The Olympian

From 1 August 2003

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OUR VIEWS

Trail system is a great legacy

Paving on a stretch of the Chehalis Western Trail is wrapping up this week, giving walkers and bicyclists another seven miles of trail to use.

Converting the abandoned railroad tracks into a paved trail is one of the best decisions local elected officials have made in recent memory. The north-south trail, with its scenic beauty, is a tremendous gift to residents and to future generations. The final leg of the paving connects Waldrick Road to Silver Creek. The Chehalis Western Trail now stretches all the way from north of Lacey to Yelm, where it links up with a seven-mile trail to Tenino.

The South Sound community can thank the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation for a $350,000 grant that was used to pave the final stretch, which bicyclist Ruth Milroy describes as the "most beautiful" along the entire trail.

Michael Welter, the county's parks and recreation director, said, "The goal of the entire county trail system is to connect every urban and rural community with Puget Sound."

Imagine that, being able to bicycle from Tenino all the way to the saltwater of Puget Sound and back again. Not many communities have the foresight and leadership to bring about the trail system that is developing in South Sound.

The 15.5-mile Chehalis Western Trail is not quite finished yet. The final 2 1/2 miles from Yelm to Vail Loop will be completed when the county secures additional funding. It could take up to six years.

It's not surprising that the 13 miles of paved trail is drawing thousands of users. On any day of the week, you can find kids on skates, joggers, mothers pushing their toddlers in strollers and others making use of the paved trail.

Jamie Quinn, 29, of Olympia said it best: "You're in town, but you can still be out in nature."

The primary gap between the trail's northern and southern portions is between Pacific Avenue and Martin Way, crossing over Interstate 5. Unlike Yelm Highway, there are no pedestrian/bicycle bridges over those three major roadways. When the route was a working railroad, there were bridges over I-5, Martin Way and Pacific Avenue. But those were torn down as part of the freeway-widening project and after the railroad abandoned the line.

Today, trail users can find their way from one end of the trail to the other by using surface side streets. But the missing link is problematic for those commuting to work or those using the trail for recreation or exercise.

It's encouraging to know the county is tackling the "Bridging the Gap" project as part of the county's 2004 construction budget. Bridges are expensive to construct, but getting trail users off city streets will be safer.

The complete dedication of county, city and state officials to the local trail project is heartwarming. They understand the importance of this project for the future.

As Welter, the parks director, said, "This is the best lasting legacy we can have." The trail system in South Sound adds greatly to the quality of life today and for future generations.