

RPV Trail Wars

The trail wars have several participants including the four main user groups - equestrians, hikers, cyclists and naturalists. The one group entirely disenfranchised from open space use in general is the youth sports community.

Naturalists want to close over half of the trails for vaguely defined habitat protection reasons. This is the museum mentality where habitat wins over trails, the public and the taxpayers. In their view, the reserves are for passive walking and nature observation. To justify closing so many trails, they throw about words like sensitive, endangered and rare without quantitative data to back them up. If there are two trails to the same location, one is labeled redundant and should be closed in their opinion to create more continuous blocks of habitat. Never mind that the two trails offer different trail experiences or allow separation of user groups. Lost is the idea that it is the journey, not the destination that people enjoy.

Then you have some factions of user groups who feel that they have entitlements. Equestrians see horse trails, hikers see hiking trails and naturalists see habitat. Cyclists are the new breed and are sometimes opposed by the others based on habitat and safety arguments. However, most hikers, equestrians and cyclists seem to be able to coexist.

Because of the lack of management and a vacant lot mentality, some cyclists have given them reason to complain. A few years ago, a new breed of cyclists called freeriders began to build new trails with jumps and wooden structures. After all, no one was there to say they couldn't do as they pleased. Even though this segment represents only about 10 percent of the cycling community, they are responsible for most of the observable trail degradation. Unfortunately, those who wish to get rid of bikes claim off-road cyclists are all the same, unruly downhill bombers without concern for habitat or other trail users.

In the meantime, the majority of cyclists, lead by the Concerned Off-Road Bicyclists Association of Palos Verdes (CORBA PV), have been struggling to keep trails open to bikes. Their approach has been to work with the city to develop a fair management plan that serves the needs of all trail users and balances the need to protect habitat. Key goals are to clearly define issues with facts, develop solutions that are long lasting, educate cyclists, and recruit large volunteer groups to repair and maintain trails.

It is important to recognize that all users have some impact on habitat. From a habitat perspective, an ideal nature preserve would have very few trails and limited access for those whose primary goal is to observe nature. However, the city's General Plan includes a mandate for recreational opportunities for the entire community. This is the real struggle. The unknowing public may soon find that trails they have used for decades will be closed. Fewer trails means increased user density, less variety, and contentious competition for trails among user groups.

Barbara Dye apparently tried to juggle all these forces but was viewed by some as favoring trail users over habitat. The purported alliance with cyclists came from her resistance to those who want to get rid of bikes altogether. She understood that the city had already deemed off-road cycling a proper use of RPV trails and that solutions could be found to resolve issues. She also apparently recognized that anti-bike forces inflated habitat concerns and user conflicts to promote their hidden crusade. She initiated several surveys and studies that concluded the inflated claims were unfounded. It has been our contention that the city should include multiple uses. Informed trail use decisions should be based on quantitative data. Decisions based on embellished anecdotal ranting will not serve the needs of the community.

Ms. Dye apparently struggled to keep this balance against opposition from heavyweight players like the Sierra Club, Native Plant Society, and Audubon Society. In 2004 these groups fervently claimed that allowing bikes in the Forrestal Nature Preserve would unquestionably result in rampant habitat destruction and dangerous user conflicts. The city council allowed bike use on a trial basis with monitoring to be done by the conservancy. The study showed that after the management plan was implemented bikers had no more impact than other users, and there was not a single user complaint. The fallacious claims simply did not seem to materialize because the assertions were overstated and the cyclists appeared to respect the management plan.

The PUMP Committee brought back the same players with a few new faces. However, this time an alliance of seemingly anti-bike forces was formed. They nearly succeeded in banning bikes but thanks to efforts by a minority group within the PUMP committee it was overturned. Ms. Dye attended a meeting of this group as an observer and this may have been her downfall.

Angered by defeat, the alliance apparently turned their energy toward the conservancy. Here they were able to persuade the Board of Directors that the misbehavior of cyclists was causing irreversible rampant destruction of habitat and must be immediately stopped. The conservancy failed to acknowledge that the damage accumulated over a period of years with the help of a two-year drought and that such damage was declared repairable by conservancy coastal sage restoration experts.

The conservancy's recommendation to the council asking for a temporary ban on bikes is the direct result of the alliance's efforts to undermine cyclists. Some city council members appear to understand the difference between habitat protection and habitat exploitation. The council chose to disregard the attempts to discriminate against cyclists and instead closed distressed areas to all users. Whether this is just a temporary measure remains to be seen.

Ms. Dye apparently viewed the conservancy's actions as a vote of no confidence and proffered her resignation so the alliance of pseudo naturalists won that round.

Because of her resolute nature, Ms. Dye has been a controversial figure. Whether or not one agrees with her, she has been the driving force in the conservancy's plans for this city. One can only speculate about the goals of a new director chosen for a specific narrow perspective on open space. Fewer trails and a policy of segregating trail users will ultimately result in conflict and the need for unnecessary enforcement.

The city council delayed the hiring of 4 new administrative assistants at a cost of \$500,000 per year including a Trails Manager until after the recent election. One can argue that this is now a necessity and perhaps even the need for a Trails Committee at added costs. When the Preserve and the NCCP were proposed, law enforcement and other needed items were specifically excluded in the cost estimates. We warned about recurring costs to the city including habitat restoration and enforcement. It now appears that our prediction that open space would be restricted to the naturalists as the chosen few with escalating costs could be validated and the bike group could well be the first casualty of the trail wars.