

10-2020 ‘State of the Mad Rabbit’ Position Paper - Laraine Martin, Executive Director, and Routt County Riders’ Board of Directors

Trail use in the Yampa Valley may start to slow as we move through October, but it’s important to remember that we are at a critical moment in the development and success of the ‘big picture’ for the future of trails in the area. In particular, the Rabbit Ears trail network is currently under NEPA analysis overseen by our Forest Service partners. In our opinion, this is the most important piece of the Trails Alliance Proposal approved in 2013 by a 70%-plus majority of our community. This piece will tie the rest of our trail network together and relieve pressure on high-traffic zones, such as Buffalo Pass. We will soon enter into a public comment period on this next phase of multi-use trail development.

Completing the Rabbit Ears trail network is critical to ensuring that the original Trails Alliance Proposal meets its intended goals of creating multiple well-rounded, diverse trail networks, and exceptional experiences for all users.

The summer of 2020 has brought a marked increase in the number of recreationalists enjoying their public lands. Routt County Riders (in partnership with the City of Steamboat) has been collecting trail usage numbers using TrafX data counters since the snow melted from our riding areas. Our data shows up to 50% increases in the number of trail users across almost all counter sites. This is especially important to keep in mind when we consider that 2020 has not been anywhere *near* as heavily ‘marketed’ as in past years. In fact, at the beginning of our spring/summer trail use season, people were effectively being *discouraged* from visiting Steamboat and other similar rural mountain towns due to Governor Polis’ public health orders. Sporting events and live concerts were cancelled across the board. Societal pressure built to limit travel around the state. But when we transitioned from ‘Safer at Home’ to ‘Safer at Home in the Great, Vast Outdoors’ in June, just as the trail use season was fully opening from spring thaw, everything changed.

Clearly, trail use is on the rise in Steamboat, and in numbers that our networks are not equipped to handle. The recent trail network expansion on Buffalo Pass is not a stand-alone explanation for this overcrowding issue. According to the Trails Alliance Proposal, the Rabbit Ears zone was originally intended to reach completion prior to Buffalo Pass. It was also intended to be the primary area for trail development, diverting public land users on approach from I-70 and US40 before they even reached the networks closer to Steamboat. Overcrowding has also been exacerbated by the 2020 season closure of the Steamboat Bike Park. The ski area’s primary focus on winter recreation has resulted in significant and repeated Bike Park closures - and with ambitious construction projects planned for the near future, these may continue to occur. We cannot rely on the privately-managed Steamboat Bike Park to reduce pressure on other local networks.

The Rabbit Ears trail network will soon enter the next phase of public comment under the NEPA process. **It is the view of Routt County Riders that our community should insist on the timely and effective implementation of these trails. In particular, we encourage our community to insist on the following priorities:**

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1. ***Maintain the overall mileage and diversity of trails as outlined in the late-summer 2019 Preliminary Proposed Action.*** Rabbit Ears is intended as a nexus trail use area. In order to be so, it must serve a wide range of users. This means maintaining a plan that allows for different trail difficulty ratings along varying terrain that is well-rounded and provides at least the suggestion of directionality. The March 2019 Keystone Policy Center Final Report (from Routt Rec Roundtable meetings) noted participant feedback that “Ferndale and the West

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Summit accomplish a lot of the economic goals that 2A set out for. It provides something different and a relief valve for Buff Pass.”

2. ***Keep a portion of trails as user-specific and/or directional.*** Many trail use conflicts and safety concerns can be solved by encouraging positive etiquette. However, the ability to insert segments within a trail network for hikers-only or bikes-only (and specifically downhill/directional for bikes) has an immediate impact on the user experience in those networks. For example, the NPR directional trail on Emerald and Spring Roll on Spring Creek have both greatly reduced conflict between users by providing fun bikes-only downhill routes where higher speeds can be diverted away from multi-use trails. Local hiking-only trails provide a more enjoyable experience for those users. We believe our community is clamoring for an increase in the trails on Emerald and Buff Pass that are designated as directional or user-specific. It’s almost inconceivable to try and map out a trail nexus without any intent to do so with this in mind. As trails become more crowded, the need for directionality will only increase. Each location on Rabbit Ears deserves a hard look to maintain the planning for user-specific and/or directional trails.
3. ***Clarify the appropriate usage of the term “Roadless Area”.*** A common anti-trails argument in our area conflates Roadless Areas with Wilderness Areas. These two terms are not synonymous. [Please link to the Colorado Roadless Rule here to understand appropriate interpretation of the rule.](#) There is a misconception that Roadless areas are not designated or appropriate for trail development. The Colorado Roadless Rule is intended more to restrict high-impact extractive and industrial use and states directly:

“Roadless areas are important because they are, among other things, sources of drinking water, important fish and wildlife habitat, ***semi-primitive or primitive recreation areas, including motorized and non-motorized recreation opportunities,*** and naturally appearing landscapes.”

In other words, Roadless Areas ARE appropriate for trail development. Furthermore, the Roadless Area in question on Rabbit Ears borders Highway 40. The proposed Rabbit Ears trail network would only impact a small portion of the Roadless Area in proximity to the highway corridor and leave the vast majority of this Roadless Area undeveloped. We understand that the intention in protecting these Roadless Areas is also to bring up their susceptibility to fragmentation of wildlife habitat or corridor. As always, we support the inclusion of seasonal closures on trails in these areas when appropriate. Good trail network planning can easily mitigate much of the disturbance to wildlife. For example, at a Routt Recreation Roundtable meeting in January of 2019, Colorado Parks and Wildlife staff agreed that “certain trails and trail connectivity will create more wildlife impacts, so adding trails where there is already human activity would be better. CPW supports trails in the Ferndale area because it would be able to fill a gap that current trails don’t offer and is surrounded on three sides by Highway 40.”

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Development of any new trail network comes with concerns. The first is that any addition to the overall trail mileage in Steamboat will create a management and maintenance nightmare for agencies that are already stretched thin.

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We share this concern. However, modern trail design lends itself to much less annual maintenance than the user-created trails of the past. The next level of reassurance for the maintenance issue is that stewardship of our trail systems, both financially and in-kind, is also undergoing a huge period of growth here in the Yampa Valley. The Trail Maintenance Endowment Fund currently sits at a balance of \$685,160 and has begun to grant out about \$20K per year to land management agencies - with a planned expansion to include nonprofit beneficiary partners starting in 2021. To add to this, Routt County Riders’ volunteer hours spent on projects in 2020 nearly doubled those from 2019, clocking in at 900+ volunteer person-hours thus far in the season. After an extensive blowdown of trees across all of our most popular trail areas this September, a combined effort on part of all land management agencies, private citizens, and organized volunteer groups cleared hundreds upon hundreds of trees and reopened trails in record time. The maintenance capacity is real. We must acknowledge that our trail users are steadily also becoming trail stewards.

Another recurring concern is that increased trail mileage will only result in attracting more trail users, exacerbating overcrowding. This sentiment is unrealistic and tries to avoid an issue by ignoring it and putting up barriers. Growth is inevitable. It is better to plan for it than to ignore, complain, or deny. The Trails Alliance Proposal and the Rabbit Ears trail network have been working their way through the public process for many years.

Failure to improve trail networks as usage increases results in overcrowding and a diminished experience for everyone. This specific multi-layered trail expansion project is intended to increase our capacity through each step in the process and improve our trail diversity for everyone’s benefit. By successfully implementing the development of the Rabbit Ears network, we will have made major progress in improving our trail networks, reducing overcrowding, and elevating the overall user experience. **In conclusion, the Trails Alliance Proposal was overwhelmingly approved by our community. The Rabbit Ears network is the most critical component of the proposal. It will be impossible to achieve multiple well-rounded, diverse trail networks, and exceptional user experiences, without it. If you care about our local trails, please keep your eye out for the NEPA public comment period later this winter.**