

White Clay Creek State Park Trail Plan Comments and Suggestions



Introduction:

Mountain Bikers as a **User Group** have a diverse set of ideas concerning what makes a great trail system. Many, if not most of us love to hike, run and observe the beauty of the outdoors in addition to our first love of cycling. We have children of all ages, parents and grandparents and have good friends and relatives with special needs. We are as much a **Giver Group** as a user group. We annually contribute money, time, equipment, education and leadership to the regional trail systems. We are pleased to provide input to the proposed Trail Plan and hope that our ideas will be considered in the final design.

Bicycling activity is on the rise. The Outdoor Industry Foundation report from 2006 and Delaware's 2008 SCORP have some very revealing information about bicycle use for active recreation. The White Clay Creek State Park trail counters also show evidence of increased trail use by bikes. As frequent trail users we're seeing more kids and families riding on the trails. Three bike shops opened in New Castle County Delaware in 2009 bringing the total to nine specialty bicycle shops plus the various big box stores. There are many case studies where communities in the United States that have built great places to ride have seen improved economic growth and health of the population.

With all this increased activity, there are still thousands of local residents who haven't discovered our parks. Adding shared use connections to local neighborhoods will improve access for local residents. As you will see by carefully reviewing our suggestions we fully support most of the proposed trail plan. The current trail system is one of the safest and most responsible uses of land in the region. The new plan makes it better. By implementing the following suggestions we can make this trail system even better yet!

The following comments are offered by representatives of the mountain biking user group in northern Delaware and Maryland. In addition to members of the Delaware Trail Spinners, comments were solicited from local mountain bikers, regional trail maintenance volunteers, local bicycling industry representatives and the International Mountain Biking Association.

Key Concepts for Mountain Bikers:

- All new trails or rerouting of existing trails should be designated shared use unless a specific exception is approved by land managers with input from user groups. Criteria for such exceptions need to be developed. This process should be dynamic as active recreation is NOT a static situation. We call this concept "Complete Trails", patterned after the Complete Streets executive order signed by Governor Markell on April 24, 2009. Complete Trails connect

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communities to our natural and cultural resources and to each other in a beautiful and safe environment.

- All new trails or rerouting of existing trails should be designed and built to the latest sustainability philosophy within Delaware State Parks.
- Public lands should serve as wide a segment of the population as possible with due regard given to protecting the environment. These lands should also support connections to communities, towns, and local and national parks. Increasing user diversity should also be considered when projects are proposed and funded.
- A trail system should include a variety of trail difficulty levels. While a particular trail loop should be consistent, having a percentage of beginner, intermediate and advanced trail loops is desirable. Our user group is diverse but we share many common goals. Like improving our skills, physically challenging our endurance, or just having a causal group ride with our friends. This spectrum of trail difficulty also leads to safer users as it allows skill development at a rate appropriate to each individual. We think this concept also applies to pedestrian user groups.

Recommendations for the Current Trail Plan:

We have organized our recommendations into three categories. Several of the specific points include brief background information to illustrate why they are recommended. Others are self-explanatory.

Trail System Design

- We support the concept of a “spine” of “all-weather” trails to accommodate a wider diversity of trail use, in a safe manner, while keeping the overall trail loop system in better condition, protecting the environment, and reducing maintenance. Such spine trails have longer sight lines, are wider and allow families with both young and older members to use the trail system. All-weather trails typically have an imported surface that can withstand natural elements. This gives users an alternative trail to use in inclement weather. In conjunction with these all weather trails, new signage should be implemented to help protect the sensitive natural surface trails from damage during inclement weather.
- We recommend the flexibility to make common sense changes in trail alignments be incorporated in this plan. As experienced trail workers, we understand that conditions sometimes exist in the field that may not be clear on a plan or map. We recommend language that allows these corridors to change based on site conditions and future acquisitions. The

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Division of Parks and Recreation staff should be able to make adjustments in the field without a complete trail plan revision. These changes should be documented with details and possible sign-offs.

- We recommend increasing the difficulty level on more of the trail loops in this design. The trail plan and current system is very enjoyable for novice and intermediate mountain bikers. Evidence of this is the increased trail system usage. However, more advanced riders miss the “old days” when trails were more challenging to ride. Increasing the skill level, fitness level and overall “playfulness” of a trail and its features appeals not only to cyclists but those hikers, runners and children (both young and old) in our user group. There are several possible ways to do this in a sustainable fashion and we would be happy to assist in this effort. The attached letter of support from the International Mountain Bicycling Association indicates their willingness to also support such an effort.
- We support the addition of Skill Development and Education Areas in the plan. Areas should also be allocated that include pedestrian challenges. Adding “pocket parks” (some near parking areas) would fulfill this recommendation. A more “regional” view including city, county and nearby State Parks should also be considered for such facilities. Each pocket park should have unique features, but also some overlap. Examples of both bicycling and pedestrian features are: pump tracks, jump parks, log-over features, rock gardens, “North Shore style” features (named for ride parks near the northern reaches of the West Coast), climbing walls, and rope bridges.
- We support the expansion of the Skills Trail. The current trail has broad appeal. Hikers, bikers, and runners regularly challenge themselves on the skills trail and on the other technical trail features along the trails. We would like to see additional natural technical trail features throughout the park. These features create alternative challenges with minimal corridor impact.

Trail System Administration

- We suggest the addition of some “periodic special use” trails for special events, for educational programming and for users with advanced skill levels. These trails would be designated as “shared use”, but appropriately marked for their primary use and able to be allocated periodically to special uses for specific periods of time. Summer and winter nature programs for children, families and adults would be an example of this concept. Other examples include trail runs, night hikes or bicycle rides and special physical fitness training for different age groups. Adding flexibility for periodic events with large educational or fun factors would be another excellent addition to the trail system.

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- Consider periodic designation of certain trails as “one way” or directional. Several of our members have visited trail systems where this concept has been implemented (Fork Area Trail System, SC and DuPont State Forest, NC). The local users and land managers indicated this was quite successful in reducing the level of interaction and increasing user safety. We are not suggesting implementing a full-time, one-way trail policy, but it could be considered in the future if justified by increased user traffic. One such trail system directed bike riders and runners to travel in one direction and hikers in the other. The hiker could then see the rider or runner without having to turn around and riders and runners had less interaction with slower moving users. In these trail systems, connector trails remained two-way trails (with appropriate signage) while trail loops were directional.
- Consider allowing different “courtesies” on specific trail segments. As an example, a fisherman wants to ride his bicycle to the perfect fishing hole along a creek. He would not be allowed under current use designations. Signage could be changed to indicate this trail is “unsuitable for biking” because all riders are required to dismount when approaching other users on the trail. This courtesy change allows better interactions on a trail where the main use includes long dwell times or people carrying gear, but does not forbid any user group. In our area, Fair Hill Natural Resource Management Area has trails that are marked unsuitable for equestrians, but doesn’t disallow them on the trail.
- Finally, we think a stronger policy on limits to trail use during inclement weather is desirable. One change would be to protect the resource when trails are easily damaged by use (primarily freeze-thaw issues and use immediately after big rain events). Such a policy, in addition to the all weather trails, better signage and trail user education would benefit land managers and users. Park staff could leave parking areas gated that are primarily used for trail access. Parking areas that serve other uses should have lockable signs indicating natural surface trails are closed to protect them from damage.

Facility Improvements and Safety

While Delaware State Park facilities are among the safest and most “user friendly” facilities in the region, the following recommendations are presented as “best practices” from other trail systems that our members have visited or worked on.

- We recommend additional facilities be considered at trail heads, such as bike wash stations to minimize invasive species transfer, picnic tables, toilet and changing facilities and shelters from sun and rain. We also support moving the Possum Hill Parking Area closer to Paper Mill Road. This move will create a safer parking area because it will be closer to the road and visible by

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travelers on Paper Mill Road. The current parking area isn't visible from the trail and offers thieves sight lines that give them time to break into cars. The proposed parking area will allow a more sustainable trail connection than the current parking area (evident by current trail erosion).

- We recommend improving signage at trail heads and intersections. Signage for way-finding is quite good currently but, information about trail upkeep, volunteer opportunities, trail condition, trail difficulty, trail use and special events could be improved.
- We recommend discussing trail road crossing with Delaware Department of Transportation. DelDOT is developing policies related to "Complete Streets" which should include trail road crossing. Our trails should be considered "transportation corridors" so time and money can be applied to improve signage and road striping for immediate relief. Traffic lights should be considered at many crossings where justified by Department policy. When roadways are to be improved or maintained, trail underpasses or overpasses, depending on the topography of the crossing, should be installed. We can provide examples of safe and economical solutions if needed.

Summary:

The large and diverse user group known as "Mountain Bikers" has been working with many of the Delaware state and local park staffs for many years. We value the experience and expertise DNREC brings to our parks and trail systems and heartily support the proposed plan. We trust DNREC will receive the above suggestions as both thoughtful and constructive. Although there are many different views on what makes a great trail system, we believe it is possible to reach consensus on specific characteristics of a trail plan especially when a broader view of the "trail system" is considered. Such a regional view requires partnerships between different government agencies and user groups.

Volunteers from the many user groups in the region work many hours each year to do a small part to make the system safer and more fun for all. We value the relationships established over the years between trail users and land managers. We look forward to growing these relationships well into the future and helping DNREC implement the final plan. We would like to thank DNREC staff for inviting us to comment on the new White Clay Creek Trail Plan.