

Local mountain bikers push wilderness alternative

By Terray Sylvester

A mountain bike advocacy group is working to preserve mountain biking access in the face of formal wilderness designations proposed for more than 150,000 acres of local backcountry.

The Roaring Fork Mountain Bike Association (RFMBA) is proposing alternative designations for most of the public lands that the Hidden Gems campaign is seeking to protect in the Roaring Fork and Crystal River valleys.

RFMBA hopes those alternatives can protect the terrain in question from industry and motorized uses while leaving open mountain bike access that a formal wilderness designation would cut off.

"We're doing our best to bring some realities to the table: I think a lot of people are not clear with the fact that wilderness equals no bikes," said Mike Pritchard, a founding member of RFMBA. "For a tourist-based place where it's all about recreation, this is just, it's wild that we would consider bringing the wilderness down so close to our towns."

But the coalition behind the Hidden Gems Proposal says it cannot support such a broad departure from the formal protections offered by wilderness designation.

With a few exceptions, all mechanized travel, including mountain biking, is prohibited in wilderness areas. Some mechanized access is allowed, including wheelchairs, search and rescue vehicles and some agricultural equipment.

Sloan Shoemaker, executive director of the Carbondale-based Wilderness Workshop - a member of the Hidden Gems campaign - said the coalition is open to further discussion about keeping specific areas open to mountain biking, but that "a blanket application of alternative designations for all of

these landscapes is not something we're willing to entertain."

Shoemaker said that alternative designations are more appropriate for land that doesn't possess the untrammeled qualities required for protection under the Wilderness Act. But his main beef with the alternative designations revolves around the fact that they do not include uniform management standards for the public land in question.

The Hidden Gems Wilderness Coalition is developing a proposal to apply formal wilderness designations to as many as 154,000 acres of mid-elevation terrain in the Roaring Fork and Crystal River Valleys.

Arguing that the proposal would block access to some existing trails and preclude mountain bikers from building new trails in certain areas, RFMBA is pushing for all but about 30,000 of those acres to be protected under alternative conservation designations that would permit bicycles.

As yet, said Pritchard, the members of RFMBA aren't familiar with the ins and outs of specific alternative designations, but the more likely options for the lands in question include the national conservation area, national recreation area and national protection area designations.

"Mountain bikers in general want to see land protected, but we're not interested in closing off access in perpetuity by using the

wilderness designation," Pritchard said. "The nice thing is that it's 2009, we've got other tools."

The potential alternative designations are similar to wilderness in that they result from federal legislation. But they differ from wilderness designations, in part, because any land they pertain to would be managed by an individualized resource management plan formulated through a public input process on the local level.

Shoemaker says that compared to a wilderness designation, the alternative designations don't ensure adequate protection against future logging, energy development, motorized recreation, and new road construction. Those activities are specifically barred under the Wilderness Act.

"I guess our fundamental concern there is that these alternative designations are not a guaranteed means of protecting landscapes," Shoemaker said. "There is no standard of what can and can't happen in a [national conservation area]."

The Roaring Fork Mountain Bike Association and Hidden Gems Coalition have been negotiating the Hidden Gems proposal since late 2007. The negotiations have generally focused on adjusting proposed wilderness boundaries to accommodate certain areas and trails. But Pritchard explained that RFMBA members realized they would need to adopt a more general strategy toward maintaining access to trails that run through the proposed wilderness designation.

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Town trustees accept a few more pieces of the Overlook

By Jeremy Heiman

The developers of the Overlook Neighborhood and their representatives are gradually chipping away at Carbondale's objections to their plans for a mixed-use neighborhood with about 145 residences.

In a special meeting Aug. 19, Overlook attorney Larry Green and the Carbondale Board of Trustees checked off some of the trustees' concerns from a list Green provided and another from Doug Dotson, head planner for the town, but not without considerable discussion on nearly every point.

A hotel is a major feature of the project, and both the developer and the trustees want to see it completed. But because finding a willing hotel developer is expected to be somewhere between difficult and impossible, the town has agreed to allow the developer to convert the hotel site to residences if no hotelier has been contracted by the time all the other phases of the development are completed.

Each phase represents a different type of housing, for example, single- and multi-family, higher and lower density, higher and lower income. They won't necessarily be completed sequentially, and it may be years before the housing for each one is actually built.

Suspicious of any vague wording, trustees

haggled over how to determine when a phase is "done."

Green told the trustees he thought a phase of the development is effectively finished when infrastructure for utilities is buried and the streets are completed.

Mayor Michael Hassig disagreed, saying the developer could, in bad faith, put in such "horizontal" construction throughout the development, and move directly to building residential units on the hotel site.

"This is not likely, from this side of the table," Green objected. He said he's not familiar with the kind of "gamesmanship" implied by Hassig's suggested scenario.

"All I can say, from this side of the table, is we've been gamed," Hassig replied. He hastened to add that he wasn't referring to the Overlook's representatives, but other developers in the past.

After more discussion, the trustees agreed to allow town planning staff to work out language that provides the assurance they want.

Affordable housing has also been contentious in the Overlook's appearances before the trustees. A recent proposal from the developer would have augmented the number of low-income units by allowing the developer to build four townhouses on property owned by the town of Carbondale overlook-

ing Delaney Park.

Hassig said the town might have a use for that property, which he called "premium land," in the future, and said that proposal doesn't have any benefit for Carbondale.

"I can't go for the 'You'll build 'em on our land and get credit for 'em,'" Hassig said. "That's overreaching."

Trustee John Hoffman called for 20 percent of the dwellings in the development to be within the affordable definition, rather than the 15 percent required. He said the Planning and Zoning board, in its review of the project, had agreed to sacrifice lower density to get more community housing.

"If we're not getting 20 percent, then we're just cramming people together to benefit the developer," Hoffman said.

The board and the developer agreed to work with an affordable housing plan prepared by Kay Philip, a planner for the town.

The trustees appear to be nearly satisfied with the amount of open space and parks in the plan since the Overlook's designers floated a new open space proposal July 28. But there was still some disagreement about a couple of issues.

Carbondale's code calls for a new development to provide public parks equal to 15 percent of its total area and common open

"It's more broad at this point, because we're just not going to get to a resolution on those [contested] trails," Pritchard said.

He said some of the contested trails go through the middle of the Hidden Gems proposal areas, and that on those trails in particular RFMBA doesn't see a workable compromise on the horizon. He emphasized that RFMBA is still open to negotiating.

Pritchard said that as the Hidden Gems proposal now stands, it's unlikely that most Carbondale-area mountain bike riders would see their regular, after-work rides affected. Popular trails in the Red Hill, Prince Creek, Crown and Hay Park areas aren't included in the proposal. Contentious areas include some trails in the Thompson Creek area, the Dexter Creek connection to Coal Basin, an incomplete trail on the north flank of Mount Sopris, as well as areas farther up the Roaring Fork Valley. These are places where RFMBA hopes to maintain access, and potentially see more trail development in the future, Pritchard said.

Shoemaker said that though the Hidden Gems Coalition is working to introduce the Wilderness legislation to congress before the current session breaks for the holiday recess. He said it's anyone's guess as to when the legislation might actually become law.

The Hidden Gems Wilderness Coalition is composed of the Wilderness Workshop, Colorado Mountain Club, Colorado Environmental Coalition and the Wilderness Society. The coalition is currently pushing for Wilderness designations on roughly 400,000 acres of Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management land in Pitkin, Eagle, Summit and Gunnison counties. The proposal aims to protect ecologically rich terrain lower in elevation, and closer to populated areas, than most local, existing wilderness areas.

space equal to 25 percent of the total area. Public parks are open to all town residents, while common space is for use by residents of the area.

One of the ways the developer's plan achieves the 25 percent open space is by providing an extra strip of landscaping four feet wide along all street right of ways, in addition to the standard planting strip within the right of way.

Trustee Stacey Bernot said she doesn't think that strip should count for open space on the same basis per square foot as parks and other open space, but when Hassig conducted a straw poll, Bernot said she could live with the overall quantity of open space.

Trustee Pam Zentmyer said she thinks the big park, at 1.2 acres, is good, but the smaller "outlots" and strips aren't adequate.

"The rest of your open space is all made up of bits and pieces that aren't all that useable," she said.

The poll resulted in "yes" responses from Bernot, Frosty Merriott and Ed Cortez, and "no" responses from Hoffman and Zentmyer.

The Overlook was again the subject of discussion before the trustees in their regular meeting on Tuesday, Aug. 25, which concluded after The Sun's press deadline.