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**War of the Woods — A win-win in the forest?**



Rob Newell

**Katherine Steig, longtime advocate for the old growth forest, is pleased a forest management plan is in the works.**

**By Jennifer Maloney**  
*Jun 02 2005*

It was just one line. One line crammed between paragraphs of a bureaucratic text addressing the merits of having a 27-hole golf course in an undeveloped area of West Vancouver, but it caught one resident's attention.

"One member of West Vancouver staff noted in the report that there was an old growth stand in this area and said it could be of community value," remembers Katherine Steig, a resident who would become active in protecting the area. "Very few people were aware of what old growth really was at that time, but what we had right in our own backyard was old growth and it was significant."

The discovery became a political issue provoking a referendum, which overturned the golf course development. Now, 14 years later the area's fate is again in question with the proposal for West Vancouver's first bike park, which if built, would butt the south edge of the old growth.

"This is a special treasure to be looked at from a distance," Steig said. "The question is how close do you want to get?"

Steig was an original member of the Municipal Mountain Lands Committee, which formed to act as an advisory body to council after nearly 8,000 residents voted in a 1991 referendum to preserve the old growth.

She is careful not to speak against the idea of a community bike park in West

Vancouver, but its proximity poses a question amongst those who have fought for years to protect this land: Is this going to work?

On May 16, West Vancouver approved the site for the mountain bike development in principle, on the condition that a management plan first be developed for the old growth park.

"I think it's very important for all members of the community to understand council has only approved the mountain bike park in principle," said Corinne Amber, West Vancouver's park planner in a telephone interview. "It will only go forward after council has received and approved the management plan for the old growth park."

West Vancouver's three public high schools as well as Collingwood have mountain bike teams, but at the moment the approximate 70 students have no local place to practice, according to Rockridge coach Peter Bant. Instead, the students spend most of the eight-week season biking in the Seymour Demonstration Forest or the Blair Range area of North Vancouver. West Van schools participate in the B.C. school mountain bike races, which requires them to host one race per year and in order to host a race, the schools must obtain permission from the landowners.

"The schools in North Vancouver have no problem," Bant said. "When it comes to West Van ... I've tried over the last three years to have access to very basic, minor trails and have been turned down every time. They don't want to acknowledge mountain biking is happening on their lands."

Bant hopes the mountain bike park will provide a safe place for young families to ride together and for kids who don't want to be a part of the harried down hill scene to practice cross-country.

"It may be a long process, but I think the intention is to eventually have something like that," he said. "The idea is just to start off with something very user friendly."

Until a group of concerned citizens invited Bant on a tour of the old growth park, he'd only heard of its existence. He admits the hike, which was led by a person from the District's parks board, convinced him of its importance.

"It really is a remarkable area. There's no question about it," he said. "It's a delicate area. I agreed that the old growth [management plan] should go ahead first. Whatever they decide as a group, I'm sure we can live with."

Bant and other members of West Van's biking community are forming a North Shore Mountain Bike Association branch, a non-profit organization that acts as the voice for the mountain bike community. Amber said the municipality will include its biking community in the process.

"We will be keeping dialogue going in the mean time with the mountain bike community," Amber said. "What we're going to do is create a management plan for the old growth park. Once that's in place, we'll begin to look at ways to implement this mountain bike park."

"We don't want anyone going in there until we establish what this area can tolerate."

The oldest part of the 350-acre area sits at the top third of what appears to be a triangle. Years ago a fire killed a lot of its vegetation, but some of the yellow and red cedars that survived are up to 900 years old. After the first referendum saved it from being mowed over, the District commissioned an ecological study to provide recommendations on what should be done to the area. In its report, Oikos Ecological Consultant stated a growing public awareness of forestry, the stand's accessibility to the public, and a lack of coastal western hemlock within its climactic zone, as reasons the park should be preserved.

"In terms of the long term preservation of this stand the more undisturbed buffer it has around it, the better chance it has of remaining undisturbed as well," the report stated.

A second referendum held in 1993 confirmed a large percentage of West Vancouver residents wanted the park protected, but after that nothing happened, Steig said. Council didn't reconvene the Mountain Land Committee and a management plan was never implemented.

"This is why I feel it's a plus for the District to finally be looking at this," Steig said. "The task of this management plan to me is going to be to decide what should we do. How much public interpretation should there be? How do we best protect? How do we educate? This is not an easy thing to do."

A team from the parks department is being put together to work on the

management plan and Amber would like to see it completed by the end of the year, but this will depend on the length and complexity of the public process. "It was contentious in the early '90s," she said. "It is still very vivid in people's memories. You need to give it time to do it properly and find the best way to look after that area."

Steig says she's very supportive of the staff's efforts to take on a project, which will not only determine the fate of a very sensitive area, but will possibly set precedent of how mountain bike parks are created on the North Shore.

"I admire and respect West Van staff for starting this process and bringing everybody in from the beginning," she said. "Will it be possible to have a mountain bike park in that area and maintain its future? Can we in this community manage to have mountain bike trails in this area and develop enough ecological understanding to protect it at the same time? This is what we're trying to do and it's not going to be easy."

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