

9 miles of singletrack bike trail going into Kincaid Park

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Janice Tower and Lee Bolling of Singletrack Advocates stand near a trail May 23, 2011, in Kincaid Park, where the group is planning to break ground on nine miles of new singletrack biking trails. The trails are scheduled to open July 15.

Five years ago, options were few. But by the time leaves turn amber this autumn, Southcentral's singletrack mountain bikers may be soaking in nature's Technicolor beauty on miles of new trail that is beginning to turn Anchorage into a mecca for the off-road crowd.



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The latest jewel is a 9-mile trail being built later this summer at Kincaid Park.

"There's incredible terrain. It's so interesting because of the lumps and ridges and the incredible views of Turnagain Arm and the Chugach Range," said Janice Tower, chairwoman of the organization Singletrack Advocates, a local group working to preserve, build and maintain natural trails in Anchorage.

From Kincaid Chalet, the new singletrack will weave through parkland to Jodphur parking lot before heading past Kincaid Road to Raspberry Road.

"The fun factor is going to be really high," Tower predicted. "It will be just as good, if not better, than what we built on the Hillside. Our trail builders have gotten even better in their design skills, and there will be

some nice banked turns."

When project manager Lee Bolling first approached Tower with the idea a few years back, she wondered whether there was sufficient space for a trail system that flows the way mountain bikers prefer. Last spring, the duo toured the area on foot.

"I immediately saw his vision for a world-class mountain bike trail system," she said.

About 70 percent of the \$166,000 raised so far in the \$200,000 project has come from private donors such as the Anchorage Park Foundation, REI and the Continental Motor Group, according to Tower.

There's a small request in the capital budget before Gov. Sean Parnell and pending grants from the American Hiking Society and Conoco Phillips.

"We still have a couple of irons in the fire," she said. "But we have enough funding right now to build a system of mountain biking trails," Tower said. "The added funding we are seeking will allow us to fully take advantage of the incredible terrain found in Kincaid Park."

The new trails aim to supplement some 8 miles of Hillside singletrack that opened last year, offering riders a different style of singletrack on the opposite side of town.

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"Hillside trail is on a hillside -- there's pretty much always a huge climb leading to a huge downhill," Bolling said. "That's fun because you can have some really long downhills. But Kincaid is rolling topography. It's a flowing trail, meandering through more hilly topography. It's not going to have these big uphills and big downs like Hillside."

Two selling points emerged when Tower and Bolling approached the Nordic Ski Association of Anchorage about the idea last year.

- Come winter, the singletrack trails will offer hikers an appealing place to walk away from Kincaid's system of nordic ski trails that attract thousands of cross-country skiers from November to March. Separating the two user groups prevents hikers from damaging ski tracks too.

- By basing the singletrack trails out of the Jodpfer parking lot, officials also hope to shift some Kincaid visitors from the popular chalet area to a less-used section of the park.

Construction will use volunteer labor under the direction of trail builder Jon Underwood, 46, of Fairbanks, whose company, Happy Trails Inc., constructed the new Hillside trails as well as some well-regarded trails at Ester Dome in his hometown.

Much of that volunteer labor will come from the Anchorage Park Foundation's Youth Employment in Parks program and the Student Conservation Association.

"It's a win-win," Tower said. "We get kids outside working on the trails, they're going to be tomorrow's trail stewards."

Underwood has already laid out most of the trails. He plans to limit climbing grades to 10 percent.

"We tried to design the trail so that every time it crosses a ski trail, it's going uphill," he said. "That minimizes the potential for conflict and helps make it safe."

Others say the plan will work.

"It looks awesome," said Holly Spoth-Torres, maintenance superintendent for the municipal parks and recreation department. "They identified the areas where the new singletrack will intersect with ski trails, and they've spent time minimizing the intersections."

Underwood said his previous experience only helps.

"I think it will be better (than Hillside or (Ester Dome) because I've improved my own skills," he said. "It will be a very fun trail for mountain bikers, an intermediate trail."

Underwood isn't the only one whose trail-building reputation is expanding.

Earlier this year, the Coalition for Recreational Trails, a federation of national and regional trail-related organizations, gave the Anchorage Hillside Singletrack Trails project its 2011 national achievement award, which recognizes outstanding trail projects funded by the national recreational trails program.

The award touts Singletrack Advocates' work coordinating youth trail crews. Those crews helped complete nearly 8 miles of hand-tool finish work on the Hillside.

While a web of trails course through Anchorage, the opening of the Hillside trails in June of 2009 in the southeast portion of the 4,000-acre Far North Bicentennial Park was the first time a trail specifically built for singletrack riders had been built here.

"One thing runners and bikers talk about is the flow of a trail," Bolling said. "It's like you're on a trail, and it's a roller coaster that allows you to carry your momentum through everything. It reminds me of when you're skiing powder or snowboarding powder."

"You're one with the trail, and it's just a blast. You know it when you feel it. Lots of trails that have pieces of that flow, but when you have trail designed from the beginning to be that way, once you start riding, you'll have a blast."

For Tower, the idea of producing something useful for this generation as well as the next has a strong appeal.

"It's an opportunity to be part of something that's durable and sustainable," she said. "The Mighty Bikes (a summer-long mountain biking program for children 8-18) are one of the beneficiaries. Once they discover the trails, they won't want to ride anything else. It's like an amusement park ride. We're adults, and we're out there hooting and hollering (on the Hillside trails)."

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