

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 7/8/2024 5:07:52 PM

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Comments: Trail development to an extent is a good thing for human health, preserving natural environment, driving economic prosperity and helping humans connect with their natural surroundings. However, regarding this project I believe there is a blurring of the line between healthy recreational development and damaging an area that is supposed to be preserved for its natural beauty which is an ever-dwindling thing in current times. I believe development of natural surface trails in the proposed project in a manner that reduces erosion and damage of important natural elements would be beneficial for the city of Mena and all of Arkansas. However, the construction of multiple lifts, gravel roads, large paved parking lots and additional facilities continues to slowly chip away what little pristine natural habitats are in existence. The continued move of recreation toward amusement park like design does not contribute to an appreciation of the land but only degradation of the area for the sake of economic development without respecting the land. The beauty of the Ouachita National Forest comes from the preservation of the habitat for so many years which is now seemingly coming to an end. As an avid mountain biker myself, I oppose the proposal for multiple lifts in this area and many additional facilities. I would recommend limiting the area to one lift to reduce turning an important natural area into an amusement park. The fun of mountain biking comes from the feeling of truly being out in nature, away from human built infrastructure and large crowds of people. The forest will never feel the same with this type of permanent infrastructure and increased traffic.

Many studies of economic improvement are based on studies done in Northwest Arkansas which is starkly different from Mena. Northwest Arkansas already has significant infrastructure in place and is a highly urban area focused on bringing people to the area through world class museums, music festivals, a unique biking community and infrastructure and other unique experiences that Mena Arkansas is not positioned to offer. This may play a role in why the economic benefit would likely be much higher in NWA compared to Mena. As an avid mountain biker, I enjoy visiting NWA because of not only the mountain biking opportunities, but the world class experience that the city itself also offers to visitors. NWA is a unique blend of urban and greenspaces that other cities would have a hard time implementing. It is less destructive to sensitive and protected areas as well.

I recommend reducing the environmental impact on our forest by limiting to one lift maximum in the area and trying to reduce additional facilities and roads which will fragment habitats and contribute to loss of the beauty of the forest and the ecosystem. I am also concerned about the rigor of environmental assessment done in these types of projects which appears will be either performed by Arkansas State Parks or contracted to a third party company. It seems that economic development continues to overshadow the value of undisturbed or minimally disturbed habitats. For example, as noted in the draft EA it claims that although some foliage would be permanently removed, it would provide a habitat for different foliage to move in which would provide net balance. This is highly unlikely to be true as removed foliage in a disturbed area typically becomes overgrown with invasive plants that don't contribute to the environment and require continuous treatment with herbicides to keep it at bay. To me, this seems to be a poor attempt at minimizing the consequences of disrupting a currently well-functioning natural habitat. It also supports the notion that preserved habitats are undervalued and overshadowed by eagerness for economic development.

I would be in favor of an alternative proposition for this plan that reduces the number of lifts and additional areas to better preserve this unique area.