



Op-Ed: When development forecasts trouble, not progress



Barbara Moss Murphy

Posted Tuesday, February 28, 2023 12:25 pm

Barbara Moss Murphy

It's been said nothing stays the same. In Conifer, Colorado, many of us who have lived here for decades have witnessed the changes.

Shopping centers, restaurants and businesses have grown along the U.S. 285 corridor to serve an increasing population, and 285 has been widened in areas to ease the traffic flow to and from the mountains. Cell phones and computers (for the most part) now enjoy internet access.

But the Conifer signature that endures, the reason we live here, is the incomparable natural beauty of the meadows and mountainsides we are graced with every day.

To be sure, our area has faced challenges inherent in many mountain communities, most prominent of which is the threat of devastating wildfires.

The 1996 Buffalo Creek Fire in Pine burned 12,000 acres, taking ten homes and two lives, the Bailey High Meadow Fire in 2000 burned 10,800 acres and 51 structures, and the Hayman Fire of 2002 scarred four counties taking in Pine Junction and Bailey, and resulted in the loss of 138,000 acres, 600 structures and six deaths. *All were human caused.* Decades later the scars remain as a cautionary tale.

Necessarily, we Conifer homeowners have become vigilant and aware that fire prevention is a shared responsibility. We do our part to make sure our homes are as safe as possible, and that we are not a hazard to our neighbors in the community. Our local government leaders encourage us in this mutual protection.

Which brings us to the point where a proposed development and wildfire disaster risk intersect.

In January 2021, two young men decided that a Colorado State Land Board parcel on narrow, winding Shadow Mountain Drive in a residential neighborhood with homes dotting the hillsides would be an excellent location for a 273-acre chairlift-access, downhill commercial bike park, drawing more than 700 mountain bikers daily.

An abundance of factual research shows that the proposed park presents an enormous risk for a catastrophic fire. The parcel is in an EXTREME wildfire risk area as designated by the Elk Creek Fire Protection District Community Wildfire Protection Plan, and a bike park would add nearly 5000 additional human potential wildfire ignition sources per week. The developers submitted their application to the Jefferson County Zoning and Planning Commission on January 23, 2023, and the design plan for the facility reveals that if a fire occurs the ensuing evacuation on Shadow Mountain Drive would be mayhem.

The developers in their exuberance to build the park say they want to be good neighbors, but what they are proposing to accomplish is about as unneighborly as it gets.

Good neighbors do not increase the chances for a catastrophic wildfire threatening the homes and lives of their neighbors. They don't bring a deluge of traffic on an already dangerous neighborhood road, almost certainly leading to an increase in car crashes, injury and even loss of life. They don't add the guaranteed injuries of downhill mountain biking to already overburdened area emergency response teams, not to mention waste disposal for 700 expected people daily that could easily pollute or deplete community water wells and devastate the wildlife population and ecosystem.

The developers like to talk about being transparent in their communications.

But when you look at the proposed bike park website you immediately encounter one of many misleading forward-looking statements posited as fact. The front page "Coming Soon" banner (previously "Coming in 2023") leads readers to conclude that the bike park is a done deal, and it most certainly is not.

The developers have often said we might want to welcome a bike park on Shadow Mountain Drive because the other scenarios for the parcel, such as a mining operation, would be more invasive. It's a scare tactic that's misleading because it falsely narrows the full scope of options that are available. There are many additional and far more benign options for the parcel including not developing the land at all.

The truth is building a commercial bike park on Shadow Mountain Drive with its inescapably dangerous baggage is absolutely not compatible with responsible community behavior. And nothing anyone can conjure up to obscure the facts will make it right, or neighborly.

Barbara Moss Murphy is on the Board Of Directors of Stop the Bike Park, a non-profit organization formed specifically to prevent the Bike Park – with its fact-driven negative consequences to traffic, wildfire risk, emergency response, air and water quality, and key wildlife habitat – from becoming a reality in its proposed location. She has lived on Shadow Mountain Drive for nearly 40 years and is committed to fighting for the community's environmental health and safety.