



BOARD OF DIRECTORS September 12, 2005

Guy Burgess

To: Jim Reeder and Joe Mantione,
City of Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP) Department

Jim Knopf

Subject: Marshall Mesa-Southern Grasslands Trail Alternatives

Mike O'Brian

Marshall Mesa and the Southern Grasslands offer exceptional opportunities for both recreation and nature study. These properties include regional trail alignments, important riparian habitat, and several significant safety issues. Given the tight time schedule, the Marshall Mesa-Southern Grasslands Trail Alternatives developed by the OSMP staff identify many of the opportunities and, for the most part, accurately characterize them.

Adam Massey

Chris Morrison

Gary Sprung

We support the implementation of the majority of the alternatives considered. We believe it is important to identify the most important. Trail emphasis in the TSA should include: completing the missing trail connections, especially the external connections to regional trail systems; providing limited, but significant, opportunities for public appreciation of the Coal Creek corridor; and, correcting the trailhead and highway crossing safety exposures.

Holly Tulin

Eric Vogelsberg

Suzanne Webel

Of the forty alternatives identified, there are several that are essential to the success of the Trail Study Area (TSA) project and to the future of OSMP management of the properties:

- The Marshall Mesa to Superior Trail (Alternatives 10 and 13) and the Greenbelt Plateau Trailhead to Coalton Trail (Alternative 33) are previously approved, comprehensive plan trails. They are vital regional connections and must be included in the final trail plan.
- In addition, at least one of the major visitor proposed "white dot" trails in the Southern Grasslands HCA must be approved. This is essential both to provide the general public an appreciation of the area and to demonstrate that the hours of public participation and the strong public interest exhibited for some access to the area has not been discounted by the OSMP department.

The final trail plan must also address the safety issues associated with the Marshall Mesa trailhead and with Highway 93 crossings. We believe the proposed City Limits Trailhead (Alternative 2), the Community Ditch Trail Crossing (Alternative 3), and equestrian access to the Matterhorn cattle underpass (Alternative 25) appropriately address these concerns.

We have attached our detail analysis and recommendations for these essential trails and our recommendations and comments on all the Trail Alternatives. We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Trail Alternatives and have high hopes for the success of the TSA process

Sincerely,

Boulder Area Trails Coalition Board of Directors

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Marshall Mesa-Southern Grasslands TSA BATCO Trail Alternatives Recommendations

The adoption of the following trails and connections is essential to the success of this TSA process and to the future OSMP management of the TSA.

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| Essential Trails and Connections |
| Previously approved trails: |
| <i>Alternative # 10 New Trail from Marshall Mesa Trail to South 66th Street</i> Option 1: Mid-slope alignment |
| <i>Alternative # 13 Trail Connection from South 66th Street to Coal Creek Drive</i> Option 2: Trail located east outside the road ROW onto County Open Space connecting over to the Boulder County Open Space Singletree Trailhead |
| <i>Alternative # 33 New Trail Connection from Greenbelt Plateau Trailhead to Coalton Trail</i> Option 2: Trail that moves into the HCA to a limited extent |
| Additional essential trail(s) - At least one should be approved: |
| <i>Alternative # 22 New Trail North of Coal Creek</i> |
| <i>Alternative # 23 New Trail South of Marshall Lake</i> |
| <i>Alternative # 35 New Trail South of Coal Creek</i> |
| Related recommendations: |
| <i>Alternative # 11 Stabilization / Hazard Mitigation Measures on Damyanovich Property East of South 66th</i> |
| <i>Alternative # 12 Existing Pedestrian Gate south of S.H. 170</i> Option 2: Maintain the gate until public access / trail decisions are made for the Tallgrass Prairie East Trail Study Area |
| <i>Alternative # 14 Dog Management on New Trail to South 66th</i> Option 1: Voice-and-sight control |
| <i>Alternative # 17 No New Trails in the Fenced Riparian Restoration Area</i> |
| <i>Alternative # 18 Continuation of the Eagle Nesting Closure</i> |
| <i>Alternative # 38 Fencing of Trail Corridor for New Trail from Greenbelt Plateau Trailhead to Coalton Trail</i> Option 2: Do not create any additional fencing; rely on the HCA on-trail, on-leash requirements to adequately protect resources |

To be successful the Trail Study Area Project must-result in a trail plan for additional multi-use trail connections to the Coal Creek and Rock Creek trail systems and a trail that provides the public with opportunities to observe and enjoy the beauty of the Coal Creek corridor.

We can dramatically improve visitor opportunities in the area by connecting the existing western trails to the County's Coal Creek and Rock Creek trails to the east. Together with the County's planned north-south connection between the Singletree and Coalton trails, the Marshall Mesa to Superior Trail (Alternatives 10 and 13) and the Greenbelt Plateau Trailhead to Coalton Trail (Alternative 33) will ultimately provide a continuous trail loop paralleling Highways 93, 128, McCaslin and Marshall Roads. This will also disperse existing congestion in the west, reduce user conflicts, and improve the quality of the visitor experience.

We support the Option 2 alignment of the Greenbelt Plateau Trailhead to Coalton Trail. It provides a safer, higher quality visitor experience and has fewer potential resource effects than the Option 1 alignment. We also recommend taking a light handed approach to trail corridor fencing and the institution of new access restrictions. Fences are expensive, reduce the quality of the visitor experience, and can impede wildlife and livestock movement. Rather than fencing the trail corridors, we recommend giving the HCA on-trail regulation a chance to work. If it proves ineffective, fencing can always be added at a later date.

The OSMP Board of Trustees approved the Marshall Mesa to Superior and the Greenbelt Plateau to Coalton Trails at their August 23, 2000 board meeting. These trails also appear in both the Boulder Valley and Boulder County Comprehensive Plans and were identified as priority future trails in the March 2003 OSMP Trail Assessment and

Prioritization Report and in the recently approved OSMP Visitor Master Plan. This TSA process should confirm them.

The HCA components of the study area have a very low trail density and can support additional visitation. The HCA on-trail requirements and the existing protective fencing and closures of the riparian corridor allow us to designate additional multi-use trail alignments with minimal effects upon the natural resources. The previous existence of the undesignated trails and off-trail access by hikers and equestrians in these areas shows a significant public interest in the alignments, as does the public input during the TSA process. At least one of these trails should be designated:

- A new trail on the north or south side of Coal Creek connecting Greenbelt Plateau with Superior, to serve as a replacement for the undesignated and presently closed Wind Tunnel trail alignment (Alternatives 22 or 35). The trail can be built to avoid the riparian corridor entirely, while still providing visitors an opportunity to observe and appreciate the beauty of the valley.
- A route around the south side of Marshall Reservoir which could provide to an excellent "stacked-loop" trail system compatible with the Marshall Mesa trail system and offer opportunities for viewpoints of the Coal Creek corridor (Alternative 23). This is our preferred alternative.
- A connection from 66th Street south via the old road grade up to the Coalton Trail (shown in the Alternatives as a north-south crossing of Alternative 35). This alignment is perpendicular to the riparian corridor and would have minimal environmental impact while allowing visitor to experience the area.

In defining these alignments we should keep new trail construction near the periphery of the area whenever feasible. When possible we should make use of existing undesignated trail alignments for interior alignments to minimize new disturbances. We should avoid the Coal Creek riparian corridor and maintain the exclusion of trails within the riparian corridor, except for one or two trail crossings. We should maintain the bald eagle closures while the eagles are in residence. Should the eagles cease to use the nest the closure may be removed.

The following trailhead and trail enhancements will significantly improve the TSA safety and the quality of the visitor experience.

| Trailheads |
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| Recommended alternatives: |
| <i>Alternative # 1 Marshall Mesa Trailhead</i> Option 2: Close trailhead and replace with City Limits Trailhead Option 2A: Maintain pedestrian / bicyclist access with pedestrian gate |
| <i>Alternative # 2 New Trailhead at City Limits</i> Option 2: New trailhead built and new trail connection to Community Ditch Trail |
| <i>Alternative # 4 New Trail Connection from the New City Limits Trailhead (# 2) to Marshall Mesa Trailhead</i> |
| <i>Alternative # 36 Improvements to Existing Greenbelt Plateau Trailhead</i> |
| Recommended deferred decisions: |
| <i>Alternative # 26 New Trailhead in the Vicinity of South 66th</i> |
| <i>Alternative # 34 New Trailhead at Intersection of S.H. 128 and the Coalton Trail</i> |
| Highway crossings: |
| <i>Alternative # 3 New Community Ditch Trail Crossing under S.H. 93 using Existing Community Ditch Underpass</i> |
| <i>Alternative # 25 New Trail from the Greenbelt Plateau Trail to the Existing Cattle Underpass near the Old Matterhorn Site</i> |

We need to address the serious hazards presented by the existing grade level crossings of Highway 93 and the inadequate and unsafe trailhead parking on Marshall Road. The following safety improvements should be made:

- To address the traffic dangers associated with the existing Marshall Mesa Trailhead a new trailhead should be constructed at the City Limits property with connections to the Marshall Mesa trail system. Once this is done the hazardous parking at the present Marshall Road Trailhead can be eliminated. An access gate for pedestrians and bicyclists should be kept at the present Marshall Trailhead to serve local residents and bicyclists arriving via Cherryvale or Old Marshall Roads. The southern end of the trail connection from the City Limits Trailhead to the Community Ditch should incorporate both a bicycle alignment and a parallel, pedestrian only segment to avoid visitor conflicts on the steeper sections of the hillside. A connection from the City Limits Trailhead to the existing Marshall Mesa Trailhead should also be provided. In addition to enhancing the visitor experience by providing a new trail loop, this connection will prevent the otherwise inevitable development of an undesirable social trail between the trailheads.
- A safe pedestrian and bicycle crossing of Highway 93 at the Community Ditch must be created. If OSMP is unsuccessful in obtaining use of the Community Ditch underpass, a pedestrian and bicyclists overpass could be created by bridging the highway cut just to the north of the ditch underpass.
- A safe equestrian crossing of Highway 93 via the Matterhorn cattle underpass must be provided. Here it may be sufficient to allow equestrians to make use of the underpass without going to the expense of creating a new trail.

Trail Improvements

Alternative # 5 Improvements to Existing Trails (Marshall Mesa & Community Ditch Trails)

Alternative # 9 Improvements for Bike Access on the Community Ditch Trail

Alternative # 29 Allow Continuation of Parallel Biking Trail alongside Greenbelt Plateau Trail

Alternative # 30 Retrofitting of the Existing Trail for Biking Interest

We should also give consideration to improving the quality of the visitor experience along the existing Greenbelt Plateau road grade, Community Ditch road, and elsewhere in the system.

Wide, straight gravel roads make low quality trails and can create visitor conflicts between hikers, equestrians, and bicyclists. Revegetating portions of the road and adding curves and contours, similar to the County's treatment of the Coalton trail will improve the situation by reducing speed differentials. Improvements such as grade dips and tread width restrictions can be made without effecting emergency access requirements. Where the road tread must be maintained, a parallel single-track alignment can separate user groups without significantly affecting resources. The existence of such undesignated alignments demonstrates the public interest in them. Well designed city bike paths now make such provisions.

We support the following alternatives with some reservations about the details of the implementations.

Other alternatives

Alternative # 20 Limited Guided Hikes into the Coal Creek Riparian Restoration Area

Alternative # 28 Seasonal Wildlife Closures / On-Trail and On-Leash Requirements in the Douby Draw Natural Area

Alternative # 32 Implement the Habitat Conservation Area Closure to Current Off-Trail Activities

Alternative # 40 Management of Hang Gliding

Option 2: Create limited-use area for hang gliding

We believe the following alternative is best implemented in another OSMP location.

Not Recommended

Alternative # 24 New ADA Trail Loop from the Greenbelt Plateau Trailhead

We support the following "non-mapped" alternatives in principle. Implementation details are site specific. Application of the alternatives may not always be appropriate.

Non-mapped Alternatives

Alternative # 6 New Spur Trails to Historical or Geological Sites

Alternatives #7, 15, 19, 27, 31, 39 Elimination of Social Trails, Trail Widening, and Parallel Trails

Alternative # 8 Enhanced Education and Enforcement to Improve Compliance with Dog Regulations

Alternative # 16 New Interpretive Improvements for Historical or Geological Sites

Alternative # 21 Interpretive Signs / Materials Explaining the Restoration Process from a Remote Viewpoint?

Alternative # 37 Grassland Ecosystem Interpretive Trail / Overlook

Marshall Mesa-Southern Grasslands TSA BATCO Trail Alternatives Comments

The overall quality of the staff's evaluations is extremely variable. The content for the items that the staff has seriously considered for implementation is often quite good (e.g. Alternatives 1, 2, 10, 33). Assessments of other alternatives show obvious biases against implementation. This is particularly noticeable in the trail alternatives presented for the interior of the Southern Grasslands (Alternatives 22, 23, and 35) where 2 to 4 "Pros" are answered with 10 to 21 "Cons".

"Cons" listed for trail Alternatives 22, 23, and 35 are redundantly repetitive. Many of the statements are emotional and without significant justification or content (e.g. "compromises conservation goal for HCA", "greatly reduces untrailed habitat", "bisects HCA", "fragments habitat", "importance of keeping HCA free of trails"). This is a single, questionable argument repeated over and over again. Similarly, few mitigation items are offered for these alternatives despite clear evidence of trail alignments that avoid the resources of concern (see Map 9b).

There should be a trail alternative (or option to an existing alternative) for a trail connection from the south end of 66th Street to the northwest corner of the Coalton trail. Lumping this connection under trail Alternative 35 doesn't allow for a separate evaluation of its suitability.

Citing the loss of the entire Terra Foundation grant \$450,000 as justification for allowing no trails or stream crossing within the Fenced Riparian Restoration Area is extremely questionable. At the least the potential to mitigate this "Con" via negotiation with the foundation should be included. A crossing paralleling one of the private property fence lines should have minimal effects.

Bicyclists are singled out at several places in the document as creating undesignated trails (e.g., Alternative 4, Con 1). This is inappropriate and incorrect. Bicyclists may make use of undesignated trails but will not create them in a grassland environment (too many flat tires). Hikers and joggers are much more likely to create undesignated trails.

The trail alternatives dealing with biking trail enhancements (Alternatives 9, 29, and 30) miss the point that adding curves, contours, and narrowing the trail corridor all tend to reduce bicyclists speeds and alleviate visitor conflicts. The "Con" listed for Alternative 9 ...(more bicyclists riding faster)...is incorrect. The suggested enhancements will reduce speeds (which is a visitor conflict "Pro").

"Planned obstacles" is a poor choice of words for trail enhancements that help control alignments and reduce speed. Open Space regularly installs such features to control widening or braiding of existing trails. There is nothing in Alternative 9 that is "contrary to the Open Space Charter".

The connection from the City Limits trailhead to the Community Ditch trail might best be done as a trail with two parallel alignments at the southern end to separate hikers from bikers and reduce visitor conflicts on the steep hillside immediately north of the Community Ditch.

Although the at-grade crossing of Highway 93 at the intersection of HW 128 and HW 93 and the suggested crossing via the Community Ditch underpass (Alternative 3) resolve the crossing safety issues for hikers and bicyclists, there is still a need for a safe highway crossing for equestrians. Use of the existing cattle underpass near the old Matterhorn site (Alternative 25) could resolve this issue. Although a formal trail connection has been previously approved, it may be sufficient to allow equestrians to make use of the underpass without going to the expense of creating a new trail. In this case only minor modifications to fencing and gates to the west of the underpass would be required. Consider adding this possibility as an option to the existing Alternative 25.