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Linked trails a great gift

Our Views

One of the greatest gifts today's elected officials are leaving for future generations is a marvelous network of urban and rural trails.

□ The publicly funded trail project took another giant step forward recently with a groundbreaking ceremony for a bridge across Interstate 5. It's one of three bridges that need to be built - Pacific Avenue and Martin Way are the other two - to complete the Chehalis Western trail. When complete, the trail will stretch all of the way from Woodard Bay on the north to Tenino on the south.

Think about what an incredible accomplishment that is. A Tenino resident can then pedal all of the way to Puget Sound.

Of course, the most heavily used portion of the trail is in the urban area of Lacey, Olympia and Tumwater, where bicyclists, runners and walkers have found a safe and interesting place to get some exercise.

Today, trail users must use other streets because bridges across I-5, Martin Way and Pacific Avenue were removed during the freeway renovation project in the 1980s.

"It's literally the missing link," said Michael Welter, community development director for Thurston County. "I thought it would take years to get the bridges built, but it has moved a lot more quickly than a lot of us even dreamed possible."

That's great news for trail users.

The Department of Natural Resources paved the six miles of trail stretching south from Woodard Bay. The county picked up the next 16 miles. There are still two miles of trail to pave south of state Route 507 to Vail. Then the project will be complete.

And what's even more remarkable is the fact that the 29.5-mile north/south Chehalis Western Trail will link up with the 14.5-mile east/west trail connecting Yelm, Rainier and Tenino.

Not to be outdone, Olympia and Lacey are working to create another east/west link, the Woodland Trail, that will cut through the heart of both cities.

Those connected trails will allow users to move freely throughout the entire South Sound community.

Next up is a trail from Tumwater to Rochester.

What an incredible gift the trails are to South Sound residents - those living here today and those who will follow.

"It's kind of a stretch, but if we're really aggressive in looking for funding, within five or six years, this whole thing should be complete," said Thera Black, senior planner for Thurston Regional Planning Council. "It's always contingent on funding, but I think we have a very compelling project here."

Local, state and federal officials have worked diligently to secure \$7 million of the estimated \$9 million to construct the three bridges. It's teamwork at its best.
