

## **Buena Vista's Secret Trails: A Troubled Past and Unclear Future**

By Carol Godwin

Despite the popular love of them, the Buena Vista's social trails, or "Secret Trails" do have problems and even threats to their continued existence. Just like any other "unofficial" or "wildcat" trail system, the trails came into being without the necessary legal clearances. Without any official recognition or legal standing, these trails have no protection. Regardless of how much they might be used, loved or cared for by their users, they could easily disappear, plowed under by new housing developments. Unless action is taken by the United States Forest Service to officially recognize the trails and unless they are adopted into the White Mountains Trail System (WMTS), there may be no future for the Secrets.

In 2013, the USFS entered into a land exchange agreement for over 900 acres, which would jeopardize a large section of the secret trail area, and could erase more than five miles of high-quality legacy single-track that was unnoticed and unmentioned in the 2013 Environmental Impact Statement underlying the USFS decision to participate in the land exchange.

*"The land exchange showed me that we can't leave the future of this trail system to chance. We have to fight for it if we want walkable, hikeable and bikeable communities. That's also when I realized that the "secret" part of the "Secret Trails" was an impediment to its future and needed to become a thing of the past. The only way forward is to make this trail system known, talked about, officially recognized and protected."*-Jason Moore, cyclist and trails advocate

At this point, the exchange remains in limbo and will take a concentrated effort from cyclists, hikers and equestrians to convince the USFS and the City of Show Low that the current trail layout has more economic and recreational benefit to the area than another housing development. The USFS is interested in separating single track trail use from motorized vehicle use in order to reduce trail conflicts, and as The Buena vista is primarily a motorized use trail, while the Secret trails are single track more appropriate for cyclists, hikers and equestrians. it remains beneficial to recognize the Secret Trails as their own trail system within the Buena Vista.

Last year, Jason Moore collaborated with a group of other supporters of the trail system, to create a non-profit group “Save the Buena Vista Foundation” (STBVF).

*“With development pressures mounting here in the White Mountains, it is clear that we can’t be as passive as we have been in the past about getting something done for the Buena. That’s why we created STBVF . . . it’s there for the express purpose of advocating for the trails and educating local elected officials and the Forest Service about the needs of the Buena Vista area specifically. It is critically important to protect an area for an urban trail system. If you have a look at a map, the Buena Vista really is Show Low’s last opportunity to have an urban trail system. The community can’t afford squander it.” -Jason Moore*

If realized, the area could become the showpiece for the White Mountain Trail System, a draw for mountain bikers from around the state and country. It would be the first thing to would greet visitors from Phoenix and Tucson as they arrive in the White Mountains. It would be a magnet for tourism and rival similar trail systems in places such as Sedona, Prescott and Flagstaff User Pass. In many of those places, the USFS has been able to recognize social trail systems like the Buena Vista and add to them. An influx of vacationing cyclists would be a huge asset to the local community through increased tourism-related revenues.

Both the City of Show Low and Navajo County passed Resolutions last winter endorsing the TRACKS/STBVF proposal to save the Secret Trails. The proposal would work whether or not the Show Low South land exchange ever is approved. If the land exchange were to occur, it is hoped that the value of at least some portion of the 5.5 miles of trails therein would be seen as an asset by a developer which could be preserved and integrated into a new community while preserving access points for those that already have access to the Buena Vista from their existing neighborhoods.

Trailhead improvements, better signage, addition of more beginner-level segments and installing benches on a few vistas for folks to sit and enjoy the views would make the area more enjoyable for visitors as well.

“The important thing is that the commitment to preserve, expand and protect the Buena Vista is there. The partnerships are between the federal government, municipal and county governments and non-profit advocacy and trail building groups is there. With luck, those commitments will hold to see the master trail plan to completion even if it takes years to finish the project.”- Jason Moore

The Secret Trails are currently a valuable asset for White Mountain communities and with active support from residents and visitors expressed to the USFS and local city councils, their continued existence is on better footing as it is still unclear today if . . . or when . . . the land exchange will take place.

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