

To All Who Care About Forest Park:

My name is Marcy Houle. I write you today out of serious concern for the future health of Portland's greatest treasure, Forest Park.

I am the author of the book, "One City's Wilderness: Portland's Forest Park." This book – a complete trail guide to the park and its natural history – has been continuously in print for over twenty years, with a new, third edition to be released in Fall 2010. I am also a scientist and have studied the park intensively since 1982. Through all these years, I continue to be amazed at the health and natural beauty of this 5,000-acre park – a place that has been deeply valued since the Olmstead Brothers did their first report to the Park Board 106 years ago. Since 1948, when Forest Park was finally dedicated as a city park, it has been lovingly and carefully stewarded by generations of Portlanders.

Today, however, this may all change. Unless many people, like you, who truly care about this place come forward, the management, future health, and allowable uses on trails may transform irrevocably.

A proposal from cycling enthusiasts to greatly increase the amount of biking routes in Forest Park is currently being highly promoted citywide. Unknown by most park users, mountain biking advocates are rapidly gaining momentum, funding, and political clout. The bike industry is heavily pushing for singletrack trails in Forest Park to make a "world class singletrack in our backyard."¹ Several cycling shops are joining forces to make this happen and donating large sums of money with the goal being to raise \$200,000 for the cause. "Universal Cycles in northwest Portland has committed \$10,000 a year for the next five years in order to help push local advocates and community leaders into creation more single-track mountain bike trails in Forest Park." (Our objective is to) "triple the amount of mountain bikers in Portland, and that would help our industry."²

Some users of Forest Park as well as city officials, view this objective without concern and even favorably. In particular, the newly organized 'Forest Park Conservancy' (that previously was known as the 'Friends of Forest Park') supports this change of direction and philosophy for the park. This is in diametric opposition to the advocacy role that the Friends of Forest Park and its predecessor, the original Forest Park Committee of Fifty, played for the past sixty years. Current cycling proposals under discussion include the possibility of opening up pedestrian-only trails, specifically *Wildwood Trail* and *Maple Trail*, to mountain biking. A leader of the mountain biking effort, Frank Selker, has said, "I believe they (the Forest Park Conservancy) may support devoting parts of the Wildwood Trail to cycling on certain days of the week."³ When the directors of the Forest Park Conservancy were asked what they thought of increasing mountain biking in Forest Park, they responded, "I think Frank's idea is a great one, and we are thrilled at the potential for

this level of collaboration and engagement.”⁴

But the ramifications of these actions, should they occur, could have irreversible, damaging consequences for Forest Park and the other groups – primarily hikers, runners and equestrians -- who also use the park.

Let me state that I am a cyclist and enjoy mountain biking. I understand the need and desire for biking routes. But it is important to recognize the fact that *nearly 30 miles or 35% of all the trails in Forest Park are already available for mountain biking*. In other words, over one-third of all routes throughout the park are presently being used by cyclists.

Unfortunately, there are growing problems and conflicts generated from the use of these trails by mountain bikers. Some trails are suffering erosion. Native vegetation has been damaged in places. Cyclists are observed riding on trails that are off limits to bikes. There are increasing incidents of near-accidents between cyclists and walkers. And there is little to no money in the Park budget to enforce park-user rules.

Although I am deeply concerned about the potential increase of detrimental impacts to the ecological health of Forest Park, my greatest worry as an author sending people out on the trails, is for *pedestrian safety*. The primary user group in Forest Park is, historically and currently, walkers. The Park Futures Plan identified that “walking for pleasure to be Portland’s most popular recreational activity.” The potential for serious accidents between speedy mountain bikers and hikers and runners will only accelerate by allowing more mountain biking use, especially if these combined uses are on the same narrow singletrack trail.

Secondly, from my years of intensive study of Forest Park, I can confidently state that few, if any, other large urban areas in the country have a city park that evidences overall such healthy natural attributes as seen in Forest Park. Other cities can claim mountain biking features. Other places can accommodate increasing recreational demands. What we, as Portlanders, need to remember is: *among all major cities in the nation, only Portland, Oregon, can boast of a magnificent urban wilderness park that is natural, primarily healthy, and in some locations, even exemplifying outstanding conditions*. For this reason, and because of its beautiful, native vegetation, its abundance of indigenous birds and wildlife, and its healthy watersheds, Forest Park warrants the utmost in protection and appreciation. Without strong advocacy, however, these values will not exist in the future.

Fortunately, the **Forest Park Natural Resources Management Plan** addresses these very concerns. This Plan was adopted by the City Council of Portland in February 1995, and as such, is land use law under the state mandate, Goal 5. This Plan was developed through deliberation by a thoughtful and cooperative assemblage of City, County, and METRO planning divisions, neighborhood associations, representatives of the mountain biking community, and numerous experts in biology, forestry, silviculture, fisheries and wildlife.

The Plan was conducted openly, in a transparent approach, and based on science, not politics. It still stands today as the guiding document to all management considerations effecting Forest Park.

First and foremost, the Natural Resources Management Plan recognizes that “*Forest Park represents an unparalleled resource where citizens can enjoy the peace, solitude, ruggedness, variety, beauty, unpredictability and unspoiled naturalness of an urban wilderness.*” (NRMP, page 97) It succinctly states the necessity of “regular monitoring of natural resource functions and values, coupled with effective management response aimed at sustaining resources over time.”

“The Plan acknowledges that because it is one-of-a-kind, the park will face intense recreational demands – pressure to expand trails and facilities to accommodate greater use. With preservation of natural resources as a primary goal, the plan recognizes that Forest Park is threatened by overuse unless recreational activities are more actively managed and redirected. The development of other open space and natural area park facilities will be necessary to ease the focused demand so that Forest Park can remain a special place for generations to come.” (NRMP, Page 3)

Increasing recreational activity, specifically that of single track trails for mountain biking, is being focused on Forest Park and not being addressed as a region-wide issue. This is in contradiction with the Forest Park Natural Resources Management Plan.

The Natural Resources Management Plan also states:

“One of the first steps is to either determine how much recreational use can be accommodated without any adverse effects or to determine the amount of deterioration that is acceptable. This is done through observation, research, baseline inventories of vegetation and wildlife habitat, consultation with experts and periodic monitoring of the resources.” (NRMP, Page 84)

This essential periodic monitoring of natural resource functions and inventories of vegetation and wildlife habitat in Forest Park, as dictated by the Management Plan, has not been done.

In addition, the Plan specifies that there needs to be user surveys of the Park before any major changes are to be made.

“The first objective is to collect baseline data on recreational use in Forest Park and then to periodically re-survey the same areas in the future to see if use is increasing or decreasing and what the effect is on the natural

resources. These recreational use surveys should coincide with wildlife and vegetation monitoring to determine appropriate actions in each management unit. It is critical to begin this work as soon as possible to establish the present level use.” (NRMP, Page 85.)

To date, no baseline data on recreational use in Forest Park, as set forth by the Management Plan, has been collected.

In light that these directives from the Natural Resource Management Plan have not been followed, specifically those involving necessary regular monitoring and user-surveys, to significantly increase mountain biking in Forest Park would be in direct opposition to the goals and objectives of the City-adopted Plan, which is land use law. Other user groups – hikers, runners, and equestrians, need to weigh in on this process. Additionally, the Plan distinctly states that all options to increase recreation in Forest Park need to be first considered in a region-wide process, which is not currently being done.

For all these reasons, I would ask that if you care about the future of Forest Park, and feel a responsibility for this wonderful gift that our predecessors have given us, please write City Commissioners of Portland – expressly Nick Fish, Commissioner of Parks – as well as the Director of Portland Parks and Recreation, and the Forest Park Conservancy, and tell them of your concern. (Email addresses are below.) Time is of the essence. Presently, pedestrians have access to all the trails in Forest Park. That may change. Unless we are vigilant and honor the painstaking work done by those who have cared for Forest Park for the past sixty years, we risk losing – in the next ten – the natural resource qualities that make up this grand and beautiful wilderness forest that uniquely defines our city and sets us singularly apart ... our Forest Park.

Yours sincerely,

Marcy Cottrell Houle

The Following are Email Addresses of Those Needing to Hear Your Concerns:

Commissioner Nick Fish nick@ci.portland.or.us

Commissioner Amanda Fritz amanda@ci.portland.or.us

Commissioner Dan Saltzman HYPERLINK "<mailto:dsaltzman@ci.portland.or.us>"
dsaltzman@ci.portland.or.us

Commissioner Randy Leonard randy@ci.portland.or.us

Mayor Sam Adams Mayorsam@ci.portland.or.us

Zari Santner, Director of Parks pkzari@ci.portland.or.us

Forest Park Conservancy:
c/o Michelle Boussard, CEO michelle@forestparkconservancy.org

Specific Points That Can Be Addressed:

Tell of your concern about increasing singletrack mountain biking in Forest Park.

Express the need to follow the City-adopted “Forest Park Natural Resources Management Plan”, especially the directives concerning resource monitoring and recreational user group surveys, neither of which has been done. These things are required to be completed before an increase of *any* kind of use is allowed.

Remind City officials that the Natural Resources Management Plan was adopted by the City Council and, as such, is land use law. Under State Mandate Goal 5, the Plan still stands as the guiding document regarding all management decisions effecting Forest Park.

Stress that any discussion about increasing mountain biking in Forest Park needs be a public, open process, not behind closed doors.

State that other user groups, not only mountain bikers, need to be represented in these discussions, too.

Presently, pedestrians have access to all the trails in Forest Park. Let people know if you believe this should continue.

Stress the importance and need for region-wide planning efforts regarding mountain biking, not just focusing on Forest Park.

REFERENCES:

1. HYPERLINK "<http://bikeportland.org/2009/04/06/local-shop-commits-50000-to-forest-park-singletrack-effort/>" <http://bikeportland.org/2009/04/06/local-shop-commits-50000-to-forest-park-singletrack-effort/>
2. HYPERLINK "<http://bikeportland.org/2009/04/06/local-shop-commits-50000-to-forest-park-singletrack-effort/>" <http://bikeportland.org/2009/04/06/local-shop-commits-50000-to-forest-park-singletrack-effort/>

3. HYPERLINK "http://bikeportland.org/2008/12/17/a-new-plan-for-mtb-access-in-forest-park/" <http://bikeportland.org/2008/12/17/a-new-plan-for-mtb-access-in-forest-park/>
4. HYPERLINK "http://bikeportland.org/2008/12/17/a-new-plan-for-mtb-access-in-forest-park/" <http://bikeportland.org/2008/12/17/a-new-plan-for-mtb-access-in-forest-park/>

Forest Park Natural Resources Management Plan. Prepared by Portland Parks and Recreation and Bureau of Planning. Adopted by City Council February 8, 1995; Ordinance No 168509.

One City's Wilderness; Portland's Forest Park, second edition. Marcy Cottrell Houle. 1996. Oregon Historical Society Press.