

City of Oak Ridge
Recreation & Parks Advisory Board
White Paper on Haw Ridge Use - Policy Options

Issue:

Haw Ridge Park is a multiple user area where there are increasing concerns regarding safety, liability and maintenance. Of particular concern are the issues created by horseback riding in and around the park (on trails, in parking lots, and along the Melton Lake Greenway).

Background/History:

- 1980's
 - During the early 1980's, park use was dominated by motorized vehicles and mountain bikes.
 - Vehicles used the pre-existing gravel roads (old double-track farm roads also nicknamed "Jeep" trails).
 - Mountain bikers also used the gravel roads, but branched out onto a few dirt trails.
- 1990's
 - City staff, looking for options to provide equestrian opportunities within the City, decided to allow horses at Haw Ridge Park on a trial basis.
 - The mountain biking community undertook an initiative to begin building additional, sustainable biking trails throughout the park. This initiative has continued to today.
 - These mountain bike trails are typically built by hand (pick ax and shovel) 'contour trails' (i.e., narrow, 18"-24" wide trails built, using a cut & fill technique, into the side of slopes).
 - These trails were reserved for light-duty-use (trail bikes, runners and hikers). Based on their construction as cut/fill, these narrow bike trails on mountain slopes were not designed or envisioned to be sustainable under the weight of horses (especially in wet weather when the ground is soft).
 - In order to make the trails sustainable, the trail-builders construct lightweight wooden bridges over water streams and drainage troughs, and water diversion features across the width of the trails on slopes to prevent rainwater erosion along the downhill axis of the trail.
 - Volunteers also organized to maintain the trail system – repairing areas that became damaged, replacing bridges and water diversion features, etc.
 - The City signed a memorandum of Understanding with the 'Friends of Haw Ridge' that authorized the group to make improvements and perform maintenance on bike trails.
 - In the late 1990's, several equestrian events were held at the park prompting an increase in the use by horses.
- 2000's
 - The trail system grew to be over 25 miles in length.

- The park started to see significant increases in trail users as a result of recently constructed, nearby neighborhoods, as well as the extension of the Melton Lake Greenway (Phase IV).
 - The bulk of the increase has been within the mountain biking community, and has included a number of mountain biking events and competitions.
 - Horse use also increased, including some horse owners and commercial stables that use the park for training horses to use mountain trails. There was a significant increase of horses using the mountain bike trails in addition to the Jeep trails.
 - Damage to the trails increased and maintenance by members of the of the horse riding community decreased.

Identified Areas of Concern with Regard to the Use of Haw Ridge Park for Horseback Riding:

- **Trail damage**
 - The weight of horses and the high ground pressure transferred through their hooves easily damage the narrow biking/hiking trails, resulting in unstable trail surfaces and soil erosion.
 - The horse hooves also tend to knock the edges off of narrow side-hill trails reducing their width and safety.
 - Damage to soil base trails is particularly sever when they are wet following a period of rain.
 - Signs are posted at the park requesting the trails not be used when wet so as to prevent trail damage.
 - By and large, mountain bikers have been very respectful of this use restriction.
 - Because the mountain bike community does the bulk of the trail maintenance, there is a self-policing of trail usage by the biking community.
 - Some horse riders have indicated that they intentionally ride when the trails are wet because there are fewer other users. This compounds the damage created by the horses. It also seems to indicate a level of general disregard for the well-being of the park and the efforts of the volunteers who maintain the trails.
 - Trails determined to be especially susceptible to damage from equestrian use have been posted to prohibit horses. Hoof prints, manure piles and visual observations have shown that these postings are frequently ignored.
 - Many trails have volunteer-built light-duty (<500 pounds) bridges and boardwalks built to protect sensitive areas that trails pass through. These structures have not been designed for use by bikes and pedestrians.
 - To date, existing structures have been volunteer-built and maintained.
 - Evidence indicates that structures have been damaged by horse use and that horses have gone around the structures, avoiding them but causing damage to the sensitive areas the structures are designed to protect.
 - Due to their remote locations, it is not economically practical to build structures capable of withstanding the forces generated by horses. Tools and materials must be carried to the work sites.

- Signage Controls: In an effort to separate the different uses, the City purchased and posted signs ("Not Recommended for Horses") on the narrow mountain trails deemed unsuitable for horses.
 - The effort was intended to move horse traffic back to the double track trails and away from the single tracks.
 - Despite this, horses riders have continued to use the posted narrow trails.
 - Many of those signs were vandalized (removed/destroyed).
 - Later, staff purchased additional signs ('No Horses').
 - These signs have also largely been ignored, and have also been vandalized and removed.

- **Sanitation/Clean Up**
 - There are frequent examples where horse owners do not clean up after their horses -- leaving droppings along the trail and in the parking lot.
 - Horses deposit manure piles in the park, in violation of the city ordinance 25-32.1, which requires owners to remove animal waste from public property. The manure piles are difficult for other park users to maneuver around, especially on the narrow trails that are most common in the park. Manure deposited near the many streams in the park or along the lake shoreline can enter the water, creating a pollution problem.
 - In spite of signs posted to prevent horses on the paved trail, manure piles have been found on the pavement, indicating the signs are being ignored.
 - Some horse riders regularly "muck out" their trailers in the parking lot, again in violation of the ordinance and creating a nuisance for other park users. Requests to cease this behavior have been ignored.

- **Liability Exposure/Injury**
 - The City has a liability exposure (personal injury to users) as a result of its management policies and ordinances.
 - Horses and bikes sharing the same trails (especially narrow, mountain-side trails) create a risk for injury for contact encounters, people being forced over the edge of the trail slope, etc.
 - There have been numerous anecdotal reports of near misses on the single track trails, around blind curves and while topping hills.
 - It is difficult for hikers, runners and bicyclists to pass horses on the Park's narrow trails without spooking the animals. Over the years, concerns have been expressed regarding horses and other trail users sharing the narrow trails in the Park
 - If trail and bridge damage resulting from horse usage is not repaired in a timely fashion, the City's liability exposure increases as a result of potential negligence in monitoring or maintaining the park resources in a safe condition.

- With the construction of the new apartments along Edgemoor Road and the extension of MLG IV onto Haw Ridge, the opportunity for bike/horse/pedestrian encounters that could result in injury is becoming more frequent.

Other Relevant Information

- Nearly 90% of the 25 miles of trails in the Park are narrow, hand built, natural surface single-track trails and include numerous light-duty wooden bridges designed for bikes and not horses. These trails and bridges have been built and maintained by volunteers.
- Horses are not allowed on the new paved greenway that passes along much of the northern edge of the park in order to prevent damage to the light-duty paving from steel horse shoes.
 - However, given that horse is currently permitted in Haw Ridge park, horse riders have been migrating onto the adjacent greenway trails and greenways edges.
- There is currently nothing to prevent large equestrians groups from using the Park simultaneously.
- The mountain bike and hiking community have assimilated into a group called Friends of Haw Ridge who assist with trail maintenance and take a responsible role in keeping the park in good condition. Horse owners perform no trail maintenance and continue to ride during wet conditions when the trails are closed to bikers
- The current average user of the park is younger and less experienced than in the past – often including young families either biking or hiking.
- Due to the limited sight distance on many of the narrow trails, it difficult for all parties to follow common trail etiquette whether the encounter is face-to-face or a come-from-behind encounter. In some cases, it has been reported that horses are 2-3 abreast on the wider trails thus creating a dangerous situation for horse and others.
- DOE does not allow horses on the North Boundary Greenway or the Gallaher Bend Greenway due to liability concerns and trail damage. In terms of over municipalities, the City of Knoxville doesn't allow horses in its parks; the City of Nashville limits horse riding to two parks, and it requires a special permit.
- The Board has received citizen input that the given current uses of the park, there are growing concerns as to whether the trail system can be maintained in a safe and environmentally sound manner given the currently available financial and labor (both City staff and volunteer) resources.
- Frequent User activities in Haw Ridge Park:
 - Cross-Country running / jogging
 - Geocaching
 - Horseback riding
 - Mountain biking
 - Orienteering
 - Scouting activities

Possible Options for Managing Use of Haw Ridge Park

OPTION	PROs	CONs	Comments
Leave all uses and policies as they are		Doesn't address currently identified environmental, maintenance, and liability concerns.	
Park "OPEN / CLOSED to all non-pedestrian users" system	Clear message to all users	Staff labor required to post status (an electronic sign controlled from CC?)	Would require closure criteria/policy, enforcement
Develop Permit System for uses other than pedestrian	Opportunity for users to 'sign up' to park rules& policy	Staff labor intensive; Requires enforcement	
City Ordinance on Park Use	Creates enforcement through fines	Would require policing to enforce fines/citations	
City Policy – Two-tier trail system with clear signage and enforcement	Segregate users based on trail suitability and safety	Difficult to enforce trail usage inside park boundaries	
City Policy – No Horses at Haw Ridge with clear signage and enforcement	Reduces greatest source of current concerns with safety, maintenance, and city liability	Reduces diversity of park users; has potential minor economic impact	
Work more closely with horse user community to establish a 'User Group' comparable to the biking user group	Potential to develop an active partnering relationship with the horse community		Would necessitate that the horse community take greater responsibility to 'police' itself
Allow all uses at all times by upgrading all trails to allow safe, environmentally conscious coexistence of all users/usages in the park	Maximizes users in a safe, well-maintained park facility.	Cost prohibitive; significant ecological impact to forests and mountain slopes to increase trail widths to 8'-10'	