FIRST AMENDMENT: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

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OUR VIEWS

Trail must be a top priority

South Sound has a lot of transportation needs, but one of the most critical is the completion of the Chehalis Western Trail.

The trail, which follows the old Chehalis Western Railroad spur line from Rainier to Woodard Bay, is 22 miles long, and all but two miles of it will be paved by spring 2002.

Thanks to visionaries like Michael Welter, director of Thurston County Parks and Recreation, as soon as the railroad right-of-way was abandoned, the property was quickly put into public ownership.

The popular Chehalis Western Trail connects with the 14.5-mile east/west Yelm-Tenino trial on the old Burlington Northern right-of-way. The two trails connect just west of Rainier.

Next summer the southern portion of the Yelm-Tenino trail will be paved, making it possible for pedestrians, joggers or bicyclists to travel via trail all the way from Tenino to Woodard Bay on Henderson Inlet.

Envision, if you will, commuters in the urban growth boundary and residents of Olympia, Lacey and Tumwater, walking or pedaling to and from work along the trail during the summer months.

There's only one problem.

The 22-mile Chehalis Western Trail has a small gap, six-tenths of a mile.

There is no trail from 12th Avenue in Lacey (near Pacific Avenue) across Interstate 5 and Martin Way. Trail users have to maneuver their way around South Sound Center to get from one end of the trail to the other.

To complete that portion of the trail will require the construction of three major bridges, a costly proposition.

"It's an expensive six-tenths of a mile," said Thera Black, senior planner for Thurston Regional Planning Council. "It's formidable for bicyclists and walkers, but it's also formidable for the government jurisdictions trying to knit our communities together, north and south of Interstate 5. It's a formidable challenge, but it's a remarkable opportunity for this community."

Preliminary estimates put the price tag of bridges over Pacific Avenue, I-5 and Martin Way at $7 million to $8 million.

TRPC has set aside $500,000 to acquire crucial right-of-way. But bridge construction is far beyond the reach of Thurston County, Lacey and Olympia. The state is unlikely to pay the entire price tag, either. A transportation partnership among federal, state and local governments could bridge the gap and complete the trail.

Black is absolutely right when she says, "The trail is a community asset. It connects urban to rural, north to south, east to west. I challenge anyone to show me a community of this size with an asset like this."

The key is getting the transportation dollars to complete the trail.

South Sound residents are extremely fortunate to have federal lawmakers in key positions to make that happen.

Rep. Brian Baird, who represents all of southwest Washington in Congress, sits on the House Transportation Committee. And Washington Sen. Patty Murray is chairwoman of the Senate Transportation subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee.

Call them. Write them. Tell them to make the completion of the Chehalis Western trail a priority for the next transportation budget.

The Olympian

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