lots of time out in the trail system. She lives close to Northern State. She feels that ebikes should be allowed to use the trails near Northern State specifically.

~Ed Clausen is part of a trail riding group and they just celebrated 25 years. He enjoys riding with his group and wants to continue to do so. His health and physical issues have made riding more difficult. Ed stated that the bikers are often ones to help after a storm. He feels that ebikers are the older group, and least abusive to system, and they just want to continue to ride.

~Josh Gates is president of Fidalgo Trail Riders, a local mountain bike advocacy group. He wanted to add his support. He shared that he used to think ebikes were more of a motorcycle until he was exposed to the ebikes by other fellow riders. He has noticed very little difference between regular mountain bikes and ebikes. He feels that the current ebike riders are the main source of extra help and maintenance to the trails.

~Ken Shimke shared that his family lives here and rides often with them and anticipates he will eventually need to switch to an ebike. He has not seen any additional damage to the trails. He stated that he has looked through data and heard the concern about many bikers flooding the area, but his weekly riding at Heart Lake has not shown an increase in bikers. He feels that our trails and their natural challenges help keep the numbers down and at slower speeds.

~Julie Slater been a biker for about 7 years here in town. She has noticed an uptick in ebikes in last few years but has not seen more damage to the trails. She feels that ebike riders are more respectful because they are more seasoned. She also feels that they are the ones helping with trail maintenance.

~Austin Hanks has been a mountain bike rider for 16 years and spent 11 years helping to maintain the trails. He has noticed no difference between bikes and their impact on the trails. He shared that he can still beat some of his ebike friends. He has tested the ebikes and has seen the boost they can give a rider if needed.

~Charlie Drew has been a bike rider for a long time, and a mountain biker for a few years. Now he can only ride with assistance due to health reasons. He shared that he just wants the chance to get out and enjoy the trails and forest lands.

~Jim Taylor is a Mt Vernon resident and has been riding our trails for years. He agreed with the other speakers about the help provided to older riders. He did address the concern about a huge influx of riders but does not feel that will be an issue. He shared that rulings in area, specifically the county, will be coming soon and most land managers have no active deterrents for ebikes.

~Tabb Stringer stated that he feels the largest issue is trail etiquette. He has seen that the older riders are teaching the younger riders to be aware and respectful, and this is more important than how heavy a bike is.

~Nate Schwark spoke about the various views he has. He is a marine scientist and understands the scientific side of the issue. He has looked at the minimal data available, and some has shown that there is not much difference or

damage done by ebikes. He is also a user of the trails and feels the same as all others who previously spoke. He feels that the multiuser respect issue is important. He pointed out that there are many stewards in this group of bikers who care for the trails. He asked that we look at education for the community about trail use and care.

Brian moved to close public comment. Approved unanimously by the board.

Deliberation By Board

Brian started by sharing that the Board's primary job is to conserve the Forest Lands. He feels the worst issue is 'expansion due to violation', such as night use or large groups, both bikers and hikers. The Board's primary purpose on this issue is to assess the impact of this technology on the forest land and decide how the ebike is classified. Is it a bike or a motorcycle? The ebike was initially classified as motorcycle by the Board.

Sandra shared that she does not feel that there is any more damage done by ebikes vs regular bikes. She feels that ebikes should be classified as bikes. She wants a trial period and to look at the impact of allowing ebikes on the trails.

Kit reminded everyone that the ultimate decision is made by City Council and the Board's job is to listen to the community and make a recommendation to Council. He feels that the biggest concern raised in the public written comments is the increased use and trail etiquette. He shared he has always had great experiences with other trail users. City Council must make a decision for all users of the ACFL and members of the community. He acknowledged that there is not much data, and this is the beginning of the process. He suggested we gather data on our own trails, as they are unique in climate and type of trail, but measuring damage specific to ebikes is a challenge. He agreed with a trial period to guide decisions in future.

Nick shared that he is passionate about the trails and is happy to see so many who share this passion. He is against ebikes as he does not want to disrupt the balance in the trail system.

JoAnn said she agreed with all previous board members and their thoughts. She stated that Bellingham is not like us with their large trails and general urban setting, but the state parks are similar to our system. She shared that we have a finite resource, supporting many users. She feels there will be a slight increase in the number of ebikes in the system. She said it was clear from the written comments that there is conflict between user groups. She has reviewed all the trails, which groups are allowed on each and the different ways of using the areas. She supports a test period to assess damage, if any. She would also like to look at how trails are divided for use.

Brian spoke to how the ACFL has been reclassified as a fish and wildlife habitat. The Board is asked to use the 'best available science' to make decisions and he appreciated all the materials and references submitted. He has looked at the federal and state regulations for ebikes and both classify a

Class 1 ebike as a bicycle. Federal and state agencies are allowing local land managements to decide how they want to handle the issue of ebikes. More data will come but so far there are no control studies to reference. Brian suggested that Parks Staff could do a control study but acknowledged that we can only do what we can afford. He asked for Staff feedback.

Bob agreed that there is not a lot of science or data at this time. The written comments have shown the challenge to be much finger pointing and accusations between user groups. He asked that everyone remember they are the COMMUNITY Forest Lands. It is not always easy to share the space, but as a community we need to be more respectful. All user groups have an impact and are asked to take responsibility. As Staff, there is no way to single out ebikes and their impact on the trails. Staff recommendation is to take a year to study and gather data. He suggested doing a blind study by using a number of control spots which will be kept private. Measurements and photographs will be taken periodically with Friends of the Forest partnering in the project to ensure it would be impartial. This process will not limit observations to just ebikes, but all bikes in general. The Parks department recommends that we take the time to gather information and data and then bring the data back to the Forest Board to support any decision that is to be made.

Sandra expressed support for the proposition. She stated that conflict between the user groups will always be there as each group wants their view and vision respected. As a walker, she has had no poor experience with other user groups.

Brian asked the other board members if they are comfortable with the staff recommendations at this time, or if they would prefer to wait until the next meeting.

Kit asked to clarify staff recommendations and plan. Bob reviewed the plan details.

Nick spoke to the potential that this study will highlight bike users in the trails and jeopardize all bike use.

Asa spoke about the Friends of the Forest and their own data collection with trail ambassadors and is happy to add their data to this study.

Kit made motion to vote on staff recommendation. Second by Brian. All approved, no opposed.

Staff will put a document together and formalize the plan for the next steps.

Stand Up Paddle Board Classes at Heart Lake/Commercial Operation Proposal

Jesse Janicula was not in attendance, but he has been speaking with Jonn Lunsford about a Washington Park proposal.

Brian proposed that the discussion move forward as it covers all commercial use. Past commercial use has been individual and single time use with little or no impact. He stated that for-profit, commercial use is not appropriate in the ACFL. In general, the Board is on record as being against any for-profit, commercial, individual use. He expressed that he would like to have any type of commercial use be partnered with the parks department.

Kit agreed and said there has not been many previous requests for commercial use. Due to the most recent master plan, commercial use is no longer decided by Staff but by the Board. He is opposed to commercial, ongoing, for-profit activity in ACFL and any activity that is happening be in conjunction with parks.

All Board members agreed.

Bob added that rock climbing is the exception to this policy.

Steve said that if there was interest in commercial use it could be as a stewardship project.

Kit moved that the stand up paddle board commercial classes be only allowed in coordination with the parks department.

Approved unanimously

Friends of the Forest Update

Asa spoke about the last month with lots of exciting activities. He spoke about the great winter work party day. There was a great turn out and lots of work was accomplished. Beck, the forest educator, had lots of great conversations with volunteers about invasive species and was able to do some teaching at the work party. Josh with Fidalgo Trail riders is coordinating work parties and stewardship and efforts with the Friends. The internship with the high school students has started with two weeks of data collection on Ace of Hearts creek. This is allowing for real world challenges and adjustments. Upcoming activities will include an increase in community hikes.

ACFL Trail Committee Report

No meeting in the last month

Staff Reports

Steve had nothing to add to his written report except the addition of 2700 new residents to Whistle Lake today! Fingerlings that will grow to about 8 inches by November.

Richard Mellon spoke about the two work parties set for Washington Trail Association volunteers, Friends of the Forest, and Parks staff. They will be working on trail #113 on 3/24 and 3/25. There are several muddy areas of trail leading to widening of the trail. The group will be building turnpikes and additional structures. WTA will have about 8 people each day but they are happy to have volunteers 8:30-3:30 each day.

Other Business

Bob gave a sincere thank you to Sandra for her time and work on the Board. She will be very missed.

Sandra spoke to the last 10 years and her time on the board. She will miss the administrative part but will see everyone out on the trails.

JoAnn gave an update from the parks Board. They are finishing permits for Rotary Park. There will be a public meeting for the skate park on 3/15 at City Hall. Due to vandalism at Washington park, staff have been closing the shower unit restrooms overnight.

Adjourn at 7:47pm

Respectfully Submitted by Darby Jordan