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NEWS

Mountain bikers no longer ignored

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MOUNTAIN bike riders accustomed to unfettered access to remote property in North Vancouver District and the world-class trails found there should be prepared: regulation of their freewheeling activities could be coming soon.

The booming popularity of mountain biking on the North Shore combined with lax management and insufficient infrastructure is creating an array of serious problems that can no longer be ignored, acknowledged district council on Monday night.

An Alpine Recreational Strategic Study, presented to council at its weekly meeting by district planners, outlined key areas of concern in the heavily biked Fromme Mountain area.

These included:

- problems with traffic and parking on residential streets;
- unauthorized trail construction and erosion;
- disturbance of animal habitat;
- safety and liability issues.

The study - which was commissioned by council in June 2003 - is based on environmental assessments of the mountainside, stakeholder consultation and input from the general public.

The potential costs involved in its recommendations in addressing current concerns and building a sustainable management plan that accommodates mountain biking in the future caused a considerable stir among councillors.

"Mountain biking is an expensive sport - expensive for us, that is," said Coun. Ernie Crist. "It is interesting that we have never had enough money to maintain our trails for people to walk on. We've never had enough money to maintain our parks . . . now, all of a sudden, we're talking about \$970,000 for only one item."

Crist was referring to the projected cost of constructing two new 30-space

parking lots recommended in the study: one at the upper part of Mountain Highway and the other at Braemar Park.

To mitigate environmental concerns, the study proposed a number of options including:

- "eco-mapping" the area to identify sensitive zones for preservation. This would involve extensive research and likely the decommissioning of some existing trails;
- the creation of an extensive trail classification system for different activities and appropriate signage;
- a potential ban on night-riding.

Costs involved in implementing and enforcing these environmental measures have not been calculated.

Crist, clearly frustrated by the potential for further degradation and major expenditures, said, "I don't think the DNV taxpayers should assume responsibility. . . whatever we may say about the merits of mountain biking per se, the question is: is this the right place for this kind of recreational activity? Is it sustainable? Is it financially supportable? Is it conducive to this environment?"

"You're not going to stop it," said Kevin Bell, vice-chairman of the Parks and Natural Environment Advisory committee and member of the North Vancouver Stream Keepers. "They're already there and we already have illegal trails built. So now we have to work with the mountain bikers and try and build trails that cause the least amount of environmental damage possible. . . and figure out how to get money from these people. Do you use a permit or ticket system?"

"This has environmental challenges. . . and financial implications," said Mayor Janice Harris, but council had never moved forward on the premise of "disallowing mountain biking. . . We have always gone on the premise that

we are going to manage our outdoor recreational usage. . . in an environmentally sustainable fashion."

"There weren't any problems when it was just a few of us back in the '80s, you know, cutting some trail and doing our thing," said Lee Lau, a longtime mountain biker and representative of the 850-member North Shore Mountain Bike Association. "But there are so many people involved now. I understand the need to do something."

A decision on how to proceed on the issue will be made by council during a special and as-yet-unscheduled meeting with planning staff, before bringing it back to council for further public discussion.

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