

Beaucatcher Mountain

“ Plan-on-a-Page “ Submission 2016-06-28

1. Neighborhood Description

Beaucatcher Mountain is a largely wooded area directly adjacent to Downtown Asheville – very few cities of a similar size can claim to have bears living with ½ mile of City Hall. Apart from the ridge-line (what is now Windswept Drive) the terrain is steep, rocky and unstable. Development of much of the land on the mountain is subject to the city’s Steep Slope Ordinance.

The East End/Valley St and Kenilworth neighborhoods cover parts of the west- and east-facing flanks of the mountain respectively, but the highest and most sensitive land is not covered by a city-recognized neighborhood. As a result, this submission reflects conversations between individual residents and members of East End/Valley Street Neighborhood Association, Friends of Beaucatcher and Kenilworth Residents Association.

2. Neighborhood History

Situated close to the historic center of development in Asheville, Beaucatcher Mountain has played a prominent part in the city’s history. By the mid 19th century, it had been clear-cut for timber to be used in building the city - photographs of the period show the hill covered with tree stumps.

Grand plans for a “ linear park “ along the ridge-line and down the western flanks of the mountain floated in the early 20th century fell through, with much of the land involved being sold off and developed privately. A small part of the original plan has been realized in the establishment of Beaucatcher Overlook Park. A greenway to run from Memorial Stadium through the park towards Helen’s Bridge is in the planning stages.

Exploitation of the mountain reached a nadir in the 1970s with the excavation of the I-240 Cut.

In recent years the western flank of the mountain has hosted the construction of 420 apartments in three major developments, leaving the Alexander Drive corridor as one of the most densely populated areas in the city.

3. Neighborhood Vision

Beaucatcher Mountain is dying. Mud and rock slides are increasing in severity and frequency. Stormwater runoff into neighboring areas is increasing. Retaining walls of city streets have collapsed.

It is too late to talk of preserving Beaucatcher Mountain – its current state is not sustainable. In our view the only approach is to attempt to remedy past mistakes before it's too late :

1. For forested areas – particularly Overlook Park – the aim must be to properly curate both the land and the trees rather than leave them to look after themselves.
2. For impermeable surfaces – asphalt and concrete roads, driveways and parking areas – the aim must be to convert a significant proportion into permeable surfaces. Overall, the objective is to bring the mountain to a state where it is generating less stormwater runoff, rather than passively attempting to manage the runoff that occurs.
3. For residents, the aim must be an urban standard of life in what is essentially a rural environment.

Progress towards any vision would be hampered by confusion as to the proper role of the mountain in the city's future. Is it to be a playground for city residents and visitors ? Or is to continue to be a source of land - if steep and unstable - for use in residential development ? It is our view that, given the state of the mountain, development should slow and be subject to more restrictive conditions than in the recent past.

[1] Update Steep Slope Ordinance with stricter conditions on construction work on the mountain ¹

[2] Update Steep Slope Ordinance to require plans to include measures to mitigate stormwater runoff after construction is complete

[3] Update Steep Slope Ordinance to require plans to demonstrate the replacement of trees removed during construction

4. Neighborhood Strengths

The neighborhood's greatest strength in confronting its future is that residents of, and visitors to, Asheville know it and regard it as something special.

Residents of the mountain have shown that they are prepared to “ stand up and be counted “ when proposed developments threaten to harm it.

[4] A permanent Neighborhood body is needed to advocate for the mountain

If/when population density begins to increase in areas close to the mountain - such as the South Slope - the mountain can offer ready-made green-space for the increased population.

5. Neighborhood Challenges

Many of the neighborhood's challenges derive from the familiarity city residents feel for it - “ it's always been there : it always will be “.

¹ Policy recommendations are set off from the main discussion in this way - numbered recommendations are referred to later.

Overall - apart from the Alexander Road corridor - it is relatively sparsely populated so its voice has been, at best, weak and its interests suffer so that others can benefit :

1. Roads on the mountain are “ challenging ” and so – while outright speeding is rare – risky behavior by car drivers, cyclists and skateboarders is common.

[5] Traffic-calming measures are needed on all of the mountain’s roads - but most especially on steep grades

Walking and jogging along these roads is dangerous.

[6] Sidewalks are needed, most urgently along Windswept Drive, College Street and Alexander Drive.

2. Roads on the mountain are relatively quiet and so verges get used as convenient dumping grounds for domestic and commercial waste.

[7] Where road verges are wide for no particular reason, they need to either be blocked off or physically removed

3. Public areas – such as Helen’s Bridge – are quiet and so suffer almost continuous vandalism. Neighbors can help with monitoring such behavior, but

[8] A more visible police presence is needed

4. Forested areas are relatively quiet and so have been used in the past as unofficial campsites. Neighbors can help with monitoring such behavior, but

[9] A visible police / Park Ranger presence is needed in publicly-accessible areas

Past development – whether single-family, apartment or the Overlook Park – has taken stormwater runoff as something to be managed – or in some cases ignored – rather than mitigated.

Despite the lessons learned at the Biltmore Forestry School a century ago, there has been little or no management of the forest on the mountain – unless trees fall and block a road.

[10] Professionally-guided curation of the mountain's forested areas is needed to improve residents' lives, visitors' experiences, to help to reduce stormwater runoff and to reduce the risk of wildfires within the city’s downtown area.

6. Neighborhood Responsibility

An individual neighborhood cannot hope to take on all the tasks facing it – but since the whole city would benefit from a healthy Beaucatcher Mountain it should not need to. Already residents act as unofficial wardens of known problem areas – cleaning up after vandalism on Helen’s Bridge, for example - but

[11] A formal Neighborhood Watch is needed

Since the area is so well known, it should be possible to get help with simple seasonal maintenance needs – perhaps it would be possible to use “ Muddy Sneakers “ school trips as well.

[12] A formal “ Friends of ... “ body is needed

Assuming that the policies were validated by a suitable independent study :

1. The need to reduce impermeable surfaces on private land on the mountain is one that residents could assist with – given education and some kind of incentive, such as a rebate on Stormwater Tax.

[13] Stormwater Tax-based incentives are needed to promote the replacement of impermeable surfaces by permeable on private property

2. The need to replace dead/fallen trees on private land is one that residents could assist with – again given education and some kind of incentive.

[14] Property tax-based incentives are needed to promote the replacement of fallen / removed trees on private property

7. Alignment with Council Goals

A Diverse Community

Neutral

A Well-planned and Livable Community

On a dramatically smaller scale of course, a healthy Beaucatcher Mountain could serve the same role for Asheville as Central Park does for Manhattan - downtown greenspace shared by many neighboring high-density developments.

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A Clean and Healthy Environment

Preservation and enhancement of the forested areas on the mountain would improve the city's environment both visually and physically.

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Quality Affordable Housing

The nature of the terrain means that building on the mountain will always be expensive - the cost of foundation work needs to be amortized across as many floors as possible. The effects can be seen in the three apartment complexes in the Alexander Drive corridor : despite the costs they have imposed on the mountain they have not yielded significant numbers of affordable housing units.

Transportation and Accessibility

The nature of the terrain means that public transportation links such as bus lines can only skirt the flanks of the mountain - as the N, S1, E1, E2 and 170 do already. Provision of sidewalks along existing roads should be a priority to improve accessibility to those bus routes for residents of the mountain. Roads on the mountain are narrow, dangerous and lightly-used. Cycle paths and greenways face problems posed by the terrain - the archetypal cycle path is flat and only Windswept Drive approaches that state. The extent of these problems is shown in the March 2016 draft plan for the greenway - the maximum grade measured along its route was 19.1%

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Thriving Local Economy

A healthy Beaucatcher Mountain would increase the attractiveness of Asheville as a tourist destination, but contribute nothing to diversifying the economy away from tourism.

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Connected and Engaged Community

A coalition needs to be formed with the aim of bringing together two separate constituencies : people who belong to an established organization that represents some of the mountain's interests, and those individuals who " care " but - for example - live in an area not covered by an existing recognized neighborhood.

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Smart City

Neutral

8. Alignment with *Asheville City Development Plan 2025* Goals

Connect land use planning with multimodal transportation planning

Neutral

Mitigate impacts of climate change

Professionally-guided curation of the forested areas on the mountain should

1. Help reduce the amount of stormwater runoff onto neighboring areas
2. Help reduce the risk of wildfires within the city's

Maintain a resilient and diversified economy

A healthy Beaucatcher Mountain would increase the attractiveness of Asheville as a tourist destination, but contribute nothing the diversifying the economy away from tourism.

Promote community and housing equity

Neutral

Encourage healthy communities

The provision of access from bus routes that skirt the mountain, sidewalks along existing streets and cycling/walking paths through publicly-owned forested areas would allow the mountain to serve as public greenspace for the rest of the city.

Enhance local and regional partnerships

Neutral