

Fort Tuthill Bike Park: A Case for Fiscal and Physical Improvement in Flagstaff

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Flagstaff is known as tourist thoroughfare and a place with excellent access to outdoor recreation. It would be easy to dismiss the potential impact of additional growth in the recreation sector of our community. However, doing so would ignore the data suggesting that our city could harness additional tourism dollars while simultaneously improving the health and wellbeing of our citizens, including those most at risk in our community. By supporting the Fort Tuthill Bike Park, city officials and business will improve Flagstaff's ability to draw increased revenue from bike specific tourism while also increasing public access to outdoor activities which promote physical activity and address underlying community health issues.

According to "The Obesity Epidemic" report released in 2011 by the Arizona Department of Health Services approximately 65% of Arizona adults (18+) are overweight or obese. Additionally 28% of Arizona high school students and 30% of children (ages 2 to 4) participating in The Arizona Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program are also classified as overweight or obese. According to the report, Arizonans with lower incomes, less education, and who are from minority backgrounds are more likely to be obese. Nationally, costs related to obesity epidemics (including healthcare costs and lost wages due to illness or injury) totaled \$142 billion dollars (American Public Health Association, 2010). The Arizona Department of Health Services reports that in 2010, obesity related health care costs accounted for \$2 billion in hospital activity alone. The cost of inactivity is untenable for our community in the long term. Unaddressed, these costs will diminish the

profitability of even a thriving local economy. This evaluation does not even address the impact on future workforce development and its impact on our local economic outlook. Fortunately, there is excellent evidence to support impact of increased access to and development of recreational facilities.

The health benefits of outdoor recreation are widely recognized. People who regularly participate in moderate physical activity for 30 minutes or more are at lower risk for developing cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes (U. S. Dept of Health and Human Services, 1996). More interesting is that fact that access to well-developed public facilities results in increased use and activity, especially among the highest risk groups including low income and minority citizens (Cohen et al., 2007). In addition to access, it appears that increased development and variety of potential activities also increases both visitation and physical activity within an existing park (Brownson et al., 2001). These data suggest that increased access to well-developed public recreation areas may correlate with improved community health outcomes, especially in populations with the most need.

The health and health care cost impacts of projects like the Fort Tuthill Bike Park are only one possible benefit. The bike park specifically has the potential to play a role in Flagstaff's emergence as a bike tourism destination. According to the Outdoor Industry Foundation, 60 million Americans (18+) bicycle each year. Bike related recreation contributes \$133 billion annually to the U. S. economy. Regionally, the Mountain States generate \$6.2 billion in bike related revenue with over 4 million bicyclists (27% of the regional adult population). A study commissioned by the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) in 2013 determined that the economic impact of bicycle tourism in

Arizona was \$57 million, with Northern Arizona responsible for \$2 million in bicycle tourism revenue.

While \$2 million is a significant sum of money, it is a fraction of the revenue Flagstaff could see if the region invests in becoming a bike tourism destination. Currently Flagstaff receives 5 million visitors annually (City of Flagstaff). 58% of these visitors are stopping over in Flagstaff on route to other destinations and yet tourist spending (direct and indirect) still totals over \$500 million (Arizona Office of Tourism, 2009). Currently Flagstaff is only specifically drawing 42% or ~2.1 million of the 5 million annual visitors, and based on the bike tourism revenue totals provided by ADOT, there is ample room for growth in bike specific tourism for Flagstaff.

An excellent example of the success of bike tourism can be seen in Bend, Oregon. The city has a similar population size and demographic to Flagstaff. As in Flagstaff, there is ample access to outdoor recreation and this is a large draw for visitors. Bend's extensive trail system, bike park access, and bicycle advocacy are very similar to Flagstaff's (including current access and future plans). Recent tourism related revenue in Bend totaled \$526 million with 2.2 million tourists annually (Visit Bend, 2013). While Flagstaff sees similar numbers of visitors specifically coming to stay and play in the community and similar totals for overall tourist spending, Bend's bike specific tourist spending was \$80 million for 2012 (Travel Oregon, 2013). This is 40 times the bike tourism spending in Northern Arizona according to ADOT. In fact, bike related spending made up almost 12% of the total travel expenditures for Oregon's central region (including Bend). This doesn't include the bike industry and resident impact in the area, which are also significant.

Clearly the potential economic and health benefits to Flagstaff make a case for supporting the Fort Tuthill Bike Park, but community support is also key. While our efforts to increase bike tourism in Flagstaff need to be expanded, there is clearly a large and passionate community of cyclists already present. The support for Flagstaff Biking Organization and their various events speaks to a strong community connection to bicycles. This is further evidenced by the expansion of Flagstaff's existing trail system including the construction of the Flagstaff Loop trail, the success and growth of Bike to Work Week, and the recent success of the Bell Built grant funding competition. This community clearly supports bikes and outdoor recreation. This support will likely grow as we add to features to our bike related community that more people are able to access and explore.

The Fort Tuthill Bike Park represents an excellent opportunity to increase public interest in bikes. The park is easily accessible, provides a way to get outside for those who are less familiar with trails, and the multi-level approach will allow users to practice their bike skills at their comfort level. The park will not only increase visitation to an evolving county park, but it will serve as another feature of the Flagstaff bike community to draw out of town bike visitors. Supporting the Fort Tuthill Bike Park is a popular endeavor that will have positive long term financial and health impacts on Flagstaff.

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