

GUEST COLUMN

On the trail

BY BILL RING

Spring means birds chirping, trees budding and winter-weary residents venturing out to bask in the warmth of the sunshine. Time to get out and enjoy Hyde Park's world-class trail system.

The Hyde Park trail system is a major source of pride for our town. The 10-plus-mile network of trails and walkways links town parks, nature preserves and national park sites with local neighborhoods and the town's central business corridor.

These trails offer a multitude of benefits:

- Residents and families have safe places to walk, jog, push a stroller or bike (on selected trails). Exercising in the outdoors improves our physical and emotional health.
- The trail system increases exposure to and appreciation of Hyde Park's rich history and diverse natural environment.
- Visitors are drawn from neighboring towns to enjoy our trails. These tourists eat in our restaurants or shop in local stores while in town, boosting Hyde Park's economy.

The current trail system includes the Vanderbilt, FDR and Val-Kill national historic sites, Mills-Norrie State Park, the municipal parks at Hackett Hill and Pinewoods, and the Winnakee Preserve. We are particularly fortunate that many of our trails are maintained by the state and federal government. But to get the most out of these trails, we really need to more fully integrate them into future planning.

Hyde Park has been developing a master plan for the trail system, which would guide future site design to facilitate interlinking trails. The plan is the most sensible way for Hyde Park to efficiently incorporate the trail system into site design. It provides a road map to connect future subdivisions to existing trails, for without a common vision, it is impossible to ever achieve a fully integrated trail system.

Some worry that encouraging walking trails in a subdivision design is an economic burden for the developer. But on the contrary, studies show trails are an important selling point for new homes. Just 10 years ago, being near a golf course or water body was at the top of the list. But recreational access supplanted it a while

back so constructing simple trails actually improves the desirability and value of the lots in a subdivision. And especially if it's part of a linked trail system.

The master plan was completed last fall after extensive research, public input and revision. All that is left is for it to be formally adopted, and I encourage the town board to do so. It should also make the recommendations mandatory for future development approvals, giving the plan real backbone.

Sadly, this is the first spring in three years I am not able to take part in the Hyde Park Recreation Commission, the town partner in the trails program.

I was denied re-appointment to the commission by the current town board. The fact that I'm a Democrat apparently overshadowed my experience and track record in some board members' eyes. And though the current supervisor told a reporter he saw it as a conflict of interest should I be re-appointed (based on my former chairmanship of the Democratic committee), I don't see how.

Maybe it's time to change their motto to "Politics and to Heck with People!"

Still, I am confident the commission will carry on with its mission to further enhance recreational opportunities for Hyde Parkers, including our crown jewel, the Hyde Park Trail.

Economic development is important, but the town board must not neglect quality-of-life issues that make Hyde Park the town we love.

When I meet people from around the county and say I'm from Hyde Park, so many of them comment on how fortunate we are to have our trail system. This world-class resource is evidence of what can be accomplished by inter-agency collaboration, forward-thinking planning, committed volunteers and strong leadership.

I am proud to be part of the Hyde Park Democratic Committee, which promotes public participation and enhancing the quality of life for all Hyde Parkers.

What matters to you as a Hyde Parker? The Democrats are listening: hydeparkdems@gmail.com

Bill Ring is former chairman of the Hyde Park Democratic Party and a former member of the recreation commission. Hudson Valley News welcomes those with opposing views to submit columns to be considered for publication.

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