

Hogbacks' future full of wide-open space

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City committee also recommends ban on motorized vehicles.

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Six months of intensive work culminated in Monday's decision to develop the Hogbacks as an open space area, effectively banning the use of motorized vehicles in the vicinity just east of Skyline Drive.

Cañon City Council unanimously approved the Hogbacks Committee's recommendation to place the issue on November's ballot as required by the City Charter. The measure will not seek to dip into the taxpayers' pockets to fund the space; instead, improvements and amenities will depend on grants and other funding sources.

"Certainly, there is politically little interest in raising taxes," said Councilman Keith Hovland, who also served as chairman of the ad hoc committee. As part of the final resolution of the controversial issue, the council also approved a moratorium on all use of the Hogbacks, starting at the end of July, pending voter approval of the open space use. If residents deny such a use, the ban would become permanent, and the Hogbacks would be closed to any and all uses.

Once the moratorium takes effect, signs will be erected to notify the public of the area's closure, and the ban will be enforced by the Cañon City Police Department.

The recommendation was announced to a full — but not overflowing — audience, which burst into applause following the decision.

The issue has been closely watched by various user groups, including motorcyclists, as well as hikers, preservationists and others. Many participated throughout the six-month process, attending meetings and providing input for consideration.

One group, the Skyline Hogbacks Preservation Campaign, formed exclusively to promote protection of the area. They praised the decision.

"I would like to acknowledge and thank Councilman Hovland, the mayor, council and staff for all of the time and dedication you have given," said Monica McGowan, spokesman for the group. "We appreciate the opportunity to work collaboratively with the committee. Many members of our community were given the opportunity to share their expertise."

During his presentation before announcing the recommendations to the council, Hovland outlined the steps that preceded the committee's decision.

He said the process started about eight years ago under then-Mayor Lavelle Craig's vision and guidance.

"Over the years, Cañon City has always had this issue on its agenda," Hovland said. "We moved it to a high priority last year."

Hovland said the committee took historical, current and future use of the Hogbacks into consideration. He explained how various owners of the different parcels in the area muddled the issue, because the city controls three major parcels of land that are broken up by privately-owned acreage.

Of the 563 combined acres in the Hogbacks, only 339 acres are controlled by the city and available for development.

"We're getting down into some pretty small acreage that can be designed for specific usage," Hovland said.

In announcing the recommendation, Hovland outlined his panel's primary reasons for the decision, including liability issues and poor revenue stream for the project.

Also, he said, the city does not administer active recreational functions, such as a motorized vehicle park, and the Cañon City Area Recreation and Parks District has shown little interest in becoming involved with the Hogbacks.

The council said it would continue to seek opportunities for motorized sports, but Hovland acknowledged it is unlikely any appropriate area exists within city limits for such activity.

Following the meeting, City Attorney John Havens confirmed the committee will work to prepare the necessary ballot language for the November question, and prepare the moratorium to ban all use of the Hogbacks no later than July 31. He said although the decisions were officially made Monday night, the council soon will consider an ordinance with official language for the issue.

"We will create clear enforceability with respect to those who would chose to ignore the moratorium," Havens said.

One of those looking forward to changes in the Hogbacks was resident Rich Conway, who verbally expressed the emotions felt by many in the audience.

"From a personal point of view, I think you have made the right decision," Conway said. "I look forward to the time I can sit out on my deck and enjoy the peace and quiet."

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