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## Put entire trail under county ownership

One of the greatest gifts today's elected officials are leaving for future generations is an incredible network of urban and rural trails. The Chehalis Western Trail is the cornerstone of the system. Putting the entire 21 miles into single ownership makes sense.

A public hearing will be held tonight on a proposal to transfer 5.5 miles of the Chehalis Western from the state Department of Natural Resources and should be approved by state and county officials.

The magnificent vision of an urban/rural trail system linking individuals and communities was spelled out in a county park master plan. Michael Welter, the county's parks and recreation director, said at the time, "The goal of the entire county trail system is to connect Puget Sound."

It was a challenging vision, but one that was enthusiastically embraced by officials at the federal, state, county and city levels. The vision is nearing reality.

Welter and his staff deserve a big portion of the credit for pushing elected officials and securing the grants and funding to pay for the trail. When South Sound railroads abandoned their spur lines, park officials saw those railroad lines as a natural trail system. Had they not been connecting urban and rural portions of the county never would have been possible. The parks staff moved quickly to put the right trails in place. How ironic, then, that Welter and most of his staff will lose their jobs on May 31 when the county commissioners dissolve the county parks department. The Chehalis Western Trail, which counts about 100,000 uses per year, starts — or finishes — at the shoreline of Puget Sound in the heart of Olympia and eventually links with the 14.5-mile Yelm to Tenino Trail. It boggles the mind, but a Yelm resident or Tenino resident would know the way to Woodard Bay.

All but two miles of the Chehalis Western Trail are paved. Those two miles extend to the Vail log sorting yard and pass through the city of Olympia. There are two — soon to be, one — gaps in the Chehalis Western Trail. While bridges have been constructed over Yelm Highway and Pacific Avenue, the Pacific Avenue bridge spanned — Pacific Avenue and Martin Way. The Chehalis Western bridge over Martin Way is scheduled for construction this summer. The Pacific Avenue bridge is scheduled for construction this summer.

The Chehalis Western also links with the Woodland trail which still is in the development stage and will one day connect Tumwater and Woodland. The Woodland trail, completed — the 12.5 mile link between Tumwater (Kenneydale Park) and Rochester. That wildlife-rich trail is almost entirely rural and covers the most scenic and untouched areas of the county.

Welter's four remaining parks maintenance employees will be responsible for upkeep of the trails.

When the economy rebounds, county commissioners must reinstate park managers who must make it a priority to get the Pacific Avenue trails paved.

The 10-year-old vision of linked communities and linked lives simply is too important to leave undone. Having the entire 21 miles of trail under government jurisdiction — county government — makes sense and is the next logical step.