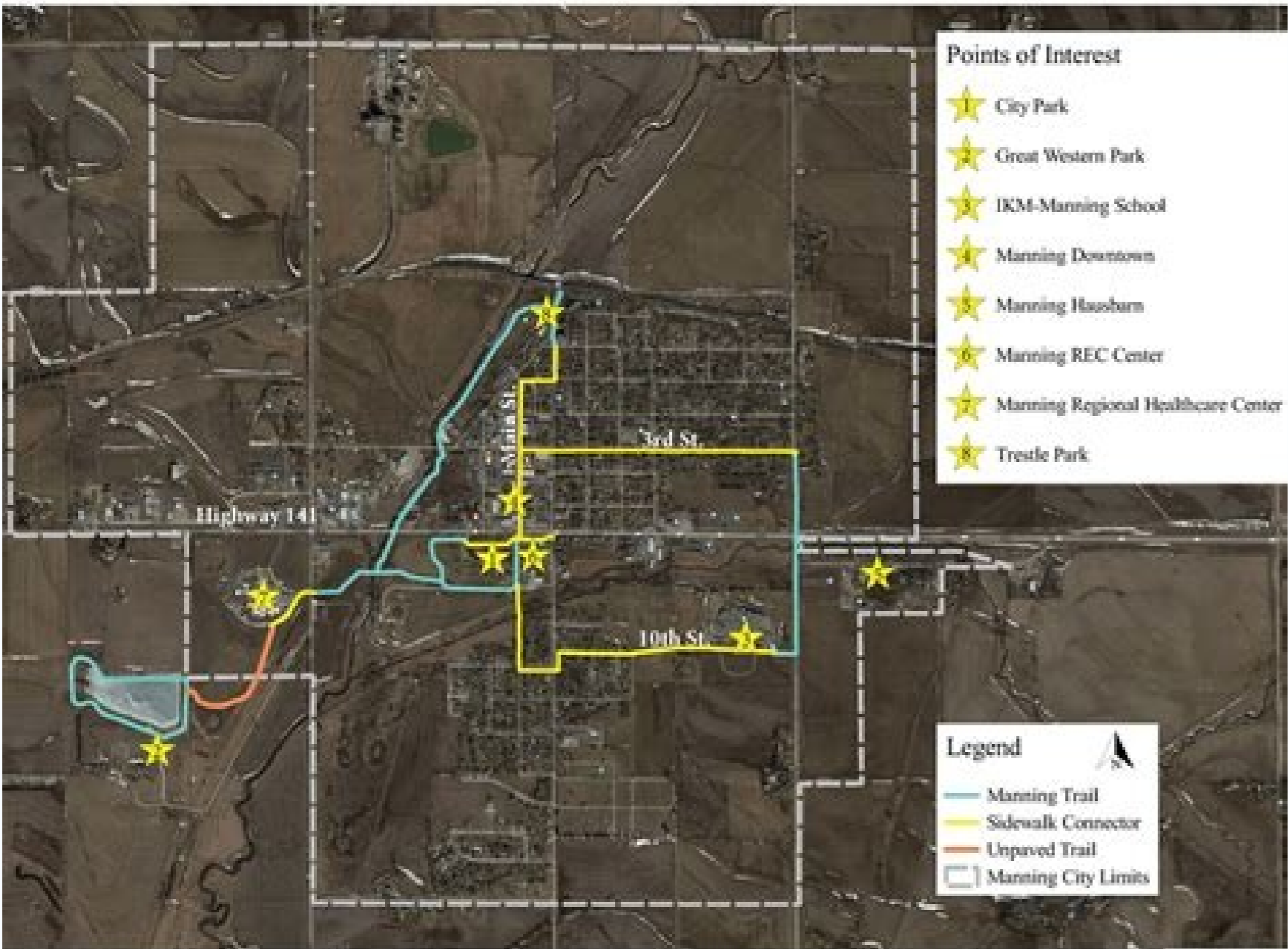


I'm not robot!



*This story has been updated with additional details on the Manning Park Mountain Bike Concept Plan prepared by Common Ground Trails. Manning Park is a 110ha urban green space in Perth, a few kilometres south of the Swan River. As so often happens in these green spaces set in suburbia, trails begin to appear, which are then adopted by local mountain bikers, runners, dog walkers, and hikers — you get the idea. While the trails running through Manning Park are not sanctioned, they are hardly underground and for many in the local community, offer a crucial piece of riding infrastructure that doesn't exist west of the Perth Hills. By all accounts, there have been trails running through Manning Park for more than two decades, however, these trails have found themselves at risk of closure thanks to a vocal opposition group and a questionable move by the Cockburn Council. Related: The push to legalise trails in Manning Park Nobody really knows who built the trails in Manning Park, and various master plans have recommended formalisation since at least 2013. One such document, the Perth and Peel Master Plan, was even launched by the WA Sports and Recreation Minister and the WA Minister for Environment on the trails at Manning Park in 2017. In 2018 the Manning Master Plan recommended formalising the trails in the park, and this was followed in 2020 by a concept trail design endorsed by the city, which aimed to formalise and construct new trails. Santo tells us he rides with a group basically every Tuesday evening at Manning Park. Chris Beaton, the head of Sustainability and Environment at the Cockburn Council, told Perth Now in 2020 that the formalised trails would address the concerns folks had raised about environmental impact and help to curb illegal trail building. "There are an ever increasing demand for approved, well-designed and constructed mountain bike trails at Manning Park," he said. Local rider Mark Santo has been riding in Manning Park for going on five years. "I live in an adjoining suburb, and it's fantastic to be able to go for a quick ride during the week, which I wouldn't be able to do if I had to drive out to the Perth Hills," he says. There are some wild and woolly little trails in among the scrub. Santo tells us even though the trails are unsanctioned, for the most part, there isn't much if any conflict between user groups and everyone recreates in harmony. "There have been a number of master plans that have included formalising Manning Park, and from a mountain bike community perspective, there's been a lot of promise around formalising the trails. But it almost feels like there has been a false promise," says Santo. Only two years after the council released the concept trail design, that very same land manager was poised to shut mountain bikers and everyone else out, for good. Manning Park is for mountain bikers, or is it? The 2020 Manning Park Mountain Bike Concept Plan prepared by Common Ground Trails outlined 15km of trails spanning across the park, which would have been a big win for riders, but the design did not include shared or multi-use trails. "From the outside, it looked like mountain bikers would take over the park. The environmental groups got their backs up, and all the other user groups were like, 'hang on, where do we fit in,'" says Santo. We should note, that the brief provided to Common Ground by the council was to look at mountain biking only, as multi-use paths and trails were already covered by the master plan that came out prior to this design. It was also the 2018 master plan that laid out what should be shared use and what shouldn't, and what other trail users should be considered; the concept design was only supposed to cover the mountain biking component. And even though it was outside the of the scope of what Common Ground was commissioned to do, the concept design does say: "While the scope of this concept plan was mountain bike trails specifically, in designing the trail network consideration has also been given to other trail users including walkers and trail runners..." Trail running in the area has exploded in popularity since the Manning Park Master Plan was completed. The potential for some or all of the cross country mountain bike trail network to be shared use with trail runners has been factored into the concept development, with trail style carefully considered. The ability for some trails to be shared use with trail runners should be investigated during the detailed design process. All trails should remain single direction. "Unfortunately, this project would never make it to the detailed design process. Clint Slomp leads the Manning Park Trail Runners, a running group that attracts as many as 100 people to the Manning Park every Thursday night. He tells Flow that this plan was extremely exciting for all the folks who wanted mountain bikes in the park, and caused outrage in the community among the people who didn't want mountain bikes in the park. "It was a hot topic in the community. There was quite a lot of debate, so the council formed a Community Engagement Group, which had representatives from every different user group in the community," says Slomp. A dozen stakeholders were represented in this Community Engagement Group, ranging from mountain bikers and trail runners, to environmentalists, Traditional Owners, and broader members of the community. Both Santo and Slomp were a part of this body. Throughout this process, West Cycle, the peak advocacy body in Western Australia, offered its support and guidance — they have contributed to a number of the master plans for Manning Park and authored the WA Mountain Bike Strategy. However, according to West Cycle Mountain Bike Manager Marg McLroy, the council declined their help at every turn. "We met with the council wanting to get involved and represent mountain bikers, but the Council shut us out, saying they didn't feel they needed our support or advice. They told us it was a local problem, and they would deal with it in the local community," she told Flow. We said, before we make any decisions, let's do the studies and see what's actually there, and then follow the proper framework. McLroy also tells Flow that West Cycle applied to participate in the Community Engagement Group and again was stonewalled. Even still, mountain bikers were involved in the process, and they participated in five brainstorming sessions to hash out the park's future. No mountain bikes allowed! It's difficult enough to get a group of a dozen mountain bikers to agree on something, but this Community Engagement Group came up with a plan to everyone's satisfaction. That plan was to commission ecological and heritage studies and recommended the council follow the WA Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attraction's eight-step trail building process. "We know that some areas of the park are of high ecological value, but the hard pill to swallow for the mountain bike community is that no one has ever actually done a study on the ecological value of the park, and specifically the impact of mountain biking or running or whatever it may be," says Santo. "Basically, we said, before we make any decisions, let's do the studies and see what's actually there, and then follow the proper framework," he continues. This was all compiled into a report and presented to an officer of the council, who then, by all accounts, went rogue and recommended the closure and remediation of all unsanctioned trails in Manning Park, and that mountain bikers be banned, effective March 2023. According to the Cockburn Council, when the draft Manning Park Concept Design was released in 2020, "60 per cent of respondents said they felt the draft plan was good or very good or were happy with it." Also according to the council as is stated on the Manning Park Trails webpage concerns were raised regarding integrating other user groups, environmental impact and the scope and scale, which is why the Community Engagement Group was commissioned. Again, we should note that Common Ground's concept design follows the recommendations and scope laid out in the previous 2018 master plan endorsed by the council. The trail company even took extra steps to address ecological values in the park and removed trails outlined in the 2018 plan that went through sensitive areas. The 2018 plan also laid out the size and which user groups went where. So while the council points to the trail design being the catalyst for the Community Engagement Group, in reality, these concerns are with the 2018 document. The council goes rogue. All of the engagement with the broader community showed no majority was in favour of closing the trails, but council staff recommended the opposite. This recommendation also goes against the master plan endorsed by the Cockburn Council and the State Government. We'd like to see the mountain bikers and the trail runners and all the conservation groups work together on a management plan to rehabilitate the degraded areas and formalise the mountain bike trails in there — it can be a really positive thing for the community. "So that created another outrage amongst all the users of the park," laughs Slomp. "All of those user groups said hang on, we've given you those recommendations, and you've ignored them. That's not due process, you can't just make up your mind in isolation to ban one user group," continues Santo. At the next council meeting, Manning Park was on the agenda, and members of the Community Engagement Group were invited to speak before a vote was taken. This was the first time in 20 years that a Cockburn City Council meeting went over time, and ultimately cooler heads did prevail and the councillors voted to defer a decision on the ban and move forward with the studies. "The environmentalists reckon that they lost the meeting and they're 'disgusted' with the councillors. But at the end of the day, we're just getting the assessments done so the councillors can make more educated decisions moving forward," says Slomp. Banning mountain bikers won't solve the problem. Manning Park has quite a history. It was once a farm, a stone quarry, grazing land, and a quarantine site for camels. It's also home to lime kilns and once housed fruit trees and a vineyard. Over the years it's also been a hotspot for illegal dumping, and a perimeter fence was erected in the 90s to make it difficult for 4WDs and motorbikes to get in. "There are parts of the park that look like pristine bush, in an area, they call it the limestone ridge, and there is not much of that left in Perth that hasn't been turned into housing. We get that there is value in that, but there are other parts of the park that are grazing land. There are quarries and dumping areas where people have offloaded rubbish over the years, and there are powerline easements. There's an opportunity there for sanctioned trails," he says. There are lots of areas of Manning Park that feel like wilderness. But there are also old refrigerators, big concrete foundations, and high voltage power lines running through the park. One of the major concerns surrounding Manning Park is unsurprisingly unsanctioned trail building. Beyond what already exists Santo says it's pretty rare to see a new trail pop up, but also says folks are out shaping the existing trails. We're not condoning illegal trail building, but their existence indicates that there's not enough infrastructure to meet the demand of the local riding population, and closing more trails without offering an alternative only worsens the problem. This had been demonstrated in Sydney, Wollongong, Brisbane, the Dandenong Ranges — the list goes on and on. But there is even a case study on how not to curb illegal trail building a few kilometres north of Manning Park. Bold Park was classified as a Class A Nature reserve in the late 1900s, and bikes were banned. A quick glance at Strava Heatmaps and Trailforks ride logs show that folks are still riding in there, and Santo tells us the land manager is public about the fact it's engaged in an ongoing battle with illegal trail

building.Manning Park may only be a small trail centre, but it provides mountain bikers in the south of the park to ride which doesn't require an hour each way in the car.Mountain bikers want a management planUnfortunately, the groups that oppose mountain biking in Manning Park have painted riders who are tearing up the bush willy nilly to get cheap thrills. This could not be further from the truth.“We’d like to see the mountain bikers and the trail runners and all the conservation groups work together on a management plan to rehabilitate the degraded areas and formalise the mountain bike trails in there — it can be a really positive thing for the community. There are areas of the park that have conservation values and European and Aboriginal Heritage values — all of that needs to be acknowledged and protected. But there is no reason you can’t avoid those areas and have mountain bike trails the park as well,” says Santo.From the outside, it seems that the Council doesn’t really know what to do with mountain bikers in Manning Park, and what transpired was an effort for a quick fix.Flow did reach out to the Cockburn Council for comment on this matter.In response, the media officer noted, “At its Ordinary Meeting on 14 May, Cockburn Council deferred any decision on trails in Manning Park until it can consider the costs and timing of detailed environmental evaluations and heritage assessments of the upland area of Manning Park.”The officer also pointed us towards this concept history page.Flow also asked why the council staff recommended a ban on mountain bikers and remediation of the trails against the recommendation of the Community Engagement Group. City of Cockburn Acting Chief of Built and Natural Environment Lorenzo Santoriello said,“The City officer took into account a range of considerations to formulate the recommendation, but the City acknowledges that prohibiting and permitting mountain bikes has both positive and negative impacts.The Community Engagement Group did not reach a consensus on all fronts. It did agree that Manning Park required careful management from an ecological/environmental perspective and that this primary concern would influence the extent that the land could provide for a variety of users.The officer’s recommendation was to ‘exclude mountain bikes, with the exception of designated cycle paths’. The walking trail network in Manning Park is not proposed to be closed.”As Slomp points out the only sanctioned trail in the park the paved Lake Loop around Manning Lake, and all the other trails in the bush are unsanctioned. These unsanctioned trails are the ones that trail runners, hikers and mountain bikers use. He also notes there are fire trails through the park, which is likely what Santoriello is referring to as the “walking trail network.”“By closing the the MTB trails, they are closing all the trails we love to run an hike on,” says Slomp.With this information in mind, we’d like to highlight the fourth bullet point of the council staff’s recommendation which, “AUTHORISES the City to close and remove all unauthorised bike trails from Manning Park.”The fourth point in the recommendation made to the council points towards closing and removing unsanctioned bike trails from the park, which are also frequented by trail runners and hikers.While Manning Park may not be a sprawling trail network, it’s an essential piece of infrastructure for mountain bikers living in the southern suburbs of Perth, but it’s not just mountain bikers that use it. One thing that Santo, Slomp, McLroy and the groups trying to close the trails can agree on is that Manning Park isn’t managed all that well. But closing the trails, and banning mountain bikers doesn’t address the problem at hand.Ocean views from the top of Manning Park. Not bad for an urban trail network.Photos: Mark Santo, West Cycle

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