

## Both sides are dissatisfied with a panel's report on bike access at Portland's Forest Park

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After nine months of intense debate, the work of a citizen committee studying additional bike access in **Forest Park** ended with little more than a collective grumble this week.

Presenting their recommendations to city officials, committee members on both sides of the issue expressed disaffection with the report.

To some of the 17-member Forest Park Off-Road Cycling Advisory Committee, the document is an affront to the ecological and recreational integrity of the **Bureau of Parks & Recreation's** 5,000-acre crown jewel. To others, it's an anemic stab at getting mountain bikers their fair share of use.

To the disinterested, the recommendations might simply be relatively dull. In a draft report to **Commissioner Nick Fish** and Parks Bureau Director Zari Santner, the committee proposed three fire lanes be revamped for better bike access and a fourth be opened as a trail connector.

It also recommended the creation of several new trails and trail connectors for cyclist use, and opening two existing trails to cyclists.

Extensive single-track trail sharing between bicyclists and pedestrians, a lightning rod for controversy over the committee's life span, was largely left out of the recommendations.

Forest Park offers miles of bike access, but that's mainly limited to wide paths shared by pedestrians -- not the relatively narrow dirt stretches mountain bikers crave.

Beyond the trail alterations, the committee made recommendations about the park's management, an issue that has come under fire of late after a report from the **City Club of Portland** criticized the Parks Bureau's stewardship.

Among those recommendations:

Fund new trails, as well as "ongoing operations and maintenance."

Complete both a comprehensive wildlife and vegetation study, and a recreational users survey.

Step up funding to allow for multiple park rangers, to ensure park rules are followed.

Fish and Santner commended the group, saying they would study the recommendations with city staff and announce decisions some time after Labor Day.

"We do not intend to make any quick decisions," said Fish, the commissioner in charge of the Parks Bureau. "This is not a zero-sum game. It's not one group wins and one group loses."

On Thursday, however, Fish followed up the meeting by announcing five initiatives to address concerns about park management, including establishing a full-time ranger position.

It remains to be seen whether that will satisfy some of the committee's more ardent members, who left Monday's meeting displeased.

"I'm disappointed with the action," said Frank Selker, a mountain biking advocate and key player in the formation of the committee. "I don't think we come away with nothing to show for it, although it's relatively little in my mind."

Selker and other pro-bike members of the committee have contended throughout the process that mountain biking would not be a detriment to the ecology of Forest Park.

"I think the cyclists have every bit as much concern about the health of the park as anybody at this table," he said.

On the other side of the spectrum was Les Blaize, a member of the Neighbors West-Northwest neighborhood coalition. He reserved the bulk of his two-minute comment period to address Fish.

"You're the chief steward of the park," he said. "It's not about bikes, runners, dogs. It's about the resource of the park. It comes first."

Like many opponents of increased single-track access, Blaize cited the **1995 Forest Park Natural Resources Management Plan**, which dictates park management.

The plan calls for a comprehensive survey of park use to determine what recreation might get greater access, and Blaize, the City Club and others are concerned the single-track discussion is taking place without referencing the survey.

"This is the first time a special-interest group has really challenged the plan," said Marcy Houle, a local biologist who's studied the park extensively and opposed increased bike access. "Follow the plan."

Many audience members intimated cyclists are being given special treatment over other interested parties.

"The more I looked into it, the more aghast I became," said Claudia Martin, a Portland neurosurgeon. Like many others in the audience, she is concerned increased bike routes could make the park perilous for pedestrians and that

the ecosystem will suffer.

"This very, very small group has gotten this immense attention," Martin said. "Forest Park is not a playground."

Bike advocates, meanwhile, contend they enjoy and respect nature as much as hikers or trail runners. They say they're willing to organize volunteer crews to help with trail maintenance and combat invasive species.

To what extent the cash-strapped Parks Bureau is fiscally able to abide the committee's recommendations is unclear. Comprehensive surveys and stepped up ranger enforcement demand resources Fish acknowledged are hard to come by in the city's economic rut.

"We're just going to have to be better stewards of the money," he said.

Fish said the initiatives he announced Thursday would do just that.

In a release, the Parks Bureau announced five moves aimed at tempering recent criticism of the park's upkeep and addressing the recommendations of the bike committee.

Those initiatives include:

Assigning one full-time park ranger to Forest Park.

Completing the recreational survey in the park over the summer.

Establishing yearly work plans and long-term goals for the park's condition.

Formally delineating the relationship between the parks bureau and the **Forest Park Conservancy**, which already pours resources into keeping the park healthy.

Involving the City Club of Portland, which helped create the park, in a budget advisory committee.

--Dirk Vanderhaert, Special to The Oregonian

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