

Brandermill Off-Road Trails Proposal

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Overview – “Why Off-Road Trails?”

In 2009, the Brandermill Master Plan was unveiled to the community. The plan outlined sweeping recommendations efforts to transform Brandermill into “a community that is more livable, vibrant and exciting for its current residents, while providing a competitive edge among new neighborhoods in Chesterfield County and the Richmond metropolitan area” (Brandermill Master Plan, p. 5). Embedded in the plan’s recommendations, the authors identified the opportunity for new uses of existing spaces that could differentiate the community, including mountain biking.

The foresight of this recommendation could not have been more accurate, given the role that cycling and trail stewardship agreements have assumed in the greater Richmond region. Last year, Richmond was named as the host city for the World Cycling Championships, one of the most highly recognized international cycling events. The last time this event was in the U.S. was more than 25 years ago (Richmond2015, 2011).

Additionally, many community health initiatives have recognized and capitalized on the role of our natural resources in promoting healthy lifestyles. This year, Chesterfield County unveiled plans for linear trails to traverse the county that would connect communities to parks and natural resources (Battista, 2012). HealthyPeople 2020 recently launched their Physical Activity Guidelines, which included a recommendation for “structural environments, such as the availability of sidewalks, bike lanes, trails, and parks” (HealthyPeople, 2012) to improve the health of all Americans. America Trails, as cited by Battista (2012), advance that “[trails] make our communities more livable; improve the economy through tourism and civic improvement; preserve and restore open space; and provide opportunities for physical activity to improve fitness and mental health” (Battista, 2012). The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) contends that “trails help humans make sense of a world increasingly dominated by automobiles and pavement. They put us in touch with our natural surroundings, soothe our psyches, challenge our bodies, and allow us to practice traditional skills” (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2007, pp. 10-11).

The History and Evolution of the Brandermill Off-Road Trails Proposal

As part of the Brandermill Master Plan process, two concerns were highlighted that garnered interest from members of the community: (a) there are few designated areas within Brandermill that offer opportunities to explore natural areas, and (b) there are no “off-road” trails within Brandermill for mountain biking (Master Plan, 2009). The initial site identified by the Master Plan surveyors had been within the Millcrest Park area. This area initially appeared

conducive for off-road trails due to “changes in elevation ... [that] through a loop system of switchbacks ... could offer a small area that could be family focused for residents wishing to learn how to mountain bike” (Brandermill Master Plan, 2009, p. 217). Additionally, the authors felt that the area was easily accessed from an existing trail system.

This recommendation for off-road trails led one resident to advance a preliminary proposal for the Millcrest Park area trails through the Parks, Amenities, and Recreation Committee in the spring of 2012. However, after performing a more detailed field survey of this area, several concerns were identified that significantly impacted the viability of this site to serve such purposes. These included: (a) proximity of county-owned property and wetlands areas, (b) lack of parking areas to accommodate residents that would travel from non-contiguous segments of the community, and (c) relative isolation of this location in relation to the greater Brandermill community. Land use concerns were also verbalized by Chesterfield County officials during a preliminary planning meeting in April 2012.

During this process, alternate trail sites at Nuttree Park and Sunday Park were identified by Theresa Biagioli, Thomas Flynn, and Al Raimo. The Brandermill Master Plan mentioned the Nuttree Park area as an opportunity for trails, and segments of this park had also been identified during community roundtable meetings as a current area of weakness in the community (Brandermill Master Plan, 2009).

Benefits and Potential Barriers of the Nuttree Park Area

Nuttree Park is located in a more centralized area of the Brandermill community and possesses a significant amount of underutilized open space. The park links several contiguous open spaces, has multiple access points, and possesses an area suitable for some parking. Nuttree Park was determined in the Master Plan to be an area of interest for innovative recreational development, including a Frisbee golf course, nature trail, and dog park. Thus far, outside of the construction of a small gazebo, it does not appear that Nuttree Park is the focus of renovations in the immediate future.

While this site is potentially suitable for off-road trail development, some areas serve as riparian buffers for continuous and perennial streams. In addition, this site does not have the characteristic elevation changes that made the Millcrest Park site attractive to the Master Plan surveyors. After several field surveys and follow up meetings with Brandermill’s Assistant Community Manager and a separate meeting with officials from Chesterfield County’s Parks and Recreation, it is believed that these barriers can be overcome through use of evidence-based trail building techniques that are consistent with both national and local standards.

Benefits and Potential Barriers of the Sunday Park Area

While not identified as a potential site for off-road trails in the Master Plan, Sunday Park possesses many of the same attributes as Nuttree Park. The added benefits of a Sunday Park

location include plentiful parking, existing supportive amenities such as water fountains and restrooms, and a greater variety of terrain and elevation changes. This area is also more scenic and is already a hub for community activities. Outside of reservoir shoreline buffer considerations, there are fewer stream and low-lying wetland issues compared to Nuttree Park.

The projected issues at Sunday Park that should be considered include accessibility/visibility to non-Brandermill residents and multi-user conflicts that could develop due to the park's high utilization. While non-Brandermill resident use would be a concern for any location, Sunday Park is likely at higher risk, since the park is well-established in the community. Multi-user conflicts are more likely due to the allure of scenic views of Swift Creek Reservoir.

Potential Environmental Impact and Remediation Techniques

It is known that "well designed trails take advantage of natural land features" (USDA, 2007, p. 24) and that the key to long-term trail sustainability rests in engineering a trail design that harmonizes the activities of users within the environment. In meeting with Chesterfield County officials, it was suggested that the trail design take into consideration the recommendations of organizations such as the USDA. Some of these recommendations include designing trail "control points" to enhance existing features such as streams, while avoiding areas with critical habitats and poor soil conditions. Other engineering strategies to control the flow of rainwater would also be implemented, such as grade reversals and waterbars (large rocks or treated timbers that are installed to direct water off the lower edge of a trail) (USDA, 2007).

Additional trail solutions that would be implemented consistent with USDA recommendations include installing reassurance markers for trail users ("blazes") and installing trail causeways (slightly raised sections of trail filled with a rocky fill/ gravel and covered with a dirt tread) (Steinholtz & Vachowski, 2007). Strategies to enhance a positive user experience could include installing a trail head kiosk, as recommended in the Master Plan. The overarching goal would be to provide a range of trail experiences, from family-friendly paths to more difficult singletrack, laying out the trail network to spread across available terrain (International Mountain Bicycling Association [IMBA], 2012).

Engaging the Community's Stakeholders

As discussed in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's action guide entitled *Places for Physical Activity*, "success ... will depend on forming good relationships with various stakeholders who are invested in improving the community's physical environment or in facilitating trail development and promotional activities. Certain partners and stakeholders may be key decision makers whose influence within and understanding of the community are essential throughout project planning, implementation, and evaluation" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009, p. 9). The concept of engaging community stakeholders was also discussed in July 2012 with Chesterfield County officials who had trail building experience throughout the county. One strategy to assess and garner stakeholder support would be to host smaller-scale informative meetings, similar to those performed as part of the Brandermill Master Plan process (Brandermill Master Plan, 2009).

It could be expected that some community members would be cautious of this trail proposal, and it will be critical to highlight the benefits of this community asset and dispel myths about off-road trail use. Some friction in this endeavor would not be new territory in this region. During the construction of the rail-to-trail project at High Bridge Trail State Park, landowners who had initially been in opposition of the project installed fences along the trail, later installing gates so they could easily access them (Battista, 2012). Effective resolution of community and multi-user conflicts can also be found closer to home, such as the scenario at James River Park System (JRPS). In the JRPS project, trail users worked closely with interest groups and elected leaders to ensure as many stakeholders as possible were involved in planning this world-class trail system (IMBA, 2012).

Role of Volunteers and Volunteer Labor

While the Brandermill Master Plan identified “apathy among residents regarding volunteering” (Brandermill Master Plan, 2009, p. 27), off-road trail enthusiasts are known for partnering with their communities to build, maintain, and rehabilitate this resource. A collective sense of ownership and accountability is often developed during trail building projects and through sustained use. In 2011, mountain bicycle racing enthusiasts logged over 230 volunteer hours as part of the Virginia Off Road Series alone (Virginia Off Road Series, 2012). Countless more hours have been donated by off-road cyclists to Virginia State Parks, including the nationally-known trail system at Pocahontas State Park.

Potential volunteering opportunities for this endeavor in Brandermill already exist, as the local Brandermill Cub Scout Pack that is sponsored through Swift Creek Elementary has expressed interest in trail work service projects (Rioux, personal communication, September 14, 2012). No less than 20 volunteer hours have already been committed towards developing this current proposal over the course of 2012. In summary, volunteer resources should not be overlooked when planning trail construction costs and to also build stakeholder support within the community.

Next Steps

Next steps that are critical to the short-term advancement of this proposal include:

Review and revision of this proposal based on feedback from the “early adopters” of this project – including the Assistant Community Manager, Parks, Amenities and Recreation Committee, and Brandermill’s contracted master gardner.

Formal proposal prepared and submitted to the Brandermill MPOC, then to the Brandermill Community Association (BCA), with revisions as needed.

Should the proposal be endorsed by the BCA, engage in formal discussions with Chesterfield County to ensure regulatory/legislative requirements are satisfied.

Informal discussions have resulted in suggestions for a “preliminary plan” - outline areas of soil disturbance, structures that will be designed/engineered to minimize erosion, and incorporation of natural features/materials into trails.

Perform more detailed field surveys to assess costs for the trail system, and submit a detailed proposal as part of the fiscal year 2014 budget process. Identify community grants that are available and could enable project “start-up” in calendar year 2013.

Begin strategic activities within the Brandermill community to engage stakeholders, build community support, and identify additional resources (material & human) that could offset project costs.

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