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War of the Woods – Mapping out the future

By Justin Beddall

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As the District of North Vancouver works on a vision for mountain biking on the North Shore, many riders hope that future will look a lot like the resort municipality of Whistler.

World-renowned as a first-class ski destination, the resort has also been cultivating a reputation as a top mountain bike destination in recent years. While that reputation is largely thanks to the creation of the Whistler Mountain Bike Park, which offers riders more than 200 kilometres of lift-serviced trails and mountain pathways, the municipality itself has been very progressive in terms of the development of its own trail system, including signage and construction standards.

“Whistler gets it; it works there. Everybody’s bought in. The resort municipality of Whistler is behind it 100 per cent. It’s not just the bike park, they’ve also got a trail network that the municipality looks after and maintains. A huge base of the population rides up there, but so does a huge base of the population here,” explained Richard Juryn, events producer for the North Shore Credit Union World Mountain Bike Festival and Conference. “It works. They have a trail crew...their full-time job is building trails.”

“We’ve been building our own trails for some time,” explained Resort Municipality of Whistler park planner Martin Pardoe, who noted that municipal crews work alongside local trail builders on trail construction and maintenance. “It’s always in progress, we’re always building trails.” Pardoe said the municipality has adopted a set of trail building standards in the 2003 Whistler Trail Standards, a book that could become the bible for other B.C. municipalities looking to create riding networks and boost tourism. The guide, a document that was reviewed and critiqued by, among others, members of the North Shore Mountain Bike Association, outlines in exacting detail the standard by which trails should be maintained in the area and also the trail type and difficulty level acceptable on municipal trails.

Environmental standards are also outlined.

The document lists five different trail types, ranging from Type 1, the highest traffic trails that have the most impact on the environment, to Type 5, which have very little traffic and thus a much smaller environmental impact. It also spells out the difficulty level of the trails, ranging from a white circle (the easiest) all the way to double black diamond, designed specially for expert riders. Under “environmental guidelines,” it notes “benefits for a trail for

recreational purposes must be balanced with the desire to protect the environment.”

As such, it recommends to “avoid critical habitat of rare or fragile plant species” and “avoid routes that impact wildlife species.” It also recommends a limited use of machinery.

And, knowing that wipeouts are an inherent part of the sport, the document also discusses “fall zones” — the places near technical features, jumps, bridges, etc. — where riders are more likely to wipe out.

In addition to trail network signage — which combine maps of the area and rules of the trail — the standards document also discusses trailhead signage, which gives such information as the trail’s name, the length, the elevation and, of course, a ride-at-own-risk disclaimer.

Juryn believes the District of North Vancouver would be well served to pore over the Whistler Trail Standards document and the International Mountain Bike Association’s trail building and maintenance guidelines.

“Certainly they are great starting points; they’ve been implemented and they’re working. Why re-invent the wheel?”

Juryn believes the fate of mountain biking should be decided by cooperation between the District and user-groups: “It makes it a heck of a lot easier if they’re on side, if everyone is working on common goals.”

Whistler, he says, has already figured out the benefit of mountain bike tourism.

“They already understand the destination tourist demographic. In North Vancouver, that’s a bit of a new commodity. In Whistler every thing is targeted to getting them there and giving them a great user experience.” That could happen in North Van too. “I think once the studies are done when there’s a realization of how much revenue it’s bringing into the North Shore,” Juryn added.

Coun. Ernie Crist isn’t convinced that the future of mountain biking is free riding. Instead, the longtime councillor has a different vision for the future: working with the Greater Vancouver Regional District, the province and the private sector to create a biking-appropriate area somewhere in the vast tracks of land located beyond the District’s borders, as is the case in Whistler.

Residents, too, have argued that the sport has become so popular that, like skiing and snowboarding, it now needs its own designated spot.

Crist, vilified by local riders for his stance — which is to say he has nothing against mountain biking, just mountain biking on a steep, forested mountain — is quick to point out that he has been involved in the protection of the North Shore mountains for several decades. In fact, he and a North Van teacher represented the North Shore when the Greater Vancouver Regional District’s Liveable Region Plan was drawn up more than 30 years ago. According to Crist, at that time, under the GVRD’s Liveable Region Plan, the North Shore mountains were planned for high-density residential development.

Fortunately, they convinced the GVRD the mountains should be saved for recreation.

Still, the ultimate solution to the future of mountain bike problem on the North Shore will be outlined in the form of the Alpine Study, which, after a series of delays, is due later this summer.

