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The long road to the Foothills Trail

South Sound rails-to-trails project moves along, but some supporters grow frustrated

ROB TUCKER; The News Tribune
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Many South Sound residents have long dreamed of a paved walking and biking trail connecting Mount Rainier National Park to Tacoma and on to Gig Harbor over the Narrows Bridge.



[□ Enlarge image](#)

Riders find their path blocked during Foothills Trail construction in 1993.

Over the last two decades, leaders and volunteers have moved closer to this mountain-to-Sound trail system.

Consider that in 1986 not a single foot of trail had been paved on East Pierce County railroad beds. Today, at least 18 miles of the corridor from a trail head east of Puyallup to Carbonado are complete.



[□ Enlarge image](#)

In 2001, the trail ended in gravel. It's now paved to South Prairie.

The path, known as the Foothills Trail, is the main thread in a web of East Pierce trails expected to come together by the end of the decade.

The Foothills Trail and some other local paths are part of a nationwide rails-to-trails movement to convert abandoned railroad lines to paved trails for walking

and bicycling, and for horseback riding on the graveled shoulder.

But more than 10 miles of the Foothills Trail remain unfinished, despite predictions that it would be done by now.

Pierce County this year will likely top the \$13 million mark, once estimated as the high side of what it would cost to buy the land and pave the whole trail.

Fifteen years after voters affirmed they wanted the trail, at least two small towns on its unfinished route wait for a promised bump in tourism. Users are blocked from enjoying the most scenic sections. And East Pierce residents are denied an easy, gas-free link to neighboring communities.

“I’m frustrated,” said Buzz Grant of Puyallup, president of the nonprofit Foothills Rails-To-Trails Coalition, the volunteer group that has helped Pierce County build the trail since 1987. “I want this trail done before I’m so old that my grandkids are pushing me down the trail in a wheelchair.”

Grant acknowledged that work continues “in the right direction” to complete the last section of the main trail: about 20 miles through Buckley.

The main stem now stops at South Prairie, about three miles short of its planned end point on the edge of Buckley. Only three quarters of a mile of the estimated eight-mile Foothills spur trail from South Prairie to Carbonado has been installed.

Buckley, which got the first section of the Foothills Trail ever built, has waited a decade for the rest of it to link up. The city wants it completed soon.

But the county parks and recreation director who oversaw trail building since 1986, Jan Wolcott, retired a year ago. A new director, who came from state government, is on the job now. So is a new trail coordinator.

“There are fresh faces and new approaches,” said

Related Information

Foothills Trail timeline

1982-86

Burlington Northern railroad abandons railroad line in East Pierce County. Crews tear out tracks and ties, but leave track bed intact, along with most of the trestles.

1986

Pierce County begins research on acquiring abandoned railroad right of way and track bed for public nonmotorized trail that can be used by pedestrians, bicyclists, horse riders and inline skaters.

1990

Pierce County Council forms linear trail park called the Foothills Trail. It runs on railroad track bed from McMillin to Buckley. A spur runs from the main trail at South Prairie up to Wilkeson and Carbonado.

1991

In a countywide referendum on the Foothills Trail, a majority of voters support the project.

1996

A state Court of Appeals ruling clears the way for the trail.

1997-98

Six miles of trail are completed – four miles from McMillin to Orting and beyond the city, and two miles in Buckley.

12/12/2010

Buckley Mayor Pat Johnson. "It's been stalled a bit, 2000 but I think it's going to work out. I'm very optimistic."

'if we had more staff ...'

Both new county officials said they are moving as quickly as possible, ironing out complex right-of-way negotiations and overseeing studies to protect fish and the environment.

"You work down the list," said parks director Kathryn Kravit-Smith.

"If we had more staff we'd assign more to property owners," she said, referring to negotiations. "It takes time to get it done."

Trail coordinator Grant Griffin said his best guess is that the entire main trail and spur could be completed by 2009.

The county built three quarters of a mile of trail in Wilkeson this spring. Kravit-Smith said she wants to complete the whole trail as soon as possible but plans to concentrate now on finishing the main trail to Buckley before focusing on the spur that stretches toward Mount Rainier.

Ernie Bay, a local trail pioneer, said he understands the frustrations of trail supporters. But he said the work continues as it has since the beginning: by obtaining right of way from hundreds of owners, one at a time.

"You've got to be realistic," he said. "It's not as if you've got just one player. No one individual can drive it home. Problems pop up all the time."

Bay received a national award for his efforts to build trails on abandoned railroad track beds in four states, including Washington. He said problems in building the Foothills Trail aren't unique: The Eastside-Sammamish Trail in King County took more than two decades to build.

There are rails-to-trails paved paths in all 50 states. Washington alone has more than 50, he said.

"Virtually all that are put in are so popular that you can't get them out even if you wanted to," he said.

Trail building has become more difficult over the years because of changes in laws that tightened land-use permitting and added more protections for endangered fish and critical areas like wetlands, said trail coordinator Griffin.

Farmers oppose trail extension from McMillin to a trail head just east of Puyallup. County officials decide to build the extension.

2005

The first 15 contiguous miles of trail from east of Puyallup to South Prairie are completed.

2006

First section of the Foothills Trail spur is built in Wilkeson.

12/12/2010

“There are a lot of biologists to satisfy,” he said.

Today there appear to be fewer than 10 property owners left to negotiate with – plus the Carbonado Town Council.

A couple of big property owners said they will make right-of-way agreements, but Carbonado officials said their residents oppose the trail. They don't want the crime, litter and congestion they believe the trail will funnel into their small town.

“I hate to rain on your parade,” said Town Councilman Ben Burbank. “I can't think of anybody who would want it.”

Some Orting officials also worried about the trail before it came through their town. Police Chief Ron Emmons was a trail opponent at first, but said the trail didn't produce the crime he feared it would.

“I love the trail,” Emmons said. “I use it myself.”

The trail is not a drain on law enforcement, said Ed Troyer, spokesman for the Pierce County Sheriff's Department.

Getting through Carbonado would put the trail within four miles of a proposed new Carbon River entrance to Mount Rainier National Park.

Delays and weather haven't been kind to parts of the old railroad bed that remain unpaved on the Foothills Trail route. Some of it is eroding, which will make trail work more expensive as officials move forward.

“We're dealing with people with serious concerns and we're looking at them,” Griffin said. “I'm new this year. I'm taking them one at a time.”

heading over budget

Pierce County estimated in 1991 that the Foothills Trail would cost \$8 million to \$13 million to complete. It's clearly going to exceed that.

So far, the county has spent \$12 million on the trail and has \$2.4 million more budgeted for this year, Griffin said.

Money comes from federal and state grants, state gas tax revenues, local real estate excise taxes and private donations, according to county officials. Wolcott, the retired county parks director, said most of the money came from federal and state sources.

The final price tag depends on negotiations for additional rights of way, construction costs and other factors.

Still, the Foothills Trail and other public paths seem to retain local support and momentum.

12/12/2010

Paul Lynch of Edgewood said he bicycles on the trail from Orting northbound several times a week – even on a recent hot Saturday afternoon.

“I love it,” he said. “Half the trail is along a river. Half has views of Mount Rainier.”

Ron Olson and Catherine Hart of Seattle were sitting on the grass in the shade of a tree in the Orting city park after bicycling to South Prairie and back. Hart said they had time to dip their feet in South Prairie Creek before heading back.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. “It’s nice and flat and well-maintained. It reuses old rail lines, gives us open space.”

She said she hoped that someday the trail would link with Wilkeson, “a wonderful destination.”

‘a huge learning curve’

The way hasn’t been easy for local trail builders since Buckley physician Dr. Doug Tait had his first vision for it in 1983.

The Foothills Trail and its supporters withstood a referendum election, court fights and political challenges.

The Pierce County Council authorized the trail as a “linear public park” in 1990. But many adjacent property owners already had filed lawsuits against Burlington Northern and the county to secure the abandoned railroad right of way.

Wolcott said the county tried to buy BN’s interests, but the railroad balked because lawsuits already had been filed.

“It was such a huge learning curve,” he said. “You’re dealing with abandoned railroad law.”

Trail opponents soon gathered more than 22,000 signatures to force a 1991 countywide referendum election on whether to continue the project. About 53 percent of voters cast ballots in favor of the trail.

Opponents also tried to block the trail in court, arguing it would take private property and threaten fish and wildlife. A 1996 state Court of Appeals ruling in the case helped clear the way for the trail.

“It freed us up,” Wolcott said. “It told everyone we were OK. From 1996 on, we made huge headway.”

old critics change their tune

About four years later, some farmers challenged an extension from McMillin to a point east of Puyallup. The trail would be built on former railroad right of way that the county bought

12/12/2010

all at once. The line ran through crop-growing areas, and farmers argued trail users would disrupt farm operations. But the county went ahead and built the extension anyway.

Allen Scholz, a McMillin farmer who had expressed concern about the trail then, said recently that someone cut up and ruined 200 pumpkins in his field just after the trail opened.

However, he said, his retail fruit and vegetable stand on his farm has gotten more business since the trail opened. He said he installed bicycle racks and developed a picnic area for trail-using customers.

“It’s been more positive than negative,” he said.

Environmental regulations also have caused delays in construction and are likely to do so again. A 3.5-mile section along South Prairie Creek, one of the most beautiful parts of the trail so far, was finally completed in late 2004 after two years of reviews to ensure that federally protected fish weren’t harmed.

Through it all, local government officials, volunteers and other groups continue working on trail plans, engineering, pathways, bridges and landscaping to accommodate thousands of users.

Next year, a trail connecting Tacoma and the Gig Harbor Peninsula should be completed.

The seed provided by the Foothills Trail has sprouted into a vision for a countywide trail system that would connect Tacoma and Gig Harbor and go east through the Puyallup Valley.

From South Prairie it would fork, with one strand heading to Buckley and the other possibly to Mount Rainier National Park.

“There is momentum now,” said trail pioneer Bay. “We don’t get any negatives anymore, just excitement from people we talk to about the trail.”

Completing the Foothills Trail remains the key to a system connecting urban and rural areas, all the way to the pristine green spaces around the mountain.

“It would be cool if it went through Carbonado and up there,” said trail user Olson, relaxing in Orting after his Saturday bike ride.

WHO’S WHO OF THE FOOTHILLS TRAIL

Dr. Doug Tait

The Buckley resident was the trail’s first major advocate. He got the idea of converting local rail lines in 1983 while watching workers pull up ties and rails after Burlington Northern abandoned its line in East Pierce County, according to his widow, Donna, an attorney who represented Foothills Trail advocates.

12/12/2010

Tait knew the railroad grade was nearly flat, even in hilly country. He reasoned that people who weren't able to hike on steep mountain trails could walk and bicycle on paved trails built atop the rail bed. As a physician, he liked the idea of people walking for their health.

He died in 2003 at age 76.

Funds are being raised for a memorial to honor him that could be built near the Foothills Trail in Buckley. City Administrator Dave Schmidt said Buckley officials support the memorial idea and are waiting for detailed drawings before officially considering the project.

The memorial might include a replica of a railroad baggage cart with Tait's bronzed medical bag on it, according to a preliminary proposal.

About \$7,500 has been raised so far. An additional \$7,500 is needed. Donations can be mailed to Tait Memorial, care of Foothills Rails-to-Trails Coalition, PO Box 192, Puyallup, WA 98371.

Ernie Bay

The Puyallup resident emerged as an early trail advocate and served as president of the Foothills Rails-To-Trail Coalition for 18 years.

He believes trails serve as extensions of sidewalks, linking communities and offering an alternative to motorized vehicles.

The 76-year-old is a biking enthusiast, a retired entomologist from Washington State University's Puyallup Research and Extension Center, and a former Puyallup parks commissioner. He received a National Rails-To-Trails Conservancy lifetime achievement award in 1998 for his work in four states: New York, Maryland, California and Washington.

Jan Wolcott

The Bonney Lake resident began work on the trail in 1986. He had been Pierce County parks and recreation director for a year when he researched the Burlington Northern rail beds and found they were still intact. To make sure, he and other officials drove the trail corridor from McMillin to Carbonado. He persuaded county officials to intercede and help Tait's dream slowly become reality.

Now 65, he retired from the county in 2005.

Claudia Peters

The Gig Harbor resident was Pierce County trails coordinator and was Wolcott's knock-on-the-door person starting in 1988. She contacted an estimated 300 people to see if they would sell or donate their property for the trail.

12/12/2010

Though she wasn't a lawyer, Wolcott said she understood laws on abandoned railways.

She was 58 when she died of breast cancer in 2003.

Kathryn Kravit-Smith

The Olympia resident became Pierce County parks and recreation director Sept. 1, 2005.

She came from state government, where she was director of Food Safety, Animal Health and Consumer Services for the Washington Department of Agriculture.

Kravit-Smith, 54, once coordinated neighborhood recreation for the City of Salem, Ore., and served as operations division director for the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission.

As Pierce County parks and recreation director, one of her duties is to supervise new trail coordinator Grant Griffin. She said she wants to complete the Foothills Trail as soon as possible.

12/12/2010