

Saskatoon Mountain Bike Alliance Incorporated – Proposed Agreement

ISSUE

In recent decades, unmaintained, unpaved tertiary walking and biking trails have developed along riverbank areas within the city. The Saskatoon Mountain Bike Alliance Incorporated (SMBA), also known as the Saskatoon Trail Alliance, has approached the City of Saskatoon (City) to ask for an agreement to formalize the approach to tertiary trail maintenance, upgrades, and to improve safety. This report provides options for consideration related to the care, maintenance and safety of tertiary trails in Saskatoon.

BACKGROUND

Current Status

Many kilometres of trails and paths have developed in riverbank areas beyond the scope of formalized park and Meewasin trails. Appendix 1 – Tertiary Trails in Saskatoon shows high-level examples. While there is no specific data, these trails have seemingly grown in popularity and use.

Currently, there is no defined framework or oversight of tertiary trails, and these are outside of the direct oversight of the City and Meewasin. Numerous landowners are also involved, including the City, Meewasin, the University of Saskatchewan, the Province of Saskatchewan, and private landowners. In addition to the tertiary trails themselves, there are also many “installations”, such as jumps, ramps, and bridges that have been constructed, some of which are potentially unsafe.

The SMBA is a non-profit organization that has developed to increase maintenance and awareness around tertiary trails and to promote awareness of these amenities. For the past three seasons, the SMBA has received approval from Administration to conduct basic maintenance and volunteer cleanup events along tertiary trails. In 2021, the SMBA commissioned a detailed study from the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA), which examined the tertiary trail system in Saskatoon. The ensuing IMBA report included detailed recommendations to increase safety of trails and installations.

Public Engagement

There has been no direct public engagement on this topic; however, it is envisioned that additional opportunities for public engagement and contributions will increase as the SMBA grows and stewardship of tertiary trails increases.

While no formal public engagement has occurred to date, the Parks Department (Parks) has engaged external and internal stakeholders, including:

- 1) Meewasin;
- 2) Recreation & Community Development Department;
- 3) Saskatoon Water;
- 4) Planning & Development Department; and
- 5) Solicitors.

City of Saskatoon's Current Approach

Currently, there is no service level for these non-park trails; Parks staff do not maintain or conduct work in these spaces except on rare occasions. As referenced above, the City has approved the SMBA to conduct basic trail maintenance over the past three seasons, with the SMBA assuming responsibility for these activities.

Approaches in Other Jurisdictions

Other cities have similar frameworks in place where non-profit groups maintain organized trails, including Edmonton, Alberta, and Whistler, British Columbia. The proposed agreement (Option 2) is similar to that of the City of Edmonton's agreement with a comparable non-profit group.

OPTIONS

Various options exist to increase the care, maintenance, and safety of tertiary trails in Saskatoon.

Option 1 – Status Quo

The status quo would be a continuation of the current model of approving ad hoc requests by groups (such as the SMBA) to conduct basic maintenance and volunteer events. This option requires approved groups, such as the SMBA, to confirm liability insurance and adherence to basic rules and guidelines. It is important to note this option does not include any defined City service level, staffing, or budget dedicated to tertiary trails. Trail maintenance would be the responsibility of the SMBA for those portions where it undertakes work, and the trails would otherwise remain unmaintained.

Advantages:

- a) No additional resourcing or cost implications; and
- b) Simple approach to administer.

Disadvantages:

- a) Does not easily allow for above basic trail maintenance or enhancements;
- b) Must be revisited annually;
- c) Does not address safety or accessibility concerns along tertiary trails; and
- d) There may be conflict between groups providing the service.

Option 2 – Agreement with Saskatoon Mountain Bike Alliance Incorporated (SMBA)

An expanded agreement would include additional responsibilities and work to be completed by the SMBA. Under this option, the following framework would be in place for one year with annual extensions permitted:

Basic Maintenance

Approval: Pre-approved – SMBA may conduct basic maintenance at their discretion.

- Trail inspection and monitoring (drainage issues, garbage issues, trail braids and short cuts, trail tread stability);

- Minor pruning and grass trimming (handheld, manual tools) – leave no trace - all clippings to be returned to the forested area;
- Power tools on volunteer clean up days, provided proper safety and personal protective equipment is used;
- Removal of fallen trees interfering with established tertiary trails; SMBA will defer all removal of Elm trees to the City and will notify the City of trees showing signs of disease;
- The filling of holes and minor trail adjustments that do not alter the natural drainage patterns of the area with local materials;
- Invasive, nuisance, and noxious weed removal will be referred to the City and Meewasin; and
- Winter trimming, consisting only of minor pruning and removal of deadfall, as described above.

Intermediate Trail Maintenance

Approval: Written work plan from the SMBA with approval from Meewasin and the City.

- Minor repairs to existing bridges/structures where structure is sufficient (i.e., plank replacement);
- Ongoing safety improvements to existing installations, in line with recommendations in the IMBA report;
- Rehabilitation, improvements, and armoring of trails;
- Ground level, floating structure bridges over perpetually damp trail sections; and
- Potential winter grooming, including the use of motorized equipment.

Extensive Trail Maintenance

Approval: Written work plan from SMBA, site walkthrough with SMBA, Meewasin and the City, written approval via letter of permission.

- All Trail Reroutes: a new section of trail that replaces an existing section;
- Major Contouring: grade and/or slope adjustment;
- Building of new structures or supports;
- Mountain Bike Trail Construction/Development of New Trails:
 - Ground disturbance (i.e., grubbing or excavating soils or rocks along a linear route to establish a visible, long-lasting tread way);
 - Clearing or cutting vegetation (i.e., significant shrubs or non-tree material along a route); and/or
 - Construction of structures, such as water bars, bridges, or other structures, of a long-term or permanent nature; and
- Any other activity.

Intermediate and extensive trail maintenance would involve internal circulation and review by relevant City departments, with the Parks Department providing final approval.

It is important to note this option does not include any defined City service level, staffing, or budget dedicated to tertiary trails. Trail maintenance would be the responsibility of the SMBA for those portions where it undertakes work, and the trails would otherwise remain unmaintained.

Advantages:

- a) Improves quality of life in Saskatoon by increasing the quality and potential number of tertiary trails;
- b) Over time, improves safety of the numerous existing installations in riverbank areas;
- c) Follows the example of other cities in allowing citizen-led groups to have a greater impact on important amenities;
- d) Over time, high-quality trails can become tourist attractions for mountain bike enthusiasts (i.e., Whistler, BC); and
- e) No direct cost impacts to the mill rate.

Disadvantages:

- a) There may be other groups who do not agree with the direction or purpose of the SMBA;
- b) Agreement could be perceived by some users of these trails as providing one group too much control of the tertiary trail system, potentially favouring improvements for one activity (biking) over other activities (walking, hiking, etc.); and
- c) Improving the safety of the many installations along tertiary trails will still require a long-term approach.

Option 3 – Public Engagement and Recommendations on an Expanded Tertiary Trails Framework

Public engagement and additional research on this topic are outside of the current Parks Department work plan, staff resources, and approved funding. Under this option, the Administration would examine further public and stakeholder engagement to answer questions, such as:

- What is the usage of trails, and how are they used – cycling, walking, etc.?
- What is the best approach to manage and enhance this amenity?
- How have other cities dealt with potentially unsafe installations in an expedited manner?
- Is there a desire to have taxpayer funded service levels along tertiary trails – should City staff maintain these areas? If so, to what level?
- What other groups, if any, are interested in taking part in the care, maintenance, and development of tertiary trails?
- What kind of long-term planning considerations should be taken into account?

This work would likely be completed by an external consultant at an estimated cost of \$75,000 to \$100,000.

Advantages:

- a) Allows for more detailed information, research, and citizen input to be collected and analyzed.

Disadvantages:

- a) Direct cost to the taxpayer; and
- b) Does not allow expanded work to begin for another one to two years.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Standing Policy Committee on Planning, Development and Community Services recommend to City Council that:

1. Option 2 – Agreement Framework with Saskatoon Mountain Bike Alliance Incorporated, be approved.
2. That the City Solicitor be requested to prepare the appropriate agreement and that His Worship the Mayor and the City Clerk be authorized to execute the agreement under the Corporate Seal.
3. That the City continue with no defined service level or staffing resources dedicated to tertiary trails at this time.

RATIONALE

Administration is recommending approval of Option 2, an agreement with SMBA, due to the key advantages as listed in this report. This approach will allow an organized group to become more active along tertiary trails in Saskatoon, improve safety over time, and raise the quality of trails to a higher level.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct financial implications involved with the recommended option; management of the agreement would be completed with existing staff. Option 3, Public Engagement and Recommendations on an Expanded Tertiary Trails Framework, would require funding of approximately \$75,000 to \$100,000.

ADDITIONAL IMPLICATIONS/CONSIDERATIONS

There are no additional implications or considerations. If approved, work will begin on completing a more detailed final agreement.

COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

There are no direct communication activities planned by the City; signage and other communications will be the responsibility of the SMBA.

APPENDIX

1. Tertiary Trails in Saskatoon

REPORT APPROVAL

Written by: Konrad Andre, Operations Manager, Parks
Reviewed by: Andrew Glum, Solicitor
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Saskatoon Mountain Bike Alliance Incorporated – Proposed Agreement

Approved by: Darren Crilly, Director of Parks
Lynne Lacroix, General Manager, Community Services

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