

Memo

To: Ken-Caryl Ranch Master Association Board of Directors

CC: Chris Pacetti, Community Manager
Cougar Design Team
Ken-Caryl Ranch Open Space Committee

From: Sean Warren, Open Space Manager

Date: 7/9/2015

Re: Open Space Manager's thoughts on the final design for Upper Cougar Trail

The Cougar Design Team (CDT) made the best of a very difficult task and has done an excellent job reporting on all of the issues influencing the Upper Cougar Trail design in their Document titled, Cougar Trail Design Team Summary and Presentation of Final Proposed Alignment (CDT Summary). Thank you to Team members; Bob Toll, Dan Mullins, Scott Quayle and Susan Johnson for all of the time they spent on this task over the past six months. The community is fortunate to have such dedicated volunteers that care so much about our open space that they were willing to sacrifice time away from family and careers to make our open space better.

Eagle Nest Habitat;

AS stated in the CDT Summary, while all team members agreed on a large portion of the trail alignment, "there is not full agreement on every piece of the alignment". I also am not in full agreement with every piece of the alignment. While many of the biological concerns were minimized or reduced I feel that more could be done to mitigate impacts to the nesting Golden Eagles in South Valley Park.

While the entire project is outside the Colorado Parks and Wildlife recommended ½ mile buffer for Golden Eagles the Survey of Critical Biological Resources for Cougar Trail Alignments (Report), completed by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program (CNHP) in 2014 points out that Golden Eagles concentrate their foraging activity in a two square mile area around the nest (the ½ mile buffer covers only 0.785 square miles). The Report goes on to say that the nest in South Valley is surrounded on three sides by development making the south end of the study area "...the only location within the immediate area of the eagle nest that has not been urbanized by either recreational trails or residential

development. This location is the only local spot where foraging activities of the Golden Eagle can occur without potential for disturbance from either recreation or residential activity and as such is important habitat for nesting eagles.”. Furthermore, when the Team met with the survey biologists on March 2, 2015 the biologists stated that disturbance from the trail development could cause the eagles to leave the area. The biologists were unable of course to predict with any certainty the probability of this potential extirpation but simply indicated that there is a chance.

On the other hand, Bill Mangle (Natural Resource Planner, ERO Resources Corporation), who completed the Ecological Sensitivities Considerations section of the Ken-Caryl Ranch Trails Master Plan (TMP), indicated in recent discussions that he is more comfortable than the CNHP biologists with the proposed alignment but noted, “...efforts to hide/screen the trails or push them further north would give you yet more certainty.” In addition, Ron Beane, Senior Wildlife Biologist that works with Bill at ERO recommended not building trails south of Docmann Gulch which makes a decision to approve the proposed alignment for upper Cougar Trail more palatable if there is a commitment from the community to preserve this area.

These somewhat conflicting views do not provide the clarity one would hope for when making a decision about this project. The CDT Summary raises the question regarding the potential extirpation of the eagles, “What is the tipping point?”. Are these eagles so habituated to development that one more trail will have a negligible impact or will one more trail be the final straw that drives the eagles away? Should we be more focused on protecting areas south of Docmann Gulch and less concerned about impacts caused by the current proposal? Nobody knows where the tipping point is but everybody seems to agree that crossing that threshold is a bad thing.

Visual Impacts;

When built, climbing sections of this trail will be visible from many of the roadways and households in the Valley development. It will also be visible to westbound motorists on Ken-Caryl Ave. when entering the Valley. Ironically, the original alignment would have caused less visual impact within the Valley viewshed but would have created a less aesthetically pleasing experience to trail users because of its proximity to the Lockheed Martin building in South Valley. The rawness of the trail cut will fade over time but will be quite noticeable in the beginning and there will likely be negative feedback from the community as the project is being built and immediately after its completion. The fact that the climbing sections of the trail weave in and out of areas of shrub cover means that the taller vegetation should help to hide the trail cut and as ground cover fills in over time the bare ground around the trail will be less visible.

Riparian Areas;

Riparian areas provide a variety of functions for wildlife and humans. Besides being areas of high biodiversity that are essential to the health and well being of many wildlife species in Colorado, they also act as migration corridors for wildlife. I feel like the majority of issues related to impacts of the trail

crossing riparian areas have been mitigated but would have liked to see the proposed alignment make a more efficient crossing of the “hidden valley” area (F2, on the final design map). Because of the steeply sloping topography on either side of the valley it is likely that wildlife movement is concentrated in the valley bottom more than in areas in flatter topography where opportunities to move within a riparian area are more numerous. Because of the more circuitous layout, trail users will spend more time in this area and have a greater potential to disturb wildlife than a route that crosses the area quickly and at more of a right angle.

Fragmentation;

Leaving large tracks of land intact is generally best for natural resources. Trails cause impacts that are not always readily apparent (in addition to those that are) such as creating a conduit that facilitates the movement of exotic and generalist species into core areas which creates competition with more sensitive species. One of the options that the CDT considered early in the design process was a trail alignment at the far north end of the study area. This alignment would have been in close proximity to the SW segment of Lower Question Mark Peak Loop (under construction) but was eliminated as an option for a variety of reasons including a concern that the user experience would not be nearly as interesting as other options being considered. This alignment did have the advantage of causing the least amount of fragmentation within the study area. However, I concede that the proposed alignment provides a spectacular experience for trail users that offers soaring views and interaction with a variety of plant communities. Concentrating the climbing section of trail within a relatively small area also mitigates fragmentation.

In summary, I believe that the proposed final design for upper Cougar Trail is a better alignment, from a biological perspective, than the original alignment. Whether the trail finds the right balance between recreation and conservation is a much harder question to answer and is ultimately reflected by the values of the Ken-Caryl Ranch community. I feel that the spectrum of these values were well represented by the CDT members and would urge the Board to put high importance on their input.