

The following comments were delivered by Steve Zemke, Chair of the Friends of Seattle's Urban Forest to the Seattle Board of Parks Commissioners on June 25, 2015.

Comments on Draft Natural Areas and Greenbelts Supplemental Use Guidelines

The Seattle Parks Department is proposing to open up long protected natural areas and greenbelts to more intensive recreational use. It is a wrongheaded policy change. These areas need to be protected for what they are – an exceedingly scarce and valuable urban forest natural experience that is very rare in an urban setting. These areas under the Seattle Greenspaces policy adopted by the Seattle City Council in 1993 were to be mainly for “low intensity recreation, such as walking trails, nature study, informal play areas or pea patches”, provide “wildlife corridors”, “significant or unique habitat for terrestrial or aquatic wildlife” and includes “streams, watercourses or wetlands”.

The language of the 1993 Greenspaces Policy adopted by the City Council says

“The purpose of greenspaces designation is to establish priority areas for preservation to

- 1. Help preserve natural landscape and habitat for wildlife,*
- 2. Provide natural buffers between land uses of different intensity or areas of distinct character or identity*
- 3. Help mitigate the effects of noise and air pollution*
- 4. Help reduce the necessity for constructed storm water systems*
- 5. Help preserve the quality of natural drainage systems and enhance the stability of the land.*

Greenspaces, with their natural environmental character, will only be used for low impact activities and will complement the city's Parks and recreation system where open space may be used in a more active manner”

Now the Seattle Parks Department is proposing to change the use of these natural areas to active recreation.

Rather than looking at where is the most appropriate area and need for bicycling and other new uses not presented during the initial creation of this proposal during the mini-summit and focus groups and public comment, we are now presented with a proposal that says the Parks Superintendent can decide a multitude of uses including mountain bike trails, bicycle skills areas, rope courses, orienteering, challenge areas and quote “future activities that may evolve.” Maybe this is zip lines. Maybe it is tree climbing, – the language leaves it wide open and is contrary to most of the comments that have evolved so far and contrary to the spirit of the 1993 Greenspaces policy.

The Seattle Parks Department has the authority now to restore these areas and build walking trails as it has done in areas like Thornton Creek and the South Cheasty area. I do not believe it has the authority by internal fiat to change the purpose for which Greenspaces were created and believe such a major policy change should be done only by the city council after a public

review process that looks at park use in its totality not just the conversion of natural areas and greenspaces to active use.

I don't believe the Parks Department has been open with the public about its intentions and cannot be trusted to protect these areas as designated by the Seattle City Council and the understanding the public has had for many years about how these areas were to be protected for future generations. These proposed supplemental uses guidelines need to be shelved and Parks go back to the adopted city policy to preserve these areas for low intensity recreation uses.

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