

# Chehalis-Western Trail

# “Bridging the Gap”

## A LEGACY BICYCLE/PEDESTRIAN PROJECT FOR THE THURSTON REGION



- What:** **Chehalis-Western “Bridging the Gap” Bike/Pedestrian Project**  
*This project will complete the region’s premier bicycle / pedestrian facility by connecting the north and south segments of the Chehalis-Western Trail currently divided by Interstate 5 and two highway-oriented arterials. It will link all but two of the region’s urban and rural communities via a 22-mile north-south corridor, a 14-mile east-west rural corridor and 12 miles of east-west urban corridors.*
- Where:** **Lacey and Olympia, Washington**  
*Project overlaps the municipal boundary between Lacey and Olympia. The facility itself is under the ownership and management of Thurston County.*
- Total cost:** **\$11 million, start to finish**  
*About \$7.7 million in local, regional, and state funds have been secured for this project, including a \$2.6 million state allocation in 2003 through the efforts of former State Representative Sandra Romero and a \$4.1 million federal allocation through the efforts of US Representative Brian Baird.*
- Partners:** **“The Gap” enjoys a consortium of local, regional, and state partners**  
*Thurston Regional Planning Council; Thurston County; Lacey; Olympia; the WSDOT Olympic Region; former State Representative Sandra Romero and US Representative Brian Baird; private property owners adjacent to the project.*
- Sponsors:** **Thurston Regional Planning Council & Thurston County**  
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## **A Brief History**

Community interest in “Bridging the Gap” has its roots in the region’s historic ties to the timber industry. For almost sixty years, the Weyerhaeuser Corporation owned and operated the Chehalis-Western Railroad between its sorting yards near the rural community of Rainier and Woodard Bay’s shipping docks on Puget Sound. This corridor traverses field and forest, links rural and urban communities, and meanders beside lake and river along the way to its terminus on the pristine shores of Woodard Bay. When Weyerhaeuser abandoned the railroad, state and local interests made acquisition of the 22-mile long corridor a priority.

The Washington State Department of Natural Resources acquired the first segment in 1988. Thurston County quickly developed an aggressive funding strategy to keep as much of the remaining corridor intact as possible, with the vision of connecting every rural and urban community with the region’s treasured resource, Puget Sound. Throughout the 1990s, Thurston County took a leadership role in securing the corridor as it was abandoned and preserving it in perpetuity for use by citizens of the region. This effort spawned coordinated strategies and partnerships with the cities of Lacey, Olympia, and Tumwater, and to the south, Rainier, Tenino, and Yelm. As a result, the Chehalis-Western Trail plays a leading role in the trails plans and non-motorized facilities strategies of every jurisdiction in the region.

Today, all but 0.6 miles of this 22-mile corridor is in public ownership and developed as a multi-use non-motorized facility for the travel and recreation benefit of residents of all ages and abilities. This 0.6 mile gap is the focus of current efforts.



## **The Gap**

The Gap refers to the 0.6 mile section of the Chehalis-Western Trail that is bisected by Interstate 5 and its parallel surface streets.

In the 1950s, the decision was made to provide direct access to the nation’s interstate highway from Washington’s state capitol in Olympia. That decision resulted in the routing of Interstate 5 through the heart of Olympia and Tumwater, and what was to become the thriving city of Lacey. Interstate 5 effectively bisected these cities, slicing through the hearts of some of the oldest established communities in Washington State. While somewhat controversial at the time, the full impact of this decision is only beginning to be realized as the region works to knit its neighborhoods back together.

Interstate 5 divides our communities. It segregates diverse residential communities from businesses and services, a regional medical center, major employment areas, and civic centers. It creates retail and business opportunities while at the same time restricting the ability of nearby residents to access them safely without having to drive the half mile distance through highway-oriented traffic.

As progress was made on acquiring and developing the Chehalis-Western Trail system, more and more people began to see the potential benefit that would be realized by connecting the northern and southern sections where they’re currently bisected by I-5. That community vision led to today’s “Bridging the Gap” partnership.

## **The Vision**

Communities throughout the Thurston region recognize the importance of a balanced, multi-modal transportation system in meeting the many different travel needs of residents of all ages, and in contributing to overall livability and quality of life for generations to come. For years these communities have invested in safe facilities for all modes of travel.



Policy makers and community leaders realized that, just as a functional network of streets and roads relies on key arterials to serve as the main framework, so too does a functional non-motorized network need a framework. To the best of its ability, the Chehalis-Western Trail serves as this region's north-south backbone for non-motorized travel. It connects with

the region's two principal east-west corridors, the Woodland Trail corridor taking shape through the north urban area of Lacey and Olympia, and the existing Yelm-to-Tenino Trail to the south. However, the Chehalis-Western's useful function is limited by the gap severing the northern segment from the southern segment in the heart of the urban area, right where non-motorized facilities are needed the most. This project will bridge that gap and enhance the functionality of the north-south and east-west trail corridors.

## **Funding**

Policy makers on Thurston Regional Planning Council, the region's Metropolitan Planning Organization, took the lead in turning vision to reality when they allocated \$500,000 in regional Surface Transportation Program funds in 2001 to what became "Bridging the Gap." This funding allocation breathed life into the vision of a complete north-south facility for non-motorized travel that would link neighborhood to neighborhood, tie close-in residential areas to thriving retail, service, medical, and civic centers, connect with key east-west corridors that serve major employment centers and the state capitol, and finally implement the original vision to connect urban and rural communities with each other and with Puget Sound. This funding allocation initiated current "Bridging the Gap" efforts that continue to gain momentum, bringing visionary reality within reach of these communities.



Former State Representative Sandra Romero joined the partnership in 2003 when she led the Washington State Legislature to allocate \$2.6 million towards design and construction of the segment over Interstate 5. The region made a commitment to obligate those funds as soon as possible, even if federal funds were not yet available to complete the full project. As a result, groundbreaking on the span over I-5 will take place in July 2006 with construction complete by the end of the year.

TRPC had an additional opportunity to allocate funding to the project in 2004 as it kicked off a new round of regional STP allocations. Regional policy makers unanimously approved

allocation of another \$500,000 to “Bridging the Gap” to keep project efforts moving forward. That funding has supported critical right-of-way acquisition and preliminary design of the Martin Way crossing element.

In 2005, US Representative Brian Baird secured an allocation of \$3.5 million for this project during reauthorization of the federal transportation bill. Those funds will ensure completion of the Martin Way crossing and begin work on the Pacific Avenue crossing. Public and private partners are working together to identify strategic alignments that will maximize benefit for trail users and stimulate compatible land use redevelopment opportunities adjacent to the trail. Design of these important segments is underway.

Lacey, Olympia, and Thurston County continue to contribute in-kind support in the form of engineering and design services to this project.

### **Community Benefits**

Benefits to the social or human environment are specific to the inherent right of safe and convenient access that all citizens of this region are entitled to, and the self-dignity and independence that access brings. Access – to business, jobs, retail and medical centers, libraries, schools, and recreational opportunities – will be expanded for non-motorized travelers of all ages and income groups.

- This includes improved access for lower-income neighborhoods adjacent to the corridor in the vicinity of the Gap, where the cost of owning and operating a car is beyond the means of many and beyond the physical ability of others. It is not easy for people in these neighborhoods to get to basic services on foot, bike, or wheelchair.
- “Bridging the Gap” will increase generational equity by enabling young people to get to libraries, parks, schools, and the mall without relying on a licensed adult to drive them.
- At the other end of the generational spectrum, the region’s largest senior community is located adjacent to the Chehalis-Western Trail, just south of the Gap location. “Bridging the Gap” will provide active seniors with safe and convenient access to the full range of retail, medical, civic and service facilities along this urban corridor.

From the environmental perspective, completion of this project will expand the viability of biking and walking as travel modes throughout the metropolitan area. Even with the existing system disconnect at I-5, bicycle commuting in the metropolitan area of the Thurston region increased more than 50% in recent years, compared to a population increase of about 10%.

Increased health and reduced obesity is another environmental benefit as “Bridging the Gap” provides more people with an opportunity to maintain an active lifestyle. Promoting bicycling and walking as alternatives to the sedentary lifestyle associated with driving has long-range benefits to the community. “Bridging the Gap” will make biking and walking a more attractive alternative for more travel needs.

Economically, “Bridging the Gap” will provide benefit by linking close-in neighborhoods on either side of I-5 directly with major retail and service centers. Completion of this project will increase facility users from more than 100,000 in 2004 to more than 150,000 people annually within just a few years. This project is likely to have spin-off economic benefit since “Bridging the Gap” includes right-of-way easement through a major retail property in Lacey’s central business district and the future urban center on the Olympia side of the trail. It is anticipated that proximity to the trail will stimulate economic redevelopment potential for properties adjacent to the trail in this heavily urbanized area.