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## Bike trail push for Eagle Creek stirs controversy

Chris O'Malley May 3, 2012

With knobby tires and shock absorbers, a mountain bike pedaled by a skilled rider can smite the roughest trail with a cloud of dust. Mountain bikers have salivated for years about building trails in the rolling hills of Eagle Creek Park, the city's largest municipal park.

At the same time, environmental advocates warn such trails would lead to erosion and more sedimentation in the park's reservoir, which is used for drinking water. Perhaps it's no wonder Indy Parks and Recreation hasn't been in a hurry to take up the issue of mountain bike trails. But that's about to change.

"We are looking to schedule a public listening session," said Indy Parks spokeswoman Jen Pittman. The session could be held late this month or early next, she said.

"This deserves to be heard. We know there's a high level of interest" from both sides, Pittman said.

That will be welcome news to the Hoosier Mountain Bike Association, which complained in a recent e-mail to its members that park management "refused to even consider Eagle Creek" for such trails.

"I want to be very clear that HMBA is done asking nicely about Eagle Creek," HMBA President Paul Arlinghaus told his members. "We require Eagle Creek to be on the table. [We want to see] progress toward a trail master plan that includes Eagle Creek."

Local environmental activists, including Clarke Kahlo, are concerned about the effects.

"I hope Indy Parks will be able to resist HMBA's apparent demanding, if not 'strongarm,' tactics. Eagle Creek Park is an ecological gem, but will cease to be so if mountain bike trails are permitted," Kahlo said in a letter to city officials.

Arlinghaus told *IBJ* that mountain bikers have grown frustrated over Eagle Creek management's reluctance to take up the issue in past years. Frustration came to a head recently when park management quickly approved a zip line for the park, the kind of use not even hinted at in past master plans.

Some mountain bikers said they were led to believe that features such as bike trails and zip lines needed

to be included in a master plan before they could proceed.

The contract with a private zip-line operator “puts money in [Eagle Creek’s] pockets, so it just happens,” Arlinghaus said.

Mountain biking, unlike a zip line, promotes exercise and physical fitness—something sorely needed to address Indiana’s obesity problem, Arlinghaus said.

Arlinghaus disputed concerns that mountain biking trails would pose a risk to the environment. He said the trails can take up to four years to open because the effect on local plants and animals would have to be carefully considered.

“Designing a trail is a very complicated process,” he said.

Mountain bikers use trails in Indianapolis-area parks. Fort Harrison State Park has two trails. And the City of Indianapolis has them in Town Run Trail Park at 5325 E. 96th St. Bicycle paths also were built at Southeastway Park in southeast Marion County.

Pittman said that while the mountain bike trail topic has come up during various meetings over the years, Indy Parks staff couldn’t remember a meeting dedicated to the topic.

“We do want to make sure we’re getting it right and not just acting quickly,” she said.

Although Eagle Creek doesn’t have dedicated mountain bike trails, its narrow arteries often swarm with packs of on-road bicyclists. The park prohibits bicycles on its hiking trails. Some mountain bikers ride on a grass-covered service road on the northern end of the reservoir, near the 71st Street gate. But that route is relatively short.