

Glouco removes man-made spans at nature park



A mountain biker rides through a stream along a bike trail at Ceres Park Nature Preserve in Mantua. The stream once had a man-made bridge over it, but it was removed and now lays next to the stream. Gloucester County has deemed the structure hazardous. PHOTOS BY CHRIS LACHALL/COURIER POST

CYCLISTS TRY TO BRIDGE GAP

By Waldy Diez

Courier-Post Staff

MANTUA — With 52 acres of winding trails, wetlands, woods and a variety of wildlife, Ceres Park Nature Preserve in Mantua appears to be a mountain biker's heaven.

But Gloucester County and cyclists who enjoy the park adjacent to Pitman Golf Course differ on how its terrain should look.

The county on June 6 sent a bulldozer and at least one Bobcat 873 to remove man-made bridges constructed by local volunteers and the Jersey Off-Road Bicycle Association, a nonprofit dedicated to the safety and maintenance of off-road bike trails.

According to the cyclists, the bridges made riding easier and helped protect the environment. There are several streams and various forms of wildlife all through-

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Steve Blackman, owner of the Caffeinated Cyclist bike shop in Pitman, makes a repair on a bike. The county has removed man-made bridges from bike trails at Ceres Park.

ON THE WEB

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Bridges

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out the park.

But the county did not approve these bridges, said spokeswoman Debra Sellitto.

"The county removed man-made obstacles from the county side of the park; they posed a great risk, and they were not authorized."

It was not the first time the county and riders have found themselves at odds. According to JORBA's Rob Hess, who has worked at Ceres Park for more than a decade, the county tore down similar structures in November 2010.

In fact, says Hess — who has a Save Ceres Park Facebook page — tear-downs have occurred four times over the last decade, including the November incident.

JORBA organized a cleanup day for volunteers with the county's blessing in 2011, receiving a thank you letter from then-Freeholder Frank DiMarco. Hess said in the last year, about 100 volunteers have logged about 750 hours in the park, including cleanups and bridge building.

The most recent rebuild was completed in March, and according to Hess, JORBA has tried to be more proactive in engaging the county in its park efforts, including through the Facebook page and year-end reports to the county and Mantua.

Still, he admits, the group had no explicit permission to build. But in the eyes of Hess and the riders, the county seemed to change its opinion on



A mountain biker rides over a bridge along a trail at Ceres Park Nature Preserve in Mantua. Similar bridges built without permission have been removed by Gloucester County. The county would have had to assume legal liability for any accident that may have occurred on the bridges. CHRIS LACHAL/COURIER-POST

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DEBRA SELLITTO

Gloucester County spokeswoman

what was hazardous in the county- and township-owned park.

Calls to Mantua mayor Pete Sciroto were not returned. In a written response to Save Ceres Park about why the bridges were removed, Deputy County Administrator Gerald A. White said safety department personnel and J.A. Montgomery, an independent safety and risk management consultant, deemed the structures hazardous.

"Our safety department... made an initial determination that the structures constituted a serious hazard to those using this natural area intended to be used for pas-

sive recreation," the letter stated.

"J.A. Montgomery agreed with our safety personnel and strongly recommended that the county remove the hazardous structures from the park."

Under New Jersey law, local governments are not legally liable for accidents that occur in "unimproved" parks.

But with the man-made structures in place, the county would assume legal liability for any accidents.

Philadelphia resident and casual Ceres Park rider Dan Langille said he empathizes with both the county and the riders.

"This sort of thing seems to happen all over the world. It's unfortunate that (Gloucester County) had to tear (the bridges) down, but I can see why they did it."

On Wednesday cyclists attended the Gloucester County freeholders meeting to discuss the future of Ceres Park. According to Sellitto, the county has always cooperated with the cyclists.

"The county is not opposed to the cyclists using the trail, but any structure put in place must be constructed properly and meet the needs of all persons using the trail."

Hess will meet privately with the freeholders Tuesday.

"I see hope," he said. "I see a community that came together that supported the park, and most importantly, the county saw that, too."