

To: City of La Crosse Park Board

From: Joshua Miner, 2225 State St., La Crosse, 54601

17 July 2024

Park Board Members:

First let me thank you for your service on behalf of all outdoor recreation enthusiasts – for the 20+ years I've lived in La Crosse, things have only gotten better and better in terms of our public parks and outdoor recreation spaces, and that is thanks in large part to the work of both our Parks Dept. staff and you Park Board members. Please keep up the good work!

I'd also like to remind each of you that these last-minute "public input" opportunities generally provide a forum for only those with the most extreme "anti" viewpoint to make their opinions known. Please consider all of La Crosse residents, and all potential trail users and not simply those of us who have the time and inclination to show up and make our voices heard – myself included! – when making your decision.

That said, I'm writing in support of changing the designation of Birch Trail in upper Hixon forest from hiking only to shared-use, effectively allowing bicyclists to use the trail. I remember very well when this trail was built (as part of the "Vista2" extension), with overwhelming support of off-road cyclists, with the understanding that, once completed, it would be a shared-use trail on which bicycling would be allowed. For a variety of reasons, that did not happen. I am very glad to hear that it might now, after many years of being a fairly under-utilized trail. (I feel that I, as a very avid trail user, can speak to the fact that Birch Trail gets far less use than other hike-only trails in Hixon forest – for example when compared with the farthest parts of Hickory trail, Miller Bluff trail, and even Oak trail.)

Birch trail simply makes sense as a shared-use trail. It is accessible only from other shared-use trails and is geographically part of what users would think of as the "Upper Hixon" system, where both biking and hiking are allowable uses. What's more, it is one of the very few "green-level" trails we would have for younger and inexperienced cyclists to use, and would complement to the current Twister loop across the road in Upper Hixon. (The current full Twister loop is approximately 3 miles long, so even with the relatively short distance of Birch trail, making it shared use would add another approximately 1 mile – 33% more – of easier riding.)

Friends of the Blufflands – not a mountain bike advocacy by any stretch of the imagination – has taken no position one way or the other on this designation change, nor have any of the major hiking advocacy groups in the area, and when the City held a public input session for actual trail users to voice their opinions about the proposed change in status, there were few if any concerns raised, while was overwhelming support for the change was expressed. I think it is safe to say that the vast majority of trail users either have no strong opinion one way or the other or are in favor of changing the designation of Birch trail. Keeping Birch a hike-only trail is a minority view.

I feel like I must also address some points raised by that minority who, for whatever reason, are very strongly opposed to this change. Many of us off-road cyclists are out on trails for exactly the same

reason as those who hike – for a calm, contemplative natural outing. Having longer trails that don't overlap and that visit beautiful vistas is ideal for both hikers **and** cyclists. As an avid off-road cyclist and hiker, I can say that this is true for the vast majority of people I know who enjoy our trails on two legs and two wheels. (Cyclists also have a tendency to spread themselves out, throughout our whole system, and also have a tendency to ride vs drive to the trail entrances, so informal surveys conducted at the Lower Hixon parking lot will no doubt create a very skewed perspective of “trail use.”) As I'm sure you are all aware, off-road cyclists – whether adults or kids on either the NICA or Adventure teams – give back to our trail systems in innumerable ways by performing volunteer trail work and by educating other users about “best practices” in trail use.

I think it is instructive to step away from the bike/hike dichotomy and look at the comparison between (for example) trail runners or hammockers, and hikers. Right now, trail runners and hammockers may go on any trail in Hixon forest. Many travel very quickly, or set up in very visible spots, and sometimes listen to music with Bluetooth speakers as they run/hammock (hikers often do this, too). Is this something that is “bad” or that “ruins the experience” for hikers? No. It is simply a different way of enjoying our outdoors. As the Park Board, you should avoid judging the ways in which users choose to experience our outdoor parks (as long as no one is physically injured). If I am interested in being by myself, alone, with “quiet solitude,” it is very easy for me to go out into the woods at 5am, or at night using a headlamp, or on cool or rainy days, when other users choose not to be outside. I'm not sure that “quiet solitude” is an appropriate general goal for a public recreational area the size and importance of Hixon Forest. There is very little that brings me greater joy than heading out into Hixon on a beautiful spring weekend day and seeing hundreds of other people doing exactly what I'm doing – getting outside – but in literally dozens of different ways, from hiking to biking to running to hammocking to picnicking to rock climbing to food foraging to “forest bathing” to orienteering to building natural structures etc. etc. etc. What an amazing, wonderful thing!

In that spirit, I'll end by simply saying that whatever gets more people out on our trails – using them, coming to love and respect them, and valuing them for the experience they offer us – is a good thing.

Again, thanks for your service, and please keep up the good work!

Warmly,

Josh Miner