

REMARKS ON MOUNTAIN BIKING

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April 13, 2017

I would like to take this opportunity to speak at some length about my vote concerning mountain bike trails in Watchung Reservation and try and explain the reasoning leading to my conclusion. I am sure each Freeholder has thought carefully about this matter and has come to their own decision.

I know this is an emotional and important issue to those on both sides of the question and I do believe there is certainly room for an honest disagreement on how it should be decided. My own opinion has evolved over time as I have listened to and looked more closely at the arguments and opinions expressed before this body, at the two public meetings and in the dozens, maybe hundreds, of e-mails the Freeholders have received over the past several months. I have also done my own research.

I would note that while I do believe both sides of this issue are acting in good faith and based upon an honest belief; I also have seen some extreme statements by each group which are clearly not correct and which I have tried to discount in my thinking. For instance, I continue to see claims by those in favor of mountain biking, that those opposed are just a small, local group. This is not true. There is substantial opposition, just as there is substantial support. Also, there are claims that the mountain bikers began work on the trails without county permission—this is also not true, and as previously explained, the work previously done was preliminary and was due to miscommunication within the county.

Now, though I have done so before, I want to once again review briefly the time line of the consideration of the Freeholders of this matter. After more than 20 years of mountain biking being forbidden in Watchung Reservation, on February 18, 2016, the Freeholder Board passed Resolution 2016-166, which approved and adopted the Watchung Reservation Trails Master Plan as prepared by CME Engineers. This plan provided for certain steps to be taken to review and if appropriate re-instate mountain biking as a legal activity within the Reservation. The plan as adopted at that time, and as it officially stands right now, provided for 7.46 miles of dual-use trails, for mountain bikers to share with hikers. This Master Plan did not, as claimed by some, closely study or make recommendations concerning the environmental impact of the plan, or the legal issues to be determined.

After further review by the Freeholders and staff, it was determined as a policy matter, that the Freeholders did not approve of dual use trails and an alternate plan to add additional trails for mountain biking only was requested. While CME was drafting the revisions, JORBA and other groups on behalf of the mountain bikers, requested that the length of the biking only trails be about twice as long as the original proposal. On December 1, 2016, a new map was presented providing for single use mountain biking trails totaling 14.08 miles. To my view, these trails take up essentially all of the remaining open areas within Watchung. Thus, as I continued to review the Master Plan and the possibility of moving forward with the plans as most recently proposed, I became more and more convinced that to allow mountain biking in Watchung Reservation would not be a prudent thing to do.

I hope to explain clearly why I have come to that decision. But first, I want to make clear a number of objections that were *not* the basis for my determination. I am not concerned about liability-- I am advised by the County Counsel that if properly built according to engineering plans, and monitored, this would not be a problem. I am not concerned about the cost-- I believe that the new trails could be constructed within a reasonable budget, with much of the work done by Park and Public Works staff and volunteers. Though I do believe there would be increased costs for maintenance and repair of the trails, as well as for increased enforcement efforts. I am not concerned about the objections of the neighboring property owners-- though they have legitimate concerns, I do believe those issues could certainly be reasonably dealt with were this project to go forward. And, my decision is most certainly not based upon this County Park being called a "reservation" in its name. I do not believe that is of any significance and I am sure that the Freeholders have the legal authority to move forward with the bike trails, if we felt that was the right decision.

The main reason I am opposed to moving forward with adding additional trails or usage to the Watchung Reservation, is that I am absolutely convinced that there is already too intense a use of this valuable piece of property. To add an additional, intensive use, either on new trails or on existing trails, would only exacerbate the existing problems. Also, the Master Plan has made clear that we, as a county, are not doing enough to maintain the trails that already exist in Watchung Reservation, and that for now we must concentrate our efforts on maintenance, repair and as appropriate, decommissioning existing trails, not on expanded use.

In order to try and quantify this issue, I looked at a number of other parks that were either mentioned by speakers before this body, or noted in on-line mountain bike

sites, as good locations for mountain biking. I compared the number of acres of the parks relative to the number of miles of trails, to the same information from Watchung. I believe the results are very telling. Without running through the whole list of 7 other parks that I examined, the ratio ranged from 440 acres per mile of trail at Ringwood Skylands Manor, in Passaic County, to 80 acres per mile in Hartshorne Woods Park in Monmouth County. As for Lewis Morris County Park, in Morris County, mentioned I believe during our last public meeting, the ratio is 183. That is based upon a total acreage in Lewis Morris Park of 2200 acres and 12 miles of trails. Compare that to Watchung Reservation which has 2100 acres and already has 45 miles of existing trails, and you get a ratio of 47.

To be clear, mountain biking is allowed at Lewis Morris County Park in Morris County, which is just the slightest bit larger than Watchung Reservation, but which has only 12 miles of trails, as opposed to the 47 miles of trails already in our park, even without adding anything new.

A second reason is, and I have heard and considered the arguments in this regard, that I must conclude that mountain biking will in fact do environmental damage to the park, which could be rather substantial. I must reject as not credible on its face the claims by some from JORBA and others, that the harm from mountain biking to the environment would be "none" — and I carefully listened and there are those who made such a claim. I also do not believe it is accurate that the environmental damage of mountain biking is no worse than that of hiking. And again, this claim has been put forth in various emails and on certain web sites.

Trying to look at the reality and not the extreme, I have in fact looked at a number of scientific studies that were brought to the Freeholders' attention by both sides. I believe the credible scientific evidence is that mountain biking does more damage to the environment than hiking. It seems fairly clear to me that a hiker who leaves a trail, either on purpose or accidentally, will not damage the off-trail environment to the extent a mountain bike, with its speed and tires, will do—particularly if the ground is wet and muddy. Even if a majority of riders comply with the rules, a few "bad apples," as they have been called, can do a lot of damage, very quickly. It is certainly possible that I have reached the wrong conclusion on this, but the downside of being right and proceeding with the plan nonetheless, is a risk I for one am not willing to take.

As I said, individuals from both sides have put forth inconsistent and irrelevant arguments. But, one item I find troubling is that one of the JORBA arguments has been that the bicycle trails will be only shoulder or handlebar width, yet others say

that this is a sport for families. I find those two concepts to be inconsistent—if I were a parent riding with my young children on a mountain bike trail, I would be interested in being next to them for safety reasons. I would like to note that in paragraph 5.5 of the Master Plan, it discusses dual use trails as being wider than the current walking trails, and that they would specifically not be for what the Plan calls “free riding.”

Based upon the demographics of those who have come to our meetings and spoken on the internet, though I am sure there are families, children and older riders, I find it likely that this is a sport for mostly men, who are interested in riding fast. I find the web sites and video’s talking about STRAVE and its competitions right here in the Reservation, to be disturbing. Once again, even if my judgment is not completely on point and it is a very small portion of the people who are actually riding who do so, they can do substantial damage to a wide area in a very short period of time, particularly if they go off trail.

This leads to my final point, and that is that there is irrefutable evidence, for instance the STRAVE web site, that there are some, and knowing how many is very difficult, but it is not zero, who continue to violate our laws and ride mountain bikes through the Reservation even now. There is certainly no reason to believe that there will not still be scofflaws if we allow even limited mountain biking.

I do not disagree with the mountain bikers who argue that Union County should offer as many diverse recreational opportunities to our residents as we can. BUT, that does not mean we must provide recreational opportunity for any and all sports, without looking at the whole picture and the need to find balance in our decisions. For instance, Union County does not offer any place for downhill skiing within the county—though I do remember a time, probably at least 40 years ago, that one hole at the Galloping Hill Golf Course did allow downhill skiing when the snow was deep enough—in fact there was even a rudimentary rope tow. But, that no longer exists, and the likelihood of it being reinstated is probably none. I am sure there are other sports that cannot be done within Union County that we are not even aware of. But, those are the choices that must be made. I believe choosing to continue to exclude mountain biking from Watchung Reservation is a reasoned and reasonable decision.

Just to be clear on a couple of other issues, I support the expansion of street bike paths, be they along roadways or otherwise, to allow street bikers to travel around the county without using a car—but that is a different issue.

Also, though I know they have argued against it, I do not find it so unreasonable for Union County riders to go to Lewis Morris and other parks within the area, to pursue their sport.

Finally, I want to make clear that I am not categorically opposed to mountain biking, I only have decided that I oppose allowing it in Watchung Reservation even on a reduced basis. I would not be opposed to considering other possible locations for this sport within the county park system. But, once again, we must do so with environmental, legal and other issues in mind.

Thank you.