

Seattle Nature Alliance
Denise Dahn, Co-founder

March 26, 2014

Open Letter Regarding Cheasty Greenspace

Last night's meeting for the Cheasty Greenspace/Mountain Bike Park was packed with sizable groups from both the Pro and Con side. It was a tension-filled evening.

I saw a lot of bewildered looks on the Pro side that were deeply affecting. It is clear you have all worked incredibly hard and have done a great job in planning and promoting your project. The energy and enthusiasm you have poured into it are amazing. Personally, I feel pretty bad in opposing something that was done with such good intentions, especially something with nature-exposure as the goal. I'm sure it felt terrible to be presenting your project in front of an angry group like that. It is not how things in a community should be.

I have heard there has been some speculation as to who the opposition is. We are not a cohesive group. Among the Cons last night, there were two of us from the Seattle Nature Alliance. The Alliance is a West Seattle based group that formed as a result of Park's attempt to install a commercial zipline into Lincoln Park's forest two years ago. The Alliance is opposed to this particular project for two main reasons: impact and precedent.

At one point last night a woman from the Pro side stood and said, (paraphrased) "I don't get it. This is a positive for the community. We are good people. This will be a lovely park. How can anyone be against this?"

For me, that single comment seemed to sum up the Pro side's apparent incredulity and frustration with the opposition. I wanted to explain, but I cannot express thoughts coherently in a crowded room of angry people. I don't think anyone can.

So, for anyone who is still baffled by the opposition, here is a reply.

This is long, but there is a lot to say. First, I'd like to share some background as to why we see this as so important. Then, a bit about impact and precedent, and a few words on process, including a serious message to Parks. Finally, a proposal for how we might work together on shared goals for Cheasty.

I'm not speaking for everybody—these thoughts are mine alone. But, I think most people on the Con side would agree with me on most of these points.

Nature

Many of us have spent lifetimes in close contact with nature: exploring, observing, studying, painting, writing, or teaching about the natural world. We've looked closely at interrelationships in the plant and animal world and at the seemingly infinite layers of complexity and mystery. Many of us have found considerable wonder and meaning in observing natural processes. We value it in profound, even spiritual ways.

And yet, we see nature being attacked from all angles. There are pressures from growing population, development, pollution, invasive species, and climate change, to name a few. Seattle—and the entire region— is destined to absorb huge numbers of new residents in the near future. Our city will densify in ways I doubt anyone can truly anticipate or visualize. And, with urbanization, there will be fewer and fewer spaces for wildlife. In Seattle, we have only a few remnants of forest, wetlands or just plain undeveloped spaces left.

And climate change will affect us in ways we cannot predict, and cannot—or will not—prepare for. Birds, plants, insects, mammals and all other living creatures are going to be scrambling to survive. Many will go extinct. And we don't really know specifically how our regional habitats will be affected. Will our native Northwest forest plants even be suitable for the climate conditions in 50 or 100 years? I'm not a scientist, but I read enough to know that many questions like these remain unanswered.

Parks

Many of us have observed over decades (yes, we are the older demographic) as Seattle and its natural areas and parks have changed. Not all changes have been bad—but overall, as the city has grown, tree-cover and habitat have shrunk considerably. And, we've seen Parks become increasingly developed as sport fields and other facilities have been added into former natural sites. The few remaining remnant natural spaces—no matter how pristine or invaded they might be—are experiencing increasingly heavy human impact. And, the impact is only going to get worse.

For example Schmitz Preserve—which was restored beautifully just ten years ago when the creek was daylighted—has been so badly trampled in a single decade that last fall the *restoration* had to be restored. A large portion of one of Seattle's last stands of old-growth is now fenced-off to protect the 1500+ new plants.

This is, of course, what happens in urban natural areas that are well-used and well-loved. All the more reason they should be carefully managed to minimize impact.

Invasives and Restoration

A Pro woman last night asked what the space would look like in five years if the project was not approved. The answer from Parks seemed to vaguely suggest that the forest will die if the project does not go through. This is disturbing for a number of reasons.

Many of us long-time Seattlites wonder what has happened to City. In the 1980's Seattle went to court in an (unsuccessful) attempt to preserve greenbelts on *private* land. Now, the City seems to regard our even our public greenspaces as a liability—essentially unused spaces that suck up resources. And, it seems to have decided that instead of preserving them intact, it is better to treat them as an untapped resource, as places to develop, thereby turning the liability into an asset.

The city should take responsibility for restoration. If places like Cheasty need to be cleaned up and restored—we should fund it and get it done. Make it a priority. If we value nature—and we should—then we should invest in it properly. Nature is too important to do otherwise.

Second, why would we develop greenspaces in order to save them? If a space is restored at the same time it is subjected to a highly impacting use, then what is the point? The net value as wildlife habitat would decline either way. Forests are more than just trees, the entire living system from the floor to the canopy needs to be considered.

Finally, should we really be trading restoration services for usage rights? I don't mean to suggest that the Pro group has been trying to pull a deal—I believe the goals of the proposal are worthwhile, admirable, and quite creatively conceived. But, consider the effect of future projects in other natural areas, and on volunteerism itself. Select groups—well-organized and well-funded—will be able to have control over considerable portions of natural areas, at the expense of the general population.

In the case of Cheasty, the space would be overwhelmingly dominated by mountain bikers—a select group, and a minority.

The offer of adding a hiking trail to accommodate the general population goes directly to my next point, impact.

Impact

The Pro side points out that bikes have no more impact than hikers. That may be true. But, bikes *plus* hikers in a given area is a far greater impact than either one alone. Recreation planners refer to the “carrying capacity” of land as to the effects of activity on wildlife and vegetation. In a park, this means how many trails and other features are appropriate for the space before you threaten the habitat or the natural qualities, and what level of “intensity of use” a parcel can absorb before it degrades.

The Cheasty space is simply not big enough for the number and type of trails proposed. The impact of the trails themselves, plus the usage they would attract would overwhelm the natural qualities of the forest. Doing a bit of research and talking to people in recreation planning I learned that these types of bike “playgrounds” (not a pejorative, this is the term used) with jumps, structures, and drops for the more advanced rider, tend to attract a steady stream of users—every day, all day, from dusk to dawn. It's an intense use pattern, similar to a skate-park.

It's a lot to ask of such a small space in a closely-built neighborhood, not to mention the effect on the land and wildlife. The greenspace is the wrong place for this type of active recreation development.

Precedent

This is the most concerning part to many of us. As one Con person pointed out last night, this is a pilot project. Pilot is by definition a trial for more of the same, the first of many. A lot of us Cons are alarmed and confused by this. Suddenly, we realize that Parks has made a major shift in policy with almost no public debate. Last year, when many of us were diligently attending numerous Legacy Plan meetings and pouring over multiple drafts of lengthy Legacy Plan documents—doing what we thought was providing our input to help plan Seattle's park future—we were entirely unaware that such an important decision was being made on a completely separate track.

Natural areas have traditionally been reserved for wildlife and natural landscape features, and what used to be called passive-use, or walking. That is why some of them were acquired and preserved in the first place. It is all that is left, it is irreplaceable, and we want to keep it—all of it—for present and future generations of living beings, both wildlife and people.

Opening natural areas to active recreational development is serious business. It means that our remnant fragments of urban wild are now subject to the same heavy human footprint we've left almost everywhere else. I've been repeating this a lot lately, but here goes again: Seattle Parks is already heavily devoted to recreation and sports, as opposed to nature or the environment. The Department has few staff specialists in wildlife or ecology. The Legacy Plan has almost no mention of wildlife or nature.

And, 86% of park land has already been developed for active recreation or landscaped.

Only 14% of park land remains as natural area.

So, how much of this 14% will Seattle be asked to "share" for future active recreation? If one specialized-user group is allowed to monopolize a space, how many other groups will claim the same right? How much will be left, after all the current and future nature-based sports have been granted their own piece of these ever-shrinking nature reserves?

Most importantly, what will people of the future do without these places? They are going to be living in a much different world, and all indications are that it will not be nearly as pleasant as what we have now. Human beings are pre-programmed to need nature—and especially quiet, peaceful nature—in their daily life. Do we have the right to develop and over-use these places just as we have everything else?

And, sadly, wildlife is going to need these places. Desperately.

Connecting with Nature

The Pro people make the case that the bike park as a way to connect people—especially children—with nature. I believe strongly that connecting people with nature is one of society's most important tasks, now more than ever. I have, in fact, devoted most of my life to it.

But, when nature is so severely limited, it is important to put what we have to its highest and best use. Nature-based sports are great, and should be supported where space allows. Mountain-biking is great, in the mountains. I wish we had enough urban forests left for everyone to use in their own preferred way. Unfortunately, we do not. In the city, mountain biking, and all other specialized-uses cannot be absorbed into the remaining fragments of natural area. Challenge courses, bike playgrounds, nature playgrounds—these can and should be built into *existing* active recreational or sport areas. We should support nature-based sport as much as we do all other active sports.

But, it is the 86% that should be doing the “sharing”, not the 14%.

A recent Parks survey found that 78% of park visitors rate walking in nature as their highest priority. This is the general population—the broadest, most inclusive demographic. If proposals like these become the norm, this broadest group will ultimately lose out access to natural areas. This is the group that should get priority for the last 14% of park natural areas.

I believe there are better, more sustainable and more rewarding ways to use natural areas to connect people with nature. I'll leave that to a possible future discussion.

Process

A Message to the Parks Department:

Last night, after the tension had risen to uncomfortable levels, one person said pointedly, “Parks, this is entirely on you.”

I agree with this, and more.

Parks, you had to have known this would happen. You do remember the zipline, right? I won't speculate publicly why this project was approved in the first place, but many of us are truly wondering. Now, a considerable amount of ill-will has been stirred up in the community, which is making everyone pretty miserable. The Pros have worked long and hard for something that has now become contentious. Cons have been put in the uncomfortable position of opposing a project brought forth in good faith by fellow citizens, *after* they have spent months of work on it. And now, whatever happens, you can shrug, point to the Cons and say, “Hey, blame those guys.”

A major policy shift such as this requires reasoned, open debate *before* any actions are taken—not angry public meetings between opposing factions, after months of work and planning have already taken place.

If Parks wants to open natural areas for recreational development, reversing what many see as a long-standing policy of preservation, then just come out and say so. Make a clear statement as to your intent, the reasons why, and present it as a single, unified, comprehensible proposal. Do not bury it under a mountain of other things like 150-page Legacy Plans, pages of levy items, Opportunity Fund Requests, or the Metropolitan Park District discussion. Be more up-front and clear. Give people—not just user-groups—time to think about it or to come up with alternatives.

Proposal to work together

Pro people: the negative energy from the meeting is obviously the exact opposite of what you intended when you started this project. Now, you are tasked with raising a huge sum of money. And, as I understand it, you have to do the restoration work *up front*, before the bike part goes in. That's a lot of work for something that doesn't really seem—at least from where I was sitting last night—to be on very solid ground.

So, here's an idea—a proposition. What about backing up a little and starting something fresh? Why don't we—the Pros and the Cons—join forces and work together to make something out of Cheasty Greenspace? Something scaled more appropriately to the space, and something focused more tightly on nature itself rather than active recreation. Possibly a nature trail designed for unstructured nature play and exploration, and connected to learning programs. If done right, it would be just as healthful and fun, and just as much—I believe more—of a positive for the entire community. There are a lot of people in the community and in the Con group that have considerable expertise in nature, and I think with some encouragement, they would be delighted to help on such a project. I don't think many of us are still up to pulling ivy, but we can surely be useful in other ways. There could be student and community science projects, nature walks, naturalist lessons, and interpretive materials (this is my personal expertise I would be willing to donate.)

Maybe such a project would even be more likely to win an Opportunity Grant, if they are still being offered.

Please take some time to think this over, and if you have any questions or would like to meet and talk it over, please let me know. We at the Alliance would be happy to meet with you. We are open to talk, anytime.

Sincerely,

Denise Dahn
Co-founder, the Seattle Nature Alliance