

Public educates trail study group

12.10.14

By Rocky Wilson
Wallowa County Chieftain

A total of about 160 persons turned out last Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday at three different locations to learn of and provide input into a feasibility study aspiring to learn how and if a pedestrian/bicycle trail can be constructed in a 63-mile railroad corridor between Joseph and Elgin.

Audiences varied at meetings in Elgin, Wallowa, and Enterprise, but formats were the same.

After the current status of a study was shared, participants broke into small groups to itemize their likes and dislikes at specific loca-

A group at the Dec. 4 meeting in Enterprise on the trail-with-rails proposal identifies locations of potential problems and opportunities along a section of the line. Participants affixed green dots wherever they envisioned a trailhead or other opportunity, orange dots to indicate areas of concern, and blue dots to call attention to other considerations.



Rob Ruth/Chieftain

students from Eastern Oregon University with the final feasibility study expected to be in the hands of the owner of the railroad, the Wallowa Union Railroad Authority (WURA), by December 2015.

With that information in hand, the board of directors of WURA will determine what action, if any, will ensue.

The mix of those favoring and opposing the proposed project varied from venue to venue, yet the Wednesday session in the Wallowa Senior Center appeared to be the most polarized.

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tions on corridor maps. Facilitators reported back to all in attendance at respective venues what had transpired in individual groups.

The study is being conducted by the Oregon Department of State Parks and

TRAIL: Participants discuss ideas

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What could have been a tense standoff that night was artfully defused when skilled facilitators Rocky Houston and Steve Kay from Oregon State Parks, plus Sara Miller of the Northeast Oregon Economic Development District gleaned vital information from three separate groups of people regarding the section of the proposed trail alongside the rails between Lostine and Minam.

Following the introductory spiel given by Houston, the estimated 50 persons in attendance in Wallowa gravitated toward like-interest groups. One group was adamantly opposed to any bicycle/pedestrian trail paralleling the existing railroad line, one group was relatively split between those opposed and those in favor of rails and trails, and the third group, as a whole, spoke in favor of the proposed project.

One idea independently presented at two of the three

tables in Wallowa was that a rail and trail could be constructed from Elgin to Minam and no further. Houston affirmed that such a possibility exists, saying, "This is not an all-or-nothing thing."

The feasibility study was initiated by the WURA board of directors who, as owners of the railroad line, made three things clear from the outset of the feasibility study that to this point has included an assessment of existing facilities and services, a land use analysis, and has conducted 26 interviews of persons who would be im-

pacted by a trail. From the outset, the WURA board has plainly stated that no rails on the railroad line will be removed, that WURA will not invest its own funds in any potential trail, and that the WURA board will render all binding decisions regarding any trail.

Houston, experienced in developing trails for the State of Oregon, said following Wednesday's meeting that concerns such as weeds, trespass, vandalism, liability, and animal issues are relatively consistent from the study of any potential trail to the next.

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Trail idea's exploration worthwhile

Kudos to responsive local residents of varying mindsets – supportive, opposed, and neutral – with regard to a proposed trail beside the rails in the Wallowa-Union Railroad corridor. A multi-disciplinary group that's currently embarked on a study of the concept's feasibility elicited a wealth of earnest public input through a recent series of workshops in three communities.

For many adjacent landowners, the very notion of the 63-mile stretch no longer being devoted exclusively to train use but to pedestrian, bicycle, and probably equestrian use as well, unquestionably rankles. Unlike trains, which are always easily heard and seen, and which consistently follow an identical course (right along the tracks) and may even proceed on a previously knowable schedule, individual people and their animals never let you know exactly what to expect.

As is always the case with public trail proposals through private ground, neighbors also have dozens of relevant and reasonable questions and concerns about everything from trespassing and firearms policy to restroom facilities and weed control.

Despite the plan's numerous challenges – including the potentially thorny one of just finding enough room alongside the rails at some locations to safely and affordably continue a trail – the basic idea of trail use has merit.

EDITORIAL

The voice of the Chieftain

12.17.14

Consider the importance of bicycling use alone. Three years ago, when boosters of local tourism asked the Wallowa County Board of Commissioners to endorse state recreation officials' offer to include this valley on a state-designated scenic bicycling route, the commissioners decided to turn down the offer because they didn't want to encourage bicycling on scary Highway 82.

The commissioners' decision was entirely correct. The winding highway so badly lacks a consistently adequate shoulder for bicyclists, they can hardly help but endanger themselves and the unfortunate motorists who suddenly come upon them.

A trail suitable for bicycling near the rail line should allow cyclists to quit entirely the most dangerous stretches of Highway 82.

Roughly a dozen years ago, governments in Wallowa and Union counties joined forces to prevent the rail line's abandonment. A conservatively minded group, their effort demonstrated a stubborn refusal to relinquish what had been a key component in the area's once fully functional resource-based economy. If there's ever a chance that such activities as logging and mining could be fully resuscitated here, continued presence of a rail line is likely to be one of the decisive factors in that turnaround.

Meantime, directors have been lucky in getting the line paid off (courtesy of a Great Recession that idled so many rail cars that Union Pacific paid handsomely for storage), recovered from an abortive deal for outside management that sidetracked the local operation for an entire year, and not long ago fended off an insistent subgroup of trail enthusiasts, call them the "purists," who were pushing for the rails to be scrapped to raise money for paving. (Many other trail supporters, incidentally, aren't so bought in to the assumption that a paved surface would be best.)

Doing what's best for Wallowa and Union counties along the rail corridor means continuing to maintain it, complete with its existing tracks, while exploring any sensible options for the corridor's use. We don't know yet for sure whether a trail does make sense, and figuring that out is what the current process is all about.

-RCR