

To: Community Services Committee – *Councillors Murray and Friesen*

From: Active Trails Whitehorse Association

Date: February 14, 2022

Topic: Pee Wee Hill

The approximately 148-metre Pee Wee Hill trail allows non-motorized users access to the Grey Mountain trail network. It has been a subject of discussion for many years, as there are a multitude of problems associated with its use.

The trail is deemed to be quite steep for the average user. It is slippery in winter due to snow cover, and in spring becomes “slick with mud on top of melting ice.” These characteristics lead to both access and safety issues for users.

In fact, City administration considers the trail (in its present condition) to be “unsustainable”. (Parks Oct. 8, 2021 email to ATWA)

Concern has also been expressed that descending mountain bikers, skiers, snowboarders, and those using sleds, present a potential danger to ascending users due to the trail’s steepness, a lack of adequate trail width to allow safe passage between users, poor sight lines, an uneven surface, and at times slippery conditions.

The trail serves as an access route for Fire Protection Services, who use a specialized ATV to deal with potential wild fires in the area above Pee Wee hill, and improvements to the existing trail would probably be welcomed.

Many options have been suggested over the years to address the above concerns, and after a year and a half investigation ending in April of 2017 the City’s findings were presented to the Whitehorse Trail and Greenways Committee (WTGC). The following is taken from the Minutes of that meeting.

A) “The [Pee Wee hill] area was visited by City employees and the proposed trail [adjacent to the Pee Wee Hill trail] was deemed not sustainable for the area.”

B) “The new proposed avenue of widening and lessening the grade on the existing Peewee Hill Trail is what the City is currently proposing.” (See <https://www.activetwa.org/pee-wee-hill-trail.html>.)

Action #15 of the 2020 Trail Plan gave hope that the City would honour its previous commitment with regard to Pee Wee Hill, as it suggested that “trail improvements” [not new trails] would be initiated to Pee Wee Hill, Crocus Ridge and Heartbreak Hill trails.

Instead of following the commitments made in 2017 with regard to the Pee Wee Hill trail, the City completely ignored them when in September of 2021 it built a “switchback trail” adjacent to the Pee Wee Hill trail.

The Trail Development Policy and Action #15 of the 2020 Trail Plan are used to justify this action.

City administration has referred to this trail as a “sustainable grade walking trail” and one that was “built for pedestrians [and] has hand rails for walkers and corners not suited to bikes.” (Parks Oct. 8, 2021 email)

Yet administration claims the trail is built to International Mountain Bicycling Association standards, which would certainly suggest that it is intended primarily for cycling use.

When asked by the City to help build the trail, Contagious Mountain Bike Club (CMBC) volunteers were given the impression that it was a “climbing” trail and was being built for bikers. (CMBC Nov. 9, 2021 email to ATWA)

Whatever the case, all non-motorized users will be able to use the newly constructed trail in *either* direction.

In order to justify this new build the City needs to explain how the building of the new trail is going to address the concerns raised about the old Pee Wee Hill trail, and improve access to the area above Pee Wee Hill by non-motorized users and by Fire Protection Services.

Please consider the following observations:

1. In places the new trail appears to be as steep as the old trail despite the claim that it is a “sustainable grade-walking trail.” It also has some very tight switchbacks.
2. In ideal conditions it takes approximately 2:12 minutes to walk up to the top of the old Pee Wee Hill trail, and 2:50 minutes to do the same distance on the “new” trail. Common sense would suggest that once non-mechanized users find this out, many would continue to use the old Pee Wee Hill trail.
3. According to City employees in 2017, any new trail adjacent to the Pee Wee Hill would be “unsustainable”. Yet, now three years later, the City claims that its trail crew “was able to find a suitable option for this area.” (Parks Oct. 27/2021 email to ATWA)

This statement suggests that the City has not only found a way to build a “sustainable” alternate trail, but has also been able to address all the concerns raised about the old Pee Wee Hill trail. Unfortunately, the City has yet to indicate how the new trail accomplishes either of these tasks.

4. The old Pee Wee Hill trail will still be as steep and as narrow as it was before, and all users will continue to be subjected to the concerns associated with these characteristics.

5. The old Pee Wee Hill trail will still be slippery in both winter and in spring. As for the new trail it will also be slippery at those times, and this combined with the fact that it appears to be as steep in some places as the old trail, and takes longer to ascend may well exacerbate concerns.¹

6. Nothing has been done to make access for Fire Protection Services any easier.

7. One can only assume that most trail bikers will go up the new “climbing” trail, but will continue to come down the old Pee Wee Hill trail and so this safety concern has not been effectively addressed.

8. Some trail bikers may actually come down the new trail as they are currently permitted to do so. This could cause additional safety concerns if they meet other trail users on their way up. (The new trail is not wide enough to allow safe passage between users.)

9. This new trail simply adds to the myriad of existing trails in the area something that the City should be trying to avoid. A section of *Hooligans Plunge* (a rogue trail) is found immediately adjacent to the new trail.

10. Administration says that the old trail (in its current condition) is “unsustainable”. (Parks Oct. 8, 2021 email to ATWA) As it will continue to be used in the same manner as before, it will still be “unsustainable”.

11. Rather than address the problems associated with the old Pee Wee Hill trail, it seems the City of Whitehorse has potentially created additional ones by building the new trail. In fact, many of the problems associated with the old Pee Wee Hill trail have been mirrored on the new Pee Wee Hill Trail.

¹ A recent visit (February 8) to the new trail proved to be quite enlightening. As feared, it is as slippery in winter conditions as is the old Pee Wee Hill trail.

Unfortunately, a section of the trail has vanished under drifting snow, something that due to this section’s location will continue unless snow fencing is installed. The blockage has resulted in a few people taking “short cuts” to get to a lower section of the trail. It did not appear that any trail bikers had made the effort to get through this section, a smart decision.

At present, the old trail is the best route to use, although as indicated it is very slippery in sections. You can view winter photos of the new trail by going to <https://www.activetwa.org/photos.html> and scroll down.

12. The new trail has proved to be unusable by mountain bikers this winter due to the fact that upper sections of the trail have been completely covered by snowdrifts.

Walkers are also finding the trail to be of little use for the same reason. Those who do use it are still not able to get to the top of the hill, and are exiting onto the old trail wherever possible. Walkers going the opposite direction on the new trail are taking shortcuts across sections of the new trail, which makes for a very steep and potentially dangerous descent. (See <https://www.activetwa.org/photos.html> and [scroll down](#).)

Yet, according to the 2020 Trail Plan, trail improvements to Pee Wee Hill were to be implemented in order “to allow a wide range of users to access the trail networks in [this area] in all seasons.” It is obvious that the construction of the new “switchback” trail has failed to achieve this goal.

13. As per the *Trail Development Policy* any trail development *under 500 metres* does not need to undergo any oversight by City Council, relevant stakeholders, community groups, other organizations, or the general public. So, it would seem administration had the authority to construct this new alternative trail without consultation of any type.

However, to do so in this case demonstrates a clear lack of understanding as to what proper process entails. The City had already undergone an extensive review of the issue and had made its findings known to stakeholders, community groups, other organizations and (through them) the general public.

However, the latter were given no notification that the City had changed its position on the subject. Nor were they given any explanation as to why the City changed its position, or how this new “suitable solution” was going to effectively address Pee Wee Hill trail concerns.

Instead the City uses both the Trail Development Policy and Action #15 of the 2020 Trail Plan to justify the lack of consultation.

Despite what the Trail Development Policy says about new trail construction, the building of the alternate Pee Wee Hill trail defies logic, reverses a previous City commitment with regard to the original trail, and does not follow the requirements concerning new trail construction mentioned in the following documents as demonstrated below.

2020 Trail Plan:

Action #15 of the 2020 Trail Plan actually gave hope that the City would honour its previous commitment with regard to Pee Wee Hill, as it suggested that “trail improvements” would be made to the Pee Wee Hill, Crocus Ridge and Heartbreak

Hill trails. There was no clear statement that “trail improvements” might involve new trail construction in the Pee Wee Hill area.

Instead of acting on the commitments made in 2017 with regard to the Pee Wee Hill trail, and making improvements to the existing Pee Wee Hill trail as mentioned in the 2020 Trail Plan, the City did a complete about-face and in September 2021 built a new “switchback trail” adjacent to the Pee Wee Hill trail. (See <https://www.activetwa.org/photos.html>.)

Administration is well aware of Action #12 of the 2020 Trail Plan, which reads as follows:

“In collaboration with Strategic Communications provide communication updates to highlight trail initiatives throughout the community, such as City Trail Crew projects, approved trail development projects, and other trail related initiatives.” (See <https://www.whitehorse.ca/home/showpublisheddocument/14132/637463002087130000> p. 27)

The new “switchback trail” initiative certainly qualified as one that should have been communicated to the public, but this was not done.

However, ATWA was told by administration that there are no “set [timelines] for this initiative and the Communications Department has their own timelines to work with and times for when they share information.” (Parks Oct. 27/2021 email to ATWA)

It sounds like there is a definite lack of communications between Strategic Communications and Parks and Community Development. Unfortunately, the result was the failure to provide a communication update with respect to the new Pee Wee Hill “switchback trail”.

As Parks and Community Development was well aware of the Strategic Communications situation, one would have thought it appropriate for *Parks and Community Development* to provide the applicable update. After all, the 2020 Trail Plan’s “What We Heard Report” mentions the necessity to “improve communication of new trails to public and user groups.”

Regrettably, this gives the impression that the 2020 Trail Plan’s *Guiding Principle of Community Engagement*, which makes the commitment that the community will be involved “throughout the planning, management, construction and maintenance of trails,” [despite their length] is simply a hollow obligation.

Chadburn Lake Park Management Plan:

The City has seemingly forgotten that the Chadburn Lake Park Management Plan says that in areas of intensive recreation, “New trails may [only] be considered where a *substantial need can be demonstrated and impacts on other users’ safety and enjoyment* can be minimized.” (See <https://www.whitehorse.ca/home/showpublisheddocument/8936/636348741400400000> p. 19)

The City built the new trail in an area of intensive recreation without first providing the public with the required information that would demonstrate adherence to the Chadburn Lake Park Management Plan directive.

Again this demonstrates a lack of proper process. It also makes one question why we develop such plans only to see them ignored when it is convenient to do so.

Strategy 2.2.1 of the Chadburn Lake Park Management Plan also calls on the City to “Implement an *inclusion strategy* to increase opportunities for, and invite full participation of, all residents where feasible.” (See <https://www.whitehorse.ca/home/showpublisheddocument/8936/636348741400400000> Strategy 2.2.1, p. 34.)

It seems the City has either not yet implemented this *inclusion policy* or for some reason determined that it was not *feasible* to inform the public of its intent to build the new switchback trail.

Park-Wide Management Directive #5 says that the City should “Ensure that new trails development is *balanced with maintenance of existing trails.*” (See <https://www.whitehorse.ca/home/showpublisheddocument/8936/636348741400400000> p. 14)

Yet, although ATWA informed the City on April 29, 2021 about the poor state of the Yukon Energy Hill “switchback” trail, and included photos of the damage and made suggestions as to what might be done to address some of the issues, nothing was done.

This despite the fact that ATWA sent a reminder to Parks in mid August, to which the reply was that “ the trail crew is pretty busy these days and getting through their work plan as the season winds down.” (Parks Aug. 18/2021 email to ATWA)

Instead of addressing the Yukon Energy Hill trail’s problems, the City built the “switchback” alternate Pee Wee Hill trail in September. One should always fix an existing problem before going on to potentially create a new one. Once again the City is seen to ignore aspects of plans when convenient to do so.

Directive #5 of the management plan also says, that “New trails and trail maintenance will be in accordance with the City of Whitehorse Trail Plan *and* the *East Yukon River Trail Plan*. (See <https://www.whitehorse.ca/home/showpublisheddocument/8936/636348741400400000> p. 14)

The East of the Yukon River Trail Plan:

This plan provides no indication of any alternate trail proposal adjacent to the Pee Wee Hill trail, so how is this new trail construction in accordance with that plan?

And, in addition, as this trail plan was approved by City Council would not any changes to the plan such as a new trail development require approval by City Council, despite what the 2016 Trail Development Policy says? (See <https://www.whitehorse.ca/home/showpublisheddocument/8936/636348741400400000> p. 14.)

Whitehorse Sustainability Plan:

One of the goals of the Whitehorse Sustainability Plan is for a “Connected, Engaged, and Participatory Community.” It goes on to say that “Citizens [should be] involved in decisions that affect them; act as stewards of the environment; and are connected and responsible to each other, the environment, and their government.” (See <https://www.whitehorse.ca/home/showpublisheddocument/5313/635883751212870000> p. 29.)

These are impressive words, but they are only words if the City does not follow through on its commitments.

The above comments point out two of the four major problems associated with having so many policies, trail plans (both neighbourhood and City), regional park management plans, and bylaws that deal with concerns associated with our trails.

Problem #1: With the exception of applicable bylaws, there is a complete lack of understanding as to which of the City’s numerous policies, and plans, takes precedent when questions and issues arise concerning our trail network.

Problem #2: This leads to a second problem, which concerns proper process. If we are not made aware of the order of precedence with regard to the various policies and plans that deal with our trail network, open spaces, greenbelts and regional parks, then it becomes impossible to know whether or not proper process is being followed.

Problem #3: A third problem is the apparent unwillingness of the City to ensure applicable bylaws reflect the intent of new City policies and plans, including that of the 2020 Trail Plan.

Problem #4: “Government policy is *not contained* within the reports and reviews it commissions; government policy *is* the reports and reviews.

By commissioning endless inquiries into the problem and the means by which it might be tackled, the government creates the impression that something is being done, while simultaneously preventing anything from happening until the next review (required to respond to the findings of the last review) has been published.

Governments will pursue this course of inaction – irrespective of the human impacts – while it remains politically less costly than the alternative.” (Comments of Mathew Prescott and George Monbiot from the book *Heat: How to Stop the Planet from Burning* (Anchor Canada edition 2007) by George Monbiot P. 213/214)

It is time the City of Whitehorse addresses Problem #4, and actually concentrates on initiating the backlog of initiatives associated with our trail network that are contained within a myriad of applicable policies and plans.

Thank you for your attention to the concerns and issues raised.

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