

Outdoors: Keeping the trails open for bikers

Tee Clarkson outdoors@timesdispatch.com | Posted: Friday, December 27, 2013 12:00 am

What is good for some isn't always good for everyone.

This was certainly true in and along the James River Park this past summer. While the unusual amounts of summer rain were celebrated by rafters and whitewater kayakers, it made for a tough season for anglers on the river as well as bikers on the trails.



“The trails took a beating,” said Mike Burton, city trails manager.

Water is the biggest cause of erosion and erosion the biggest threat to the trails.

Burton and his crew have spent the better part of the fall focusing their maintenance attention on repairs from the summer. According to Burton, the work is ahead of schedule. The trail crew has been helped greatly by volunteers from the community, specifically the Richmond chapter of Mid-Atlantic Off-Road Enthusiasts (MORE), “the driving force in volunteer labor,” Burton said.

MORE organized volunteer groups on city trails on Saturdays throughout the fall.

Burton is focused on maintaining the current trails before creating new ones. He and his crew have spent time relocating trails and upgrading them where necessary. By doing so, they hope to avoid routine maintenance visits to the same areas.

“This is logistically easier and makes more sense,” Burton said. “Ideally, we will be improving the riding, running and hiking experience at the same time.”

When the trails receive heavy rains, Burton and his crew often close off certain sections that are particularly wet. These closures are as much to protect the trails as they are the bikers.

Burton acknowledges it can be frustrating for riders to come to a closed area, often leading them to ride parts of the trail Burton would rather they avoid until they dry.

Just because one area is closed doesn't mean there aren't plenty of other good sections of trail to ride. The key is knowing which are dry and accessible.

Burton suggests riders check Richmond MORE’s Twitter feed (@richmondMORE) for the most up-to-date trail conditions in the James River Park and other City Parks. Burton regularly checks the feed as well, because riders post images and details of where trees have fallen or the trail needs other maintenance.

More big news on the trail system in the James River Park and paths in Forest Hill Park and Dogwood Dell is the installation of more than one hundred 911 markers.

These markers provide a GPS location for emergency personnel, making it easier to locate individuals who have been injured or who need emergency medical attention in the parks and on the trails.

“Ambulances have had a difficult time finding people in some cases,” Burton said.

The markers in the park are equipped with numbers that have corresponding GPS coordinates. The marker numbers are tied into the city emergency response system and police dispatch. Those in need of assistance will simply provide emergency personnel with the nearest marker number, letting them know the closest access point to the trail. Certainly this should improve response times.

Markers have been placed at known landmarks, close to areas with good road access, and at locations where people are more likely to be injured on the trails.

“We are close to being able to test the system,” Burton said.

Park goers should look for signs explaining how to use the new system.