

**Boulder City Council**  
**Open Space Board of Trustees**  
**Open Space & Mountain Parks Staff**  
Boulder, CO 80306

October 5, 2004

Dear Members of Council, OSBT and Staff:

After a long summer of high hopes, long hours, and hard-earned exhilaration resulting from the unprecedented consensus reached by the OSMP Community Group Forum, we regretfully have to advise you that the Boulder County Horse Association (BCHA) joins many other members of the Community Group Forum in our extreme disappointment with the recent turn taken by staff and the OSBT in their revised recommendations regarding the Visitor Plan.

For the first time ever, representatives of a diverse group of stakeholders representing thousands of citizens came together voluntarily to seek consensus on the vital OSMP issues that affect the very quality of life in the Boulder Valley. The Community Group Forum (CGF) comprised more than a dozen bona fide representatives of the spectrum of recreationist interests, environmentalist interests, and staff interests. Before this phenomenal group of people got together, the various entities had spent years in unyielding adversarial roles. Other advisory groups had come and gone, hand-selected ahead of time by various powers-that-be for their known allegiance to certain political views or for their very ignorance of the issues. This group was different. Many of us have been involved in OSMP matters for decades and have extensive expertise to offer. We were told that if we could reach consensus on ANYTHING, our recommendations would “carry a lot of weight” with the OSBT and Council. We learned, we listened, we respected each others’ values, we had a great facilitator, we even laughed a lot, and we did it! We reached agreement on almost all of the “core values” of the Open Space and Mountain Parks community.

Why, then, were our recommendations almost completely ignored in the “Revised Visitor Master Plan” that is before you tonight????

Key accomplishments of the CGF this summer, the disappointing recommendations of staff and the OSBT last week, and the actions we want Council to take, are summarized below:

1) The Visitor Master Plan. Staff and various Open Space Boards over the years have tried to engineer several Visitor Plans and Long Range Management Policies Documents, each of which has failed. It is our belief that the reason for these failures is simple: they were NOT “Visitor Master Plans” but rather attempted to be “Visitor Management Plans” and they went down to appropriate defeat. The Community Group Forum observed that the most recent Draft attempt, in 2003-2004, had the same authors and the same

predilection for inventorying a long list of woes, prescribing a long list of restrictions, and being painfully short on “The Vision Thing.” Instead of looking at expanding opportunities for the public to appreciate and love Open Space even more, or at making a wonderful asset even better for all, staff’s very first objective for the Visitor Plan was to “Reduce conflicts between visitors and ...resources,” followed immediately by reducing “conflicts among visitors” (p3). Yet survey after survey show that the public isn’t overly concerned with conflicts and is very happy with Open Space the way it is, with the exception of wanting more quality experiences. There are other existing and potential Management Plans for dealing with habitat restoration, local conflicts, and ecosystem protection; but this Draft Visitor Plan, like all the others, immediately got bogged down in the wrong issues instead of focusing on its mission: Visitors! The CGF tried to reorder the Draft’s priorities to focus on the benefits of Open Space for people, to no avail. **We urge Council to direct this Department to do better by the people who love, pay for, and own Open Space and Mountain Parks.**

2) Determination of Priorities. The City Charter sets forth eight equal purposes for Open Space, all of which have equal priority. However, the OSBT voted to emphasize protection of natural resources over all other Charter priorities “when faced with uncertainty about resource status, visitor use impacts, or effect on management actions.” Inasmuch as there will always be uncertainty in a program as complex as OSMP, this direction is not acceptable – because the Department will effectively become paralyzed by its own policy. Furthermore, we believe prioritizing environmental protection at the expense of all other purposes violates the City Charter. The “precautionary principle” may be a good sound bite, but it is terrible policy. Therefore, **we would appreciate Council endorsing the Community Group Forum’s recommendation, which is that “Open Space will strive for an appropriate balance among Charter purposes. Cases of uncertainty, conflict or impact will be resolved according to the focus of the relevant management area (i.e. recreational interests in the Passive Recreation Area, environmental interests in the Habitat Conservation Area, agricultural interests in the Agricultural Area, and all factors will be weighed on a case-by-case basis in the Natural Area.”**

3) New Trail Construction. Repeated public surveys show that the public wants more trails on Open Space. In fact, the current OSMP trail density (an objective parameter defined as trail miles per square mile of public land) is among the lowest of any jurisdiction in the Front Range, and the rate of trail building has lagged far behind the rate of acquisition. We remind Council that ALL members of the CGF – environmentalists and recreationists alike – agreed that there should be more trails on Open Space. Therefore, the CGF recommended that a healthy percentage of the annual OSMP budget be earmarked specifically for new trail construction. However, the OSBT voted to minimize ANY new trail construction, in part by allowing money to be spent on new trails ONLY after all other financial obligations of the Department have been met (thereby virtually guaranteeing that there will never be enough money left over for new trail construction). **We urge Council to ensure that OSMP funds be set aside – and spend -- each year for new trail construction.**

4) Comprehensive Trail Plan. In its April Draft, Staff laid out a few new trails on a map and called them the Department's "Priority Trails." However, the CGF spent many hours refining this map to illustrate where the public actually wants to see new trails – which are, in many cases, not the same as staff's ideas. We want new trails built to connect existing trail segments into a meaningful regional trail system; we want new trails to desirable destinations; and we want safe, quality recreational experiences. We are not advocating putting "trails everywhere" and we believe our recommended trails can be constructed while minimizing environmental impacts. The "CGF Priority Trails Map" is attached for your convenience. We have just learned that Staff is planning to eliminate any trail recommendations from the VMP. This is unacceptable in a Visitor Plan! Therefore, **we urge Council to direct Staff and the OSBT to include the CGF trail recommendations and map in the final VMP.**

5) Off-trail use. Approximately 43% of the entire swath of OSMP acreage is proposed by staff as Habitat Conservation Areas, with another 9% designated Agricultural Areas. At the present time more than 60% of all OSMP acreage is already closed (officially or de facto) to public access. If off-trail use is banned from many areas that are not closed now (such as all HCA's and all Agricultural Areas), the amount of Closed Space will soar and the public will see that it is being denied reasonable access to public lands. Even the CGF's most conservation-minded members acknowledged that there should be some flexibility in this matter. However, both Staff and the OSBT have insisted that there be no off-trail use in these areas. They also wish to close all existing social trails in these areas, and as we have seen above, they have set things up so that it will be exceedingly difficult for anyone to succeed in getting any new trails built in these areas. While the actual amount of off-trail use is very, very low, and there are no objective scientific studies to support the fear that off-trail use is jeopardizing environmental integrity in any way, the mere knowledge that we could venture off the beaten path (for solitude, for beauty, for independence) is very important to many people. The CGF recommendation was that "On-trail use would be strongly encouraged, but that some off-trail use is acceptable except in specific areas with documented fragile resources." **We urge Council to support this concept, and to recommend that most existing social trails be "designated" (i.e recognized as official trails) throughout the entire OSMP system.**

6) Public Involvement. The CGF recommended that implementation of the Visitor Plan include an ongoing advisory group forum consisting of citizens knowledgeable in OSMP issues to evaluate trail recommendations, develop and monitor research programs, devise pilot programs like dog certification, etc. Many of us have found both the current staff and the OSBT to be lacking in balance between recreationists and exclusionists; also, the OSMP has a short institutional memory; its members serve for five years and then they all vanish, whereas many members of the public remain active for decades. A standing citizens' committee would go a long way toward rectifying the imbalance of interests, and would serve as an institutional memory so earlier discussions and decisions would not get lost. However, Staff and the OSBT now want merely an "annual public dialogue" forum to discuss specific issues; to use "short-term ad hoc groups as necessary;" and to "designate a community liaison position." We believe that the public has a lot of continuity, expertise and experience that will be lost if this abbreviated, superficial

approach is allowed to go forward. Therefore, **we urge Council will come out strongly in favor of an official, representative “Citizens’ Advisory Committee” that will have a long-term relationship with OSMP.**

In conclusion, Council directed Staff and the OSBT to create a Visitor Plan that would “heal the rift” between the environmental and recreational groups. The direction taken by the OSBT and Staff at the last meeting will only make the rift more severe, because it throws out any attempt at balancing the multiple OSMP priorities. The CGF recommendations, on the other hand, were arrived at by laborious negotiations among bona fide representatives of the recreation and environmental groups, who reached **CONSENSUS ON ALL MAJOR ASPECTS OF THE PLAN.** It is true that we didn’t have time to address each and every element of the original plan, but I feel that we made the commitment to carry on with the process into the future until the major remaining issues had been dealt with to everyone’s satisfaction. And I believe that we could have reached agreement on even the thorniest, most intractable elements, given enough additional time. Yet staff and the OSBT have suddenly marginalized this amazing accomplishment and all this hard work. Their recommendations to you this evening do **NOT** incorporate ANY of the key elements of the CGF’s recommendations.

We did what you asked us to do, and we went a long way toward “healing the rift.” Each member of the CGF felt that we gave up some things that were important to us, because we could see that trusting each other and reaching agreement on the whole package were even more important. However, many of us now feel that we completely wasted our time, that our trust has been broken, and that the delicate balance we worked so hard to achieve is in grave danger of being destroyed.

**In the interest of adopting the best possible Visitor Plan, Council needs to direct the Open Space and Mountain Parks Department to endorse the CGF’s proposals as the central part of the Visitor Plan. Only then will the rift begin to heal.**

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

**Suzanne Webel  
External Vice President  
Boulder County Horse Association**

**OSMPVISPLAN1.COUNCIL**