

Wilderness Park Master Plan

2 October 2015

Dear Editor:

I grew up in a small Midwest town. Like most small towns throughout America, the business district was deserted almost every weekday.

I remember just a few years ago we were passing through one of the bigger towns in Wyoming on "Sidewalk Day," and even though most of the stores had tables on the sidewalk, the place was eerily quiet with hardly a shopper in sight. In contrast, some towns in the US are more fortunate. They are located near a big attraction like a national park or seashore, and their businesses are bustling with customers.

It is amazing to me to see Claremont's vibrant business district with so many people that it is difficult to find a parking space almost any day of the week. The scene is far different in neighboring cities. I'm sure there are multiple factors that create such a successful downtown, but I have a sense that few people in Claremont appreciate the fact that our town also has a major attraction, one that results in about 500,000 visits a year. This, of course, is the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park.

If only 10 percent of these park visits result in someone patronizing a Claremont business, that would amount to 50,000 shoppers and diners a year. There are hundreds of small towns that would be delighted if they had an attraction that would generate as many patrons for their businesses. This is why it is so important that the city create a master plan that, among other things, continues to encourage users to visit the park. It is good for the city as a whole. It seems odd that we haven't had much input from the Claremont businesses with regards to the master plan.

As a board member of the Claremont Wildlands Conservancy for the past year, I have been intimately involved with the process of creating the city's master plan for the park. I have attended many meetings of our group, TAC meetings and neighborhood discussions. I also spent several hours helping to survey park users last summer. I frequently hike in the park and have read all of the letters written to the COURIER.

There have been countless discussions about parking, preserving the environment, funding, bikers versus hikers, the need for restrooms and a myriad of other issues, all of which are important. But while the city is trying to assess the countless details involved in the creation of the master plan, it seems that nobody wants to step back and take an overall look at the positive impact the park has on Claremont as a whole.

It is possible that decisions made by the city council concerning the wilderness park could have implications affecting the prosperity of Claremont. For example, the city's proposal in the draft master plan to raise parking fees to \$10 on weekend mornings might have a serious negative impact on how many people from out of town visit the park. This "Congestion Pricing Program," which is designed to redistribute visits, may have the unintended consequence of actually discouraging visitors instead of "redistributing" them.

It's unfortunate that when surveys were done of park users, there were no questions designed to gauge how many people visited Claremont businesses before or after hiking or biking in the park.

If decisions about park fees are primarily based upon the desire to placate those Claremonters who would discourage visitors to the park, those decisions may have harmful consequences for the city as a whole. It would be far better to first gather data concerning the economic impact

park users have on the city and then make decisions about pricing rather than create policies with unknown consequences.

It is also important to point out that if the park continues to draw large numbers of regional users, especially from underserved communities, it may be very helpful in the future when attempting to qualify for valuable grants to expand the park and to implement the resource management plan proposed in the draft.

Finally, at the present time, the parking fees generate about \$350,000 a year, which represents the bulk of the funds that support management of the park. We must be careful not to put this current cash flow in jeopardy so that we have adequate funds to properly maintain the park.

The Claremont Hills Wilderness Park is an extremely valuable asset for our community in many ways. A carefully crafted master plan will be very important in ensuring the future prosperity of Claremont and maintaining the success of the park for years to come.

David Bedell
Claremont