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More than 100 show up for John Wayne Trail meeting

More than 100 people packed into the Hal Holmes Center on Monday night to listen and express their opinions about the future of the John Wayne Trail to Rep. Joe Schmick, R-Colfax.

The future of the trail came into question earlier this year when people learned Schmick and Rep. Mary Dye attempted to shut down a 130-mile portion of the trail by inserting a last-minute provision into the state's capital budget. The effort to close the trail from Vantage to Malden was thwarted by a typographical error.

More than 20 people provided public comment to Schmick and the room for over two hours on Monday. The majority spoke in favor of coming up with a solution that would keep the trails open.

Ellensburg was one of three places where a public meeting was held. Meetings in Lind and Rosalia were held earlier this month.

Opposition

Only a handful of people spoke in opposition to the trail remaining open.

Adams County rancher Brandon Spencer, said six miles of the trail cuts his family's 10,000 acres in half. He expressed concerns about weed control and the lack of money to repair any of the bridges, trestles and fencing along the trail.

"When you look at trying to keep this open, there's a lot of money that goes into it," he said, adding that money could be spent on funding K-12 education in the state, fixing roads or on other projects.

Jean Flanigen, a resident of Pine City, said that the major industry in the part of the state where the closure would be is agriculture, not tourism, and that people appreciate the solitude.

"We're all alone out there and that's the way we like it," she said. "Y'all keep saying 'Tourism, tourism, tourism,' trying to shove it down our throat. We already have an industry, agriculture. We don't need another one."

Flanigen went on to say that she respects the John Wayne Trail Riders Association because it's learned to work with the communities along the trail, but some other user groups have not. She also claimed the ride hasn't had more than 200 participants in several years and the church in Malden almost lost money on the community breakfast it put on for riders this year due to smaller numbers.

Volunteers

Earlier this year when Ellensburg resident Jeremy Lange asked his daughter what she wanted her 10-year-old adventure to be, she said she wanted to bicycle from Ellensburg to Seattle. They rode the 100 miles on the John Wayne Trail, and then another one of his children asked about riding the other way, east.

"I want to fight for this," Lange said. "I will volunteer."

Others echoed his sentiments. One woman suggested enlisting the help of the local Boy Scouts troops that have been successful in getting donations for other outdoor projects Kittitas County and across the state. Another woman suggested looking into using AmeriCorps volunteers to do the work.

Mary Morgan, a member of the Kittitas County Noxious Weed Control Board, said the board pays \$6,000 a year to manage weeds along the stretch from Thorp to Boylston, and is looking to possibly go to Snoqualmie Pass next year, which would be around another \$10,000. She estimated a similar amount could be made for the stretch of trail in question.

"It's not heart-stopping numbers," Morgan said.

Morgan also talked about how farmers cross the trail in Kittitas County and how a solution could be found for other landowners on the trail.

"I feel that giving up the trail would be an absolute crime," she said. "I think it's too important to this state. It's a cross-state trail. Nobody else has that. I know that we can work out your problems."

Importance

Some of the user groups that spoke of the trail's importance included the John Wayne Pioneer Wagons and Riders Association, the Kittitas Valley Trail Riders, Washington Bikes, the Cascadians recreation and conservation club and the Tekoa Trestle and Trail Association, among others.

Thor Franklin said he and his wife walked 20 miles of the trail recently, and he was struck by the solitude the trail provides. He didn't see any litter on the section they were on, but his main concern was the way the closure was inserted into the budget.

"This has the appearance of cronyism and corrupt backroom dealings and you should be ashamed," Franklin said to Schmick, which was followed by loud applause.

Tekoa City Councilman Ted Blaszak said he sees three options which are to close the trail forever, fix it and spend money on repairing trail damage or to do nothing. He advised the second option.

"We have the attention," he said. "It'd be a shame to lose this movement now."

Blaszak encouraged people to seek resolutions from their cities in support of keeping the trail — Tekoa, Spokane, Colfax and Palouse have done so — and to write their local legislators.

Officials

Kittitas County Commissioner Obie O'Brien said the trail is part of the heritage and part of the culture of Washington state.

State Reps. Tom Dent, R-Moses Lake, and Matt Manweller, R-Ellensburg, and state Sen. Judy Warnick, R-Moses Lake, were in attendance though they did not make comments.

Schmick did not comment one way or the other at the end of the public comment period, but said he'll take all of it into consideration.

"Thank you for coming out, taking the time," he said. "A lot of you drove a long way to get here and I do appreciate it. We will all consider all of your comments as we move ahead in the future of the trail."