

# GRAB A SHOVEL; LET'S DIG

## What goes into getting a mountain bike trail built?

By Travis Reill

**M**any of us have experienced this very scene. You're back at the trailhead, reaching into the cooler for a post-ride beverage. You and your buddies just finished riding nearly 15 miles of pristine singletrack. The conversation is pretty standard: a particular section of trail that is your favorite, how you like this or that on your bike, and glory stories of a trip to the bike park a week ago.

Then the conversation turns more

towards the local trails—trails that have blown-out corners and downed trees. Trails that are all but unrideable. Then come the wishes. I wish this or that section were fixed. I wish we had more flow, tech, steep—you fill in the blank—trails.

But, have you ever actually stopped and considered all that goes into building and maintaining a trail? Have you multiplied that to account for an entire trail system? Do you know how long it

takes to have a trail built or the agencies that are involved?

Complaints about trails are common. We've all heard them, and we've probably all complained a bit ourselves. As mountain biking has become more popular, trail systems continue to pop up all over. Cities and economies grow because of access to trails. And, over time, having access to trails and trail systems has become the norm, allowing us to take our trails for granted.



A COTA volunteer maintains a trail near Bend, Oregon. COTA maintains nearly 600 miles of trail around central Oregon.

Photo by Alex Brieger





## **FIVE YEARS...**

Five years is about the average time it takes to build a trail. Emmy Andrews, Executive Director of the Central Oregon Trail Alliance, says that the planning alone takes multiple years, especially if there is a federal agency involved. Even if there are no real opponents of the project, it will still take about five years—five years of planning, meeting, organizing and filling out paperwork.

It can be difficult for the average trail user to remember this. If the casual trail user thinks about trail building at all, he

likely assumes that some folks got some shovels and rakes one day and decided to build a trail. Then, after a few weeks or maybe months of work, a trail was born. Nothing could be further from the truth.

## **TRAIL ADVOCACY**

Chances are, if you have more than a few miles of singletrack near your home, there is a trail advocacy group that maintains those trails. Popular riding areas may have more than one advocacy group building and maintaining trails.

These advocacy groups are often non-

profits. This means no lobbying, no politics, and no political funding. Finances come from donations and member support. Trail advocacy nonprofits can often be small, some having only a volunteer staff, but they likely have a huge area and many miles of trails that they maintain.

Trails are often built by volunteers. Volunteer-built trails are more affordable but take much longer to build. It makes sense that volunteer-built trails take longer to build, but why do they take five years? This is often due to the land that the trails are being built on.





COTA volunteers using tools of the trade.

Photo by Alex Brieger

**NEPA**

Many of the trails that we ride and enjoy daily are on public land. These lands can be national or state forests, state parks, or land managed by the BLM (Bureau of Land Management). When trails are proposed and built on public land, the proposals must go through NEPA or the National Environmental Policy Act.

NEPA, as many of you can probably guess from its name, requires federal agencies to evaluate any project

proposals for their possible impact on the environment before they can be approved. The agency can be looking at everything from the impact on wildlife to noise pollution. Satisfying the requirements of NEPA is the starting point for many advocacy groups.

COTA, or the Central Oregon Trail Alliance, knows the NEPA process well. COTA is the trail advocacy group that builds and maintains over 600 miles of singletrack around central Oregon. The majority of

those trails are located in and around Bend, Oregon, COTA's home base since its inception 30 years ago. The lion's share of COTA's trails are in national forests, meaning they work with the local forest service agencies.

It would be easy to assume that those who work in governmental agencies, like the forest service or BLM, are the ones dragging their feet. Emmy Andrews, COTA's Executive Director, says this couldn't be further from the truth. Any time you are





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working with the federal government, the process is going to take a long time, especially with processes like NEPA.

That is COTA's reality, but Andrews and others at COTA have worked hard to build and maintain relationships with folks at the government agencies they work with. Building relationships is a major component of building trails, and the land managers that COTA works with want to see more public access for things like mountain biking on public lands.



Man's best friend joins CCCMB's trail crew.  
Photo by Christie O'Hara

Andrews also explained that new trails are not proposed one at a time. Because the NEPA process takes so long, it makes more sense for groups like COTA to propose multiple trails in one area. That way the NEPA process can be done at one time rather than repeating the process for each trail.

### **TRAIL-BUILDING NEGATIVES**

Not having the support of the community can be a big obstacle to getting trails built. Often, trails are being proposed in smaller communities. Sometimes, these communities are resistant to change. They are not only fearful of mountain biking but any kind of change.

Andrews and COTA are fortunate to be in Bend, Oregon, where the community mostly seems to be behind mountain biking. In other places, the community may be more hesitant to have trails built, as there may be a fear that trails will bring crime or vandalism to their community. Andrews stressed the importance of

building relationships in the community before trails are proposed.

Conflict between trail users, particularly as it relates to safety concerns, can also be an obstacle to getting trails built. Paul Reinhardt, a director with Central Coast Concerned Mountain Bikers (CCCMB), experienced this as his group tried to build and maintain trails in the San Luis Obispo area. Many areas in California, especially in the south, lack trees but have high brush that lines the trails. This high brush makes down-trail visibility difficult, and with the high speeds generated on steep terrain, it is easy for accidents to happen. The solution? Reinhardt spoke of their bike bell program. At CCCMB's trailheads, they have bells to hang off your handlebars to alert other trail users that you are coming. The bell program started in 2011, and Reinhardt says it has helped alleviate some of the conflicts between trail users. Above all, it sends a message that mountain bikers are trying to be considerate of others on the trail.



**OKAY, LET’S BUILD ON PRIVATE LAND**

So, if the process of building trails on public land takes a long time and trail-user conflicts can result, why not just build on private land? Some trail advocacy groups have gone this direction, but building on private land has its own challenges.

First, it can be difficult to find landowners who are willing to allow mountain biking trails on their land. Sometimes trails are built innocently but illegally on private land, and once the owner finds out, the trails get demolished, and there goes the possibility of a future relationship.

Occasionally, luck is on the trail advocacy group’s side, and they find a landowner who wants to work with them. Trails are built, and the public begins to enjoy them. But, a change in the ownership of that land can put trail access at risk. Purchasing land is one option to ensure the public maintains access. This happened in Bellingham, Washington, with the purchase of land on Galbraith Mountain.

Drew Honzel of the Klamath Trail Alliance (KTA) in Klamath Falls, Oregon, knows a thing or two about building on private land. KTA builds and maintains trails on Spence Mountain, a privately owned chunk of forest on the banks of Upper Klamath Lake.

With far fewer bureaucratic hoops to jump through, one would think that building trails on private land would be easy, but that isn’t necessarily the case. Due to the fear of the public losing access to private trails, most advocacy groups, like KTA, who are interested in building on private land look for ways to ensure long-term access before making major investments. This means lots of time and paperwork devoted to establishing things like land trusts. There may not be governmental hoops to jump through, but there are hoops nonetheless.

Also, just building the trails isn’t the end of it. After investing heavily in getting the actual trails built, there is more to do. Trails require parking, trailheads, signage, maintenance and further development.

While trails on private land may not have to go through the NEPA process, they still have some agencies they must work with. KTA works with the Department of Fish and Wildlife to ensure nesting eagles on Spence Mountain have plenty of space.

Each new trail being proposed on private land needs to be approved by the landowner. Honzel sang the praises of Spence Mountain’s landowner, saying that approval of future trails has been relatively easy. KTA is fortunate to have such a good relationship



A COTA volunteer helping future riders in the corners  
Photo by Alex Brieger

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with that landowner. Other advocacy groups haven’t had it as easy.

**TRAIL-BUILDING POSITIVES**

Building and maintaining relationships with land managers, owners and the community are the keys to getting trails built. Whether building on public or private lands, there is no doubt that the personal relationships between advocacy groups and land managers are essential.

Drew Honzel, with Klamath Trail Alliance, spoke of the ongoing relationship between KTA, the community and the owner of Spence Mountain. The trust and friendships that have been built over the years have paved the way for a positive working relationship.

Paul Reinhardt of CCCMB spoke of the group’s early days and relationships that were built with equestrian groups and other trail users. These relationships are maintained to this day, as different groups work together to protect the public’s access to the trails.

Reinhardt also spoke of CCCMB’s process of building trust with state parks in the early days. Simply put, CCCMB was willing to show up and maintain trails, regardless of mountain bike usage, in the parks. When the time came for new trails to be built, CCCMB already had an established reputation with the parks. This positive reputation led to county and city trail programs in the San Luis Obispo area.





Mountain bikers, hikers, and equestrians work together to maintain trails near San Luis Obispo  
Photo by Christie O'Hara



A CCCMB trail worker putting in work  
Photo by Christie O'Hara

## SO WHAT?

There are three things that the average trail user can do to support the growth of their local trail system.

First, become a member of your local trail advocacy group. This means money. Membership fees can be paid monthly or annually, and your membership dollars will help advocacy groups keep working. And, you don't have to stop with your membership dues. Feel free to donate! Consider it a gift for all the bureaucracy they deal with!

Is there a trail you ride often that is out of the area of your local advocacy group? Join the group that maintains those trails, too. There is no rule saying you can only belong to one club.

Second, volunteer for a trail workday. Many advocacy groups are relatively small nonprofits, some maintaining hundreds of miles of trails. With professional trail builders charging in the tens of thousands of dollars per mile of trail built, the only option for some groups is to rely on volunteers. Volunteering is fun and rewarding, and it brings the community together. Plus, how cool is it to be able to tell your buddies you helped build the trail you just ripped down?

Last, be a kind and responsible trail rider. Follow proper trail etiquette. Say thank you, smile and tell other users to have a wonderful time. The key to building and maintaining great trails is the development of relationships and alliances. Let's all help maintain bike relationships by spreading the stoke of being on singletrack!

A special thanks to Emmy Andrews of COTA, Paul Reinhardt of CCCMB and Drew Honzel of KTA. And, thank you to all who are involved in a trail advocacy group—from staff to members and volunteers. Your work is greatly appreciated! ☐