

Getting in the loop about the Loop Trail

by Michelle McNiel

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Photo provided/World photo/Mike Bonnicksen

As Pipkin Construction employees move dirt for a new, straighter section of trail, Kate Braunstein of Dryden rides her bike around one of two corners that will be removed on the Apple Capital Recreation Loop Trail as a result of the re-routing.

EAST WENATCHEE — The Apple Capital Recreation Loop Trail will undergo a series of changes and improvements this year as it heads into its 20th year as a centerpiece of the Wenatchee Valley.

From a change in ownership along the eastside to new standardized mile markers, curve realignments to a new spur trail, the 11.5-mile-long loop will undergo its biggest makeover since it opened as a completed trail in 1994.

“The stars are really coming into alignment for the trail this year,” said Bob Parlette, one of the primary proponents in building the trail.

Here are some highlights:

New ownership

State and local officials are working out some of the kinks in a plan to transfer ownership of the 4.5-mile east side of the trail. It will move from the state Department of Transportation to Douglas County and the city of East Wenatchee.

The transfer is expected to take place next month.

The state has owned the land since the 1950s, when it bought land for a waterfront highway that was never built.

The state Legislature approved a plan last year that would transfer ownership to local control. Since then, officials from the DOT, Douglas County and East Wenatchee have been working out some sticking points, primarily over private easements, the width of right of way and an equestrian trail.

Uncertainty still remains over a parcel between the trail and the Columbia River near the sand dunes that the state plans to surplus and sell.

A group of community leaders has been meeting to talk about ways to save it from potential private development, said Bob Bugert, executive director of the Chelan-Douglas Land Trust.

He said they will explore possible legislative options to remove the land from surplus. “Or, if necessary, we will try to come up with financing to acquire the land and transfer it to local control,” he said.

Mile markers

Three different sets of mile markers can now be found along the east and west sides of the loop trail, put there by different groups that hold events on the trail. One set features triangles, one has squares and the third has round dots.

Douglas County will kickstart the move to one standardized set of mile markers by paying for a fancy “0” marker to be placed in the center of the pipeline pedestrian bridge later this year. County officials hope a service club or another community group will raise the funds to pay for

the remaining mile markers. The mile markers will increase in a clockwise direction around the trail.

They will include larger signs for the mile locators and smaller ones for the half-mile and quarter-mile marks, said Douglas County Engineer Doug Bramlette. The primary reason for having one common mile marking system is in case of emergencies, for both the people calling for help and the emergency crews responding to the incident, he said.

New mile markers should clear up longstanding confusion over how long the loop trail actually is, said Stephen Maher, a partner in RunWenatchee, which holds the annual River Run on the trail.

“Some people are adamant that it’s exactly 10 miles, while others says its 10 and a half or 11 or more,” he said. “Everyone who has events on the trail puts up their own course markings, but having official mile markers would be great.”

New streamlined curves

The wilder east side of the loop trail is known for its steeper hills and sharper corners. But the original idea for the trail segment was more civilized. Early plans called for bridges over several deep gullies and washes, Bramlette said. But when it came time to build the trail in 1993 and 1994, there wasn’t enough money for bridges or even to contour some of the curves to make them less, well, curvy.

So the trail cuts in sharply in several places between the sand dunes and the foot of 27th Street N.W.

Douglas County engineers and planners, whose offices sit along the trail and who frequently use the trail, became increasingly concerned that the corners were too dangerous. Some of them suffered minor injuries from crashes. So the county asked the public to submit reports of accidents they were involved in along the eastside of the trail.

“We got a stack of responses this high,” Bramlette said, holding his hand several inches above his desk.

So the county applied for grant funding and hired a contractor to straighten out the worst curve, located near the bottom of 32nd Place. The work began last month and will be completed in April or May, depending on weather.

Bramlette said he plans to apply for more grant money this year to straighten out four more curves. One is located a few hundred feet south of the curve now under construction; one is near the bottom of 29th Street N.W.; one is at the foot of 27th Street N.W.; and the other is just south of there.

The county would also like to do something in the future about the sharp corner at the far north end of the trail where it comes off Odabashian Bridge.

Maher said he believes fixing the eastside curves will entice more groups to hold sporting events on the loop trail, particularly biking events.

Plaza

A new resting plaza will be built this spring at the east end of the pedestrian bridge, near the foot of Ninth Street N.E. The plaza will feature benches, landscaping planters and textured stone pavers. It will be a place for people to stop and rest or meet up with friends while using the trail, Bramlette said.

As part of that project, or possibly as a future phase 2, the city of East Wenatchee is planning to make more improvements at that location with money it will receive from the DOT to compensate the loss of a small view park near Fred Meyer.

The city hopes a small park or resting spot in the location will improve pedestrian circulation between downtown East Wenatchee and the waterfront, said Lori Barnett, East Wenatchee's community development director.

That portion of the project will be done this year if the city and DOT finalize an agreement on the compensation.

Extensions

Work will begin this spring on one section of the Rocky Reach Trail extension between the north end of the Loop Trail and Lincoln Rock State Park.

The northern-most mile of the spur trail, from the state park to a lookout to be built near Rocky Reach Dam, will be built starting in April. Money is available for just that portion of the 5-mile Rocky Reach Trail. But more money is needed to build the rest of the trail south to Odabashian Bridge.

WENATCHEE — The Complete the Loop Coalition will kick off a fundraising campaign to raise money for construction of the Rocky Reach Trail extension this month.

The organization will hold a public meeting on 7 p.m. Jan. 29 at the Wenatchee Valley Museum & Cultural Center. Group leader Bob Parlette will give an overview of the project's history and a representative from Washington State Parks, which is the lead agency for the trail extension, will give an update on plans to build the 5-mile trail.

A one-mile section of the trail extension is scheduled to be built this spring from Lincoln Rock State Park to a viewpoint near Rocky Reach Dam. Funds are still needed to build the trail south to connect to the Apple Capital Loop Trail.

Parlette said about \$3 million is probably needed to build the final section. The coalition is hoping to raise \$1 million through a community fundraising campaign.

— Michelle McNeil, World staff

The Complete the Loop Coalition, which formed back when the community was working on building the Apple Capital Loop Trail, will lead a community effort to raise \$1 million for the spur trail construction.

The DOT has already built a small section of the trail going north from Odabashian Bridge. Washington State Parks, which is overseeing the construction of the Rocky Reach Trail, has estimated it will cost another \$3 million to complete the spur trail.

Meanwhile, an existing spur trail south to Kirby Billingsley Hydro Park has been partially closed for the last few years because of the Sellar Bridge work. The section between the pipeline bridge and S.E. Third Street is officially closed, though some portions of it are being used by the public.

The entire trail section — complete with two new tunnels — is scheduled to reopen to the public by early summer, said Kevin Waligorski, the DOT project manager for the east side of the Sellar Bridge project.

Some parts of the spur trail that have been reconstructed by the DOT have some new features, including fog lines and center striping. Waligorski said that's because the DOT has higher trail-construction standards than local governments.

Trail brand

Douglas County and other local entities are working on creating a brand, or identity for the loop trail. So far, they've come up with an idea for a fruit-box style logo with an orchard and an apple featured prominently on the sign.

The logo would be used on some of the mile markers and other locator signs on the trail, as well as promotional materials.

Bramlette said the design for the logo has yet been finalized, but that will likely happen this year.

Trail foundation

There is no single agency that oversees the trail. That responsibility is shared by Douglas County, East Wenatchee, Eastmont Parks and Recreation, Wenatchee, Chelan County PUD, state Department of Transportation, Wenatchee Reclamation District and Washington State Parks.

So there is no clear way for the public to, say, make a donation for trail work.

Government and community leaders are exploring the idea of setting up a foundation or trail authority that would allow more direct public involvement in the trail.

"There is an acute need for it," Bugert said. "There is obviously a lot of community support for the trail."

He said a study of community trails systems in the West found that most established trails have a public-private partnership to oversee them.

While public agencies may have better access to grants and other means to maintain the trails, “private groups have more agility and fundraising capabilities,” he said.

He said the Land Trust is looking into the idea of creating the Apple Capital Trails Foundation that would solicit community donations to help pay for maintenance and development of the trails in the future.

Bramlette said there has also been talk of developing an adopt-a-trail-section program, similar to the adopt-a-highway program, where community groups can financially sponsor a section of the loop trail.

“It’s really in our own best interest to come up with the means to maintain this trail system,” Bugert said.

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