**Management plans Side by Side Comparison**

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To the Andrews Community Forest Committee:

I have begun my analysis of the Andrews Community Forest (ACF) trails proposal with a side-by-side comparison of the original and now revised Management Plan (MP). My intent is to increase awareness of the arguments that are out there so that there can be resolution.

In doing so, I used the attached version of the revised MP. I would need to know if that version of the revised MP is incorrect, as I would re-evaluate my thoughts as then necessary.

My comparison of the two MP versions remains incomplete, but I thought it important to get this to date assessment for consideration by the Andrews Community Forest Committee (ACFC). It uses MP sections and subsections as an organizing principles, leading to certain redundancies and overlap.

I will forward separately a map-based assessment which includes a number of GIS-based layer sets in the form of a pdf Power Point Slide set and is combined with a corresponding text. These are meant to represent visually the foundation of arguments out there regarding the proposed trails plan.

**3.1:**

* It is specified that mountain biking is only allowed on designated trails. It has been stipulated elsewhere and often before that all trails are to be multi-use. It also was stated at the ACFC Public Meeting that all trails are multiuse, though it was suggested that the issue may be more of preferences regarding pedestrian vs bike use. Trail use policy needs to be internally consistent. If trail bike restrictions are in place, the trails to which that applies needs to be defined in the MP. Which trails are restricted and where is that indicated? (Also see section 10.6.)

**9. Wildlife Habitat:**

* Closure rules need to be part of the approved MP. Seasonal closure for reason has been considered. Specifying closures in the current MP draft and as stated at the ACFC Public Meeting is indicated for the future. There is ample evidence that such closures are important, as reported, for example, in the Naughton State Report on trails as well as the Field Naturalist study. Delaying these decisions will have an immediate negative impact on the trails with the known evidence that closures are important. That also would require a change in the behavior and education of trail users if such restrictions are put in place at a later date.
* Critical components for analyzing trial impact are embedded in the concepts of buffers and Zones Of Influence (ZOI), as discussed in the Naughton State Report and the Field Naturalist ACF study (e.g. see figures 3 and 16). It remains unclear whether those directly relevant studies informed decisions regarding trail location and, if they did, how. Discussion / explanation of these core concepts is important from a public understanding point of view accompanied by appropriate trail use rules, just as their application is essential to the MP.

**10. Recreation:**

* The Sip of Sunshine Connection appears to be a driver of trail locations. Though the area of the trail itself would appear to be in an area of low habitat sensitivity based on the Heat Map provided in the Field Naturalist Study (Figure 13), more needs to be known about how that trail affects overall trail use, as well as the ecological cost of making the connection. (Maps such as these are included in the Map study to be submitted separately.)
* VYCC wishes to be a partner in future trail development. This implies future trail development which is an issue in terms of ecology / wildlife sensitivity. Further clarification is needed here in terms of Section 10.8 saying there won’t be any new trails, only immediately to be contradicted (see further below).
* The general condition that the Forest is open anywhere to public is important and deserves further comment in terms of issues surrounding sensitive areas.

**10.6 Trail Design Map:**

* This presently is said to have been approved in 2022 by the SB: needs to be corrected.
* The degree of community / public input has been in contention. The impression of some is that there has been little ongoing opportunity for ongoing public discussion. For example, though there is a time for public comment during ACFC meetings, that comment is placed at the end of the meeting and restricted in time. In addition, the public is enjoined from joining Committee discussion, different from other standing committees such as the RCC and Selectboard. Public comment during running meetings certainly causes issues regarding timely completion of meeting agendas. However, it can be made to work, the example being Selectboard meetings.

The March 29 ACFC Public meeting was an important positive step forward here: more such opportunities are worthy of consideration. The ability to submit post-meeting comments was extremely positive, however, the deadline for doing so was not provided at the meeting , and no public announcement such as on FPF was made.

* The ACFC plans to seek advice from the Richmond Trails and Richmond Mountain Trails Committees. It would seem appropriate that RCC be part of the regular discussion loop beyond that due to joint RCC / ACFC membership, and as is said to be called for in the Town Plan.
* As discussed above, discussion of ZOIs is absent in terms of purpose, intent and application. A 200-foot buffer (actually ZOI) was said in the MP to be aspirational in terms of being able to build a trails network in the Forest. It would not appear aspirational from an ecological point of view based on literature evidence regarding buffer importance and width. Nor is not thought “best practices” in several cases as described in the Naughton State Report and the Field Naturalist ACF study.

A map analysis indicates that much of the proposed trails system holds up fairly well regarding a 200-foot ZOI, with the exception of the Hemlock Valley trail. Important sensitive area buffers (as opposed to ZOIs) also need to be appreciated. Good examples are buffering vernal pools and Dry Oak Forest.

* The current plan appears in certain conflict with the ecological and wildlife sensitivities in the Northeast sector. Additional consideration is warranted as to whether there should be but one trail in a location not too dissimilar from that proposed in the 2018 MP Concept Map (East Climb).

**10.8 Future trails:**

* The statement is made that there will not be expansion, as also was stated at the March 29 ACFC Public Meeting. That is immediately followed in this MP section by how expansion might be undertaken. The issue as to whether there will or will not be future trails needs to be resolved.

**10.11 Trail Design:**

* It is important to have a monitoring protocol in place within the MP. There is no concrete plan regarding trail monitoring: this remains a future goal. There can be no doubt that this is a difficult undertaking, as discussed at the CFC March 29 Public meeting. However, the importance of monitoring trail use is highlighted in the ACF Field Naturalist Report which includes a process for doing so. Absent some sort of monitoring protocol, it remains unclear how will it be determined, as indicated in the draft MP, that rules / trail use, etc., will be revised when the need becomes apparent and where responsibility resides.
* Should the Hemlock Valley trail be approved, it appears that seasonal closure is an important condition, again from ACFC discussion, discussion at the ACFC March 30 Public Meeting and as summarized in the Naughton State Report and the Field Naturalist study. That area includes a deer wintering area thought important professionally to require seasonal closure.
* Text under Explore Future Opportunities has dropped language regarding rules for winter multi-use, e.g. skiing and fat-biking and how wildlife might be affected. A rationale for doing so is needed.
* As noted before, there appear to be conflicting statements regarding whether there could or could not be expansion. Important to resolve.
* Language regarding trail grooming for expanded use (e.g. fat-biking) is retained. Discussion of ecological impact would be an important add.

**Other:**

* The need to modify rules as use requires is noted (under Monitoring) but what are the founding rules? There is a description of general rules for the Forest (3.1). Important would be a concise summary list of trail rules in the MP (and at the kiosk). Would include seasonal closures, respect for ZOIs and buffers and the like.
* Virtually the entire focus of study was on the ACF itself in assessing ecological / wildlife sensitivity. Little is said about the larger scale in terms of connectivity, core forest, highest priority wildlife habitat, Upland natural communities and like features, …

**ACFC Public Meeting: further thoughts**

* The statement was made that e-bikes are an allowed use. There is no mention of e-bikes in the revised MP; nor discussion of e-bikes from a motorized point of view. This needs to be resolved.

**REFERENCES**

Naughton, M. “Wildlife and Managing Trail Use Effects”

University of Vermont Field Naturalist study: “Landscape Analysis and Wildlife in the Andrews Community Forest, Richmond, Vermont

Biofinder

ANR VGIS library