

## 63-mile trail in need of one bold step

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For several years now the people of Wallowa and Union counties have been hearing of a plan to build a pedestrian/bike trail along 63 miles of railroad from Joseph to Elgin. We've reached the point where that talk must either make room for action or slowly diminish as another fine idea that just couldn't take shape.

The concept is called Rail with Trail. It calls for keeping the railroad active for use by excursion and other trains and accentuating the corridor with a trail at a safe distance on adjacent land. Both the rail and the land is owned by the Wallowa Union Rail Authority (WURA) and the fate of the project now rests with the eight-member WURA board, which is considering allowing the use of its land but has been clear about its reluctance to assume any financial burden associated with the project.

During its most recent meeting Dec. 15 in Wallowa, the WURA board, a public governing body, heard presentations from trail advocates as well as the two key people behind the Concept Plan — Eastern Oregon University MBA candidate Dana Kurtz and Oregon Parks and Recreation State Trails Coordinator Rocky Houston. Those presentations were followed by a public discussion, during which emerged the evening's lone voices of dissent — from a few residents who own land adjacent to the rail corridor in the Lostine/Wallowa area.

It's doubtful that those who oppose the project were adequately represented at that meeting. However, surveys conducted by Kurtz and Houston do suggest that a significant majority of the general public supports the Rail with Trail proposal in its entirety. Kurtz and Houston also claim that at least a slim majority of adjacent landowners supports the completion of at least some of the six-segment plan.

Kurtz and Houston also stressed that the Concept Plan is not a blueprint. It's merely intended to show what is possible, to identify critical obstacles while leaving a bevy of design questions to those who would help fund and create the individual trail segments.

You can view the plan online at <http://tinyurl.com/htfluab>.

The price tag is far from insignificant. Both the Concept Plan and the primary group taking up the task of securing funding — the Joseph Branch Trail Consortium — estimate a grand total of \$20 million to complete the entire 63-mile trail. And those initial cost estimates have a way of climbing with projects of this magnitude. However, this proposal is uniquely suited to draw funding from a variety of federal, state and foundation sources as it simultaneously supports tourism, transportation, historic preservation and healthy living.

While the cost is high, this project would take years, if not decades, to complete. It wouldn't be necessary to secure all money up front. Funding sources would be secured incrementally over time as the project progressed.

And this isn't just a shiny, new toy. The Concept Plan cites a range of \$85,000 to \$425,000 going back into the economy annually upon completion of the trail. The trail's construction also will require contracts with local companies and the use of local labor — a short-term boost to the job market, to be sure, but nothing to scoff at. Economic benefits aside, there are potential quality-of-life improvements for our communities to consider as well — healthy transportation alternatives and a safer route for local pedestrians and cyclists that helps keep them off of the highways.

And for those who tend to focus on the big picture, there's another important term — legacy. Several of those who spoke in support of the project on Dec. 15 mentioned how important it would be for them to give this gift to their children and grandchildren, all the future generations that would most benefit from our present endeavors.

The WURA board next convenes at 5 p.m. Jan. 12 at Elgin City Hall, at which point the members may or may not issue their decision on allowing the Rail with Trail project to proceed.

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We understand and take quite seriously the concerns of the adjacent landowners. Critical issues of privacy and liability must be addressed. And we urge the project's supporters to pay close attention to those concerns and seek out creative ways to alleviate them.

If the WURA board signs off on the project, the first segments likely to be developed would be those on either end — from Joseph to Enterprise and from Elgin to Lookingglass. Those segments have garnered the most public support and represent the most immediate economic impact.

If all that comes of the years of conceptual planning to date, and subsequent years of securing funding, design and construction, is a trail connecting Joseph and Enterprise, we'll gladly declare the project a success. How great would it be to jump on a bike on a beautiful day and make that trek with the Wallowa Mountains as a backdrop and no motorized vehicles competing for space?

However, this project holds much more potential and it would be irresponsible to turn our backs on that potential without at least giving it the chance to grow.

We urge the WURA board members to give their blessing to this bold idea with confidence that future generations will thank them for doing so.

— *Scot Heisel*