

June 24, 2011

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Re: Preliminary Comments about existing conditions
on Open Space roads & trails

Dear Linda:

A salute to you for the Community Workshop on June 18, and the opportunity to provide input on how the MCOSD road and trail network could be altered. The Marin Horse Council has also solicited comments regarding trail use from equestrians in our organization, and also from hikers and environmentalists. We submit those comments here to the following questions that were asked:

1. Which trails or trail segments would you recommend be added, decommissioned or re-routed?
2. Which trails, trail segments, or specific areas would you identify as an area of environmental sensitivity?
3. Which trails, trail segments or specific areas would you identify as having an unsafe condition?

Since we lack the resources to conduct a complete inventory, this response does not purport to be comprehensive. We reserve the right to submit additional comments when MCOSD presents specific changes-in-use for public comment. But these limited comments do suggest problems that are of concern not only to equestrians, but also to all the “foot-people” who comprise the vast majority of users of Marin Open Space Preserves.

A. Preliminary Observations

1. Safety of Users and Protection of the Environment Must Have Priority

To the extent that public lands are available for recreational uses, they should be available to the public generally. Users who threaten the safety of other users or who adversely impact the environment must be restricted to the extent necessary to protect (1) the safety of the public generally and (2) the environmental integrity of the resource.

2. Mountain Bikers are Displacing More Vulnerable Users in All Preserves

As mountain bikes have become more sophisticated and mountain bikers more aggressive, displacement of more vulnerable users is taking place in all MCOSD Preserves where bikes are allowed. It is not just equestrians who feel threatened. The ordinary recreational walkers—hikers, joggers, dog walkers, bird watchers, and nature lovers—are the largest group being displaced. Seniors are the most strongly affected. The limitations on mobility, hearing and sight that come with middle-age and older, together with an increased sense of physical vulnerability, make seniors particularly subject to being driven out of their neighborhood preserves by mountain bikers. Equestrians and foot-people of every age have shared these roads and trails without conflict for decades because both groups travel slowly, both uphill and down—2-3 miles per hour for walkers, and 3 -5 miles per hour for horses. Bikers travel relatively slowly uphill, but coming downhill—driven by gravity and an appetite for thrills—many travel very fast. Neither foot-people nor equestrians should be exposed to being run into by a 150 pound biker coming downhill at speed on a narrow trail. The risk of serious, perhaps life-threatening, injury is simply too great.

It is not acceptable public policy to allow large numbers of the general public to be excluded from County Open Space Preserves to accommodate the desires of mountain bikers to ride far and fast. That is what private bike parks are for. Modern mountain bikes are as much “vehicles” as motorized dirt bikes. If mountain bikes are

to be allowed on our Open Space Preserves at all, their access must be severely regulated to ensure the safety of the public and to protect the land, flora and fauna of the Preserves from damage.

3. Increased Enforcement Must be Part of the Road & Trail Management Plan

Experience teaches that rules that are not enforced soon become meaningless. The County cannot continue to say that it has “no money” for enforcement on the Open Space Preserves while it manages to find very large amounts of money for projects important to bikers; i.e., the 680 Trail, the Stafford Lake Bike Park, and the bike tunnel connecting San Rafael with Larkspur Landing. It is simply a question of priorities.

B. Responses to the Questions Presented by MCOSD

1. Trails to be decommissioned or re-routed

Conifer Ridge Trail is an “unauthorized” trail in the Giacomini Open Space that begins near the top of Conifer Fire Road and runs down the nose of the ridge to a point where it joins the Willis Evans Trail. The trail begins and ends on MCOSD property, but some portion in between is on private property. The trail is used primarily by mountain bikers coming down off of San Geronimo Ridge and is so located that it feeds them directly onto Willis Evans Trail, making Willis Evans unsafe for horsemen and foot-people. Because it runs directly down the nose of the ridge, Conifer Ridge Trail promotes erosion. It should be closed. If left open, it should be re-routed to come out onto Conifer Road, rather than onto Willis Evans Trail.

Hunt Camp Trail is an “unauthorized” trail in the Giacomini Open Space. It begins at the old Hunt Camp on Hunt Camp Fire Road and goes directly downhill (north) to a point where it divides. One branch continues downhill and comes out on the top of East Sylvestris Street in San Geronimo. The other branch goes in a westerly direction and comes out onto the top of Juniper Avenue in San Geronimo. This trail is used almost exclusively by mountain bikers. Even if there were no bikers, the trail is so eroded that it is unsafe for horses and equestrians do not use it. Unless it can be re-routed in a way that does not contribute to serious erosion, it should be closed for environmental reasons.

Cascade Canyon Fire Road (Repack) is designated “multi-use” because it was built as a fire road. However, bikers routinely use it as a race course, riding down hill at speeds that make the road unusable by all but the most daring of hikers and horsemen. Ideally, this road should be closed or re-routed in a way to make it safer.

High Water Trail is a Hiker/Equestrian trail in Cascade Canyon Open Space that is regularly “poached” by mountain bikers during the winter to avoid crossing the creek. It is highly subject to erosion and sloughing directly into the creek. The trail is narrow and steep and unsafe for multi-use. The Management Plan for Cascade Canyon suggests an alternative to this trail which should be considered.

Cut Trail in Cascade Canyon is a Hiker/Equestrian trail that connects Cascade Fire Road with the Middle Fire Road. Mountain bikers ride this trail extensively and illegally. The Management Plan for Cascade Canyon provides that this trail should be closed because it is steep, seriously eroded and is in a rich wildlife area. This trail creates a dangerous situation because it feeds high speed bike traffic directly onto Cascade Fire Road. This trail should be closed.

Split Rock Trail is an “unauthorized” trail that connects Cascade Canyon with White Hill. It is extremely steep and promotes erosion into Cascade Creek. It is used primarily by mountain bikers. The Management Plan for Cascade Canyon proposes this trail as a hiking trail, with closure of the trail above the waterfall. This trail creates a dangerous situation because it feeds high speed bike traffic directly onto Cascade Fire Road. There is extreme erosion and deep ruts created by mountain bikes. The upper area where it crosses MMWD lands has been severely devastated and some rare plant communities destroyed. Because this trail crosses MMWD land, MMWD needs to be involved in decisions as to closure of the trail and restoration of the terrain.

There is an unnamed “unauthorized” trail that runs steeply downhill from Middle Fire Road in Cascade Canyon Open Space to Cascade Drive. It is seriously eroded due to extensive use by mountain bikers and should be closed or re-routed.

Barnabe Mountain Fire Road in the French Ranch Open Space is of limited utility because of the County's inability to secure reliably predictable access through the Mease property. The public should be able to learn in advance when the Mease gates will be locked so that they can plan a loop route to and from Roy's Redwoods using Barnabe Fire Road and the Top Flight Trail. Also, Mease should be asked to make his gates easier to open when they are unlocked. Although Mease has represented to the County and MCOSED that he has not excluded the public from Barnabe Fire Road, the current situation, with no way to know when the gates will be unlocked and gates that are difficult to open even when unlocked, does effectively exclude the public from that road.

Contour Trail in the Giacomini Open Space should be extended to join the San Geronimo Ridge Fire Road. Ideally, it would be wonderful if a way could be found to extend the Contour Trail further west to connect with existing trails that originate in Lagunitas.

2. Areas of environmental sensitivity

See comments above about Conifer Ridge Trail, Hunt Camp Trail, High Water Trail, Cut Trail, Split Rock Trail, and Unnamed "unauthorized" trail.

Cascade Canyon is an environmentally sensitive area that was the subject of an EIR and Management Plan prepared by MCOSED in 2005. Very little has been done to deal with the problems highlighted in those documents or to implement the recommendations made in the Plan. **The best example of the extent to which the environmentally sensitive nature of Cascade Canyon has been ignored is the annual "Turkey Ride" by hundreds of mountain bikers down Cascade Canyon Fire Road (known as "Repack" to the bikers). Last year nearly 1000 riders participated.** The ride commemorates the beginning of mountain biking in Marin in the mid-1970s by bikers who first raced down Cascade Canyon Fire Road. The ride is conducted in the Cascade Canyon Open Space without any permit or any attempt to regulate or limit the size of the ride. It is a form of "critical mass" ride which bikers use to demonstrate their apparent immunity from the rules that govern other users of County Open Space Preserves. The riders cross or ride near salmon-spawning creeks, generating erosion and disturbing water quality. The ride attracts bikers from all over the Bay Area, intensifying use of this environmentally sensitive preserve. The riders exit onto narrow neighborhood streets in Cascade Canyon creating traffic hazards and disturbing the residents.

The 680 Trail, which is currently being constructed between Loma Alta Open Space and the Terra Linda/Sleepy Hollow Open Space, crosses an environmentally sensitive area. When it is opened, it will need to be carefully monitored to insure that needed maintenance is performed promptly.

3. Unsafe Conditions

Willis Evans Trail (formerly known as Bates Canyon Trail) in the Giacomini Open Space is currently classified as "multi-use" despite the fact that the presence of bikes renders the trail unsafe for both horsemen and hikers. Willis Evans Trail was a hiker/equestrian trail until several years ago when, without notice or explanation, it was reclassified as "multi-use" and opened to bikes. Since then there have been numerous incidents involving conflicts between bikers coming down hill and horses or hikers going in either direction. This trail is a primary access route to the Giacomini Open Space for riders from two major horse stables, Dickson Ranch and Creekside Equestrian Center, both located within a quarter mile of the trailhead off of San Geronimo Valley Drive. Between them, these two stables house over 200 horses. Willis Evans Trail is steep, narrow, has poor sight lines and crosses the face of steep hillsides where there is little or no room for horses or foot-people to get out of the way of bikers coming downhill. (Despite the "yield" rules, anyone who spends any time on trails in Marin is well aware that mountain bikers negotiating a steep downhill trail often do not even see other users ahead of them until they are upon them—too late to slow down and give warning, even if they were inclined to do so.)

The most widely reported "near miss" on Willis Evans Trail occurred about two years ago when bikers coming off of the unauthorized Conifer Ridge Trail spooked a horse and three ponies as they reached the point where Conifer Ridge Trail joins Willis Evans Trail. The ponies were being ridden by adults in preparation for taking a group of children out on the ponies over the same trail the following day. All the horses/ponies bolted and ran downhill. Fortunately, the adult riders stayed aboard and managed to stop the horses several hundred yards down hill. The bikers fled the scene without stopping, exiting onto Conifer Road. Had the same incident occurred

the next day, with children aboard the ponies, the outcome would have been much more serious. Willis Evans Trail should be reclassified as “hiker/equestrian only” and closed to bikes.

White Hill Trail and Porcupine Trail (both parts of essentially one trail) in the Giacomini Open Space are classified as “multi-use” but are in fact unsafe for either equestrians or foot-people because of mountain bikers. This trail is narrow, steep, winding, with poor sightlines. Sightlines on White Hill Trail were better when the trail was built because much of the underbrush had been cleared out, making it possible to see who was on the switchbacks above and below. But the brush is now so grown in that it is no longer possible to see (or hear) bikers coming down the trail. Also, the trail is now narrower than when it was built because of grow-in of brush and sloughing. Because the trail is very narrow and much of it built across the face of steep hillsides, there is nowhere for horses (or even hikers) to get out of the way of bikers coming downhill. There have been so many close calls and near-misses with bikers that most equestrians and many hikers will no longer risk using this trail. What should be a good, safe Hiker/Equestrian trail has become, in practice, a “bikes only” trail. This trail should be closed to bikes because it is unsafe for multi-use and, given the terrain, cannot be made safe for multi-use.

Carey Camp Trail in Cascade Canyon Open Space is a Hiker/Equestrian trail that is ridden extensively and illegally by mountain bikers, making the trail unsafe for hikers and equestrians. Moreover, the bike traffic promotes sloughing and erosion so that this trail becomes worse every year. The last portion of Carey Camp Trail that connects to Pine Mountain Tunnel Road is extremely steep and severely eroded.

Canyon Trail in Cascade Canyon Open Space is a Hiker/Equestrian trail that is ridden extensively and illegally by mountain bikers, making it unsafe for hikers and horsemen. Use by bikers has widened what was an 18” wide hiking and equestrian trail to over 5’ wide in most places.

Sun Valley Trail in Terra Linda-Sleepy Hollow Open Space is a Hiker-Equestrian trail with many blind turns that is ridden extensively and illegally by mountain bikers, making it unsafe for hikers and horsemen. It is reported by locals that the bikers here are particularly rude and aggressive.

Fox Lane Trail in Terra Linda-Sleepy Hollow Open Space is a Hiker-Equestrian trail which is ridden extensively and illegally by mountain bikers, making it unsafe for hikers and horsemen. Bikers have an alternate route readily available to them from lower Fawn Drive gate over the paved Mission Pass Bike Path to the Terra Linda Ridge Fire Road—but they have no incentive to use it in a climate of “no enforcement”.

Bahia Trail in Rush Creek Open Space should be hiker-equestrian, not multi-use. It is narrow and winding, with poor sight lines, and not suitable for multi-use.

Dwarf Oak Trail in Mt. Burdell Open Space is Hiker-Equestrian but is ridden extensively and illegally by mountain bikers, making it unsafe for hikers and horsemen.

Increased enforcement is the only solution to the problem of bikers “poaching” the trails that are not open to them for safety reasons.

We repeat what we said at the beginning: Since we lack the resources to conduct a complete inventory, this response does not purport to be comprehensive. We reserve the right to submit additional comments when MCOSD presents specific changes-in-use for public comment. But these limited comments do suggest problems that are of concern not only to equestrians, but also to all the “foot-people” who comprise the vast majority of users of Marin Open Space Preserves.

Respectfully,

Joel Bartlett
President, Marin Horse Council