Residents weigh in on the future of the John Wayne Pioneer Trail

By Rachel Plager
Reporter

Preliminary recommendations for trail management of the current John Wayne Pioneer Trail from the Columbia River east to Malden have been drafted by the Washington State Parks.

The Legislatures and public have presented an increased interest in the future of the trail the State Parks developed an Advisory Committee comprised of numerous special interest groups and are holding public forums for outside perspectives and suggestions.

In December 2015 the first of these advisory committee meetings took place and since then there have been three. The meetings are comprised of adjacent landowners, those with interests in use of the trail such as hikers and equestrians, natural resource representatives, utility providers, and tourism and economic development persons.

There were three advisory committee members present at the meeting held in Ritzville on May 11. Two adjacent landowners, Jay Allert and Branden Spencer, as well as Sue Sackmann who represents the Natural Resources group as a former Noxious Weed Board member.

Currently, the State Parks are in stage one of a four-step process where they gather information on the specific issues and concerns people would like to see addressed.

After this step they examine the appropriate approaches to solve the problems outlined.

Preliminary recommendations will be made after this analysis process to prepare a final proposition to be presented to the seven-member State Parks and Recreation Commission for approval.

This presentation to the Commission will take place on July 21 in Clarkston.

The State Parks group currently has a goal to have a plan in place for the whole of the 285-mile trail across the state. They were able to solve issues on the Iron Horse State Park Trail in 2000 and most of those issues were similar to those on the east side of the trail.

They hope to work to solve the issue of noxious weeds along the trail, reduce trespassing on private lands of adjacent landowners, decide what permit requirements will be in place if any and discuss the renaming of the trail.

Currently the John Wayne Pioneer Trail is encompassed within the Iron Horse State Park Trail. There has been a proposal to drop the John Wayne Pioneer Trail name altogether to streamline information about the trail as one entity.

The State Parks crew has already begun solving these issues. In March they began spraying for weeds along the trail and additionally hired a person to show a “parks presence” on the trail and reduce vandalism.

There are currently multiple permits required to use the trail as there is no single ownership of the trail in its entirety. Part of the land is owned by the Department of Natural Resources as well as the Washington State Parks, both of which require a permit.

As a landowner Spencer spoke in favor of these permits as they also serve as a notification to landowners along the trail so they can be aware of someone near their property.

Many of the landowners live on remote parts of the trail and, as Spencer stated, roughly 95 percent of the people they see along the trail are not supposed to be there.

There is also 30 miles of the trail at present an active rail line, along with six total miles of property owner gaps. Closing these trail gaps is a high priority for the State Parks.

The three projects the parks are proposing are the closure of gaps and open trail mileage by either replacing or repairing structures such as bridges and trestles, which have become unsafe. This is to solve the problem of the trail not being continuous due to various barriers such as these.

Their next project is to develop access points and trailheads near more heavily populated areas or areas of heavy use to provide increased recreational value. There are 12 trailheads proposed two of which would be located in Ralston and Lind.

The third priority project is to develop a balance of the trail in more remote areas to make the trail more fully usable.

The thought is to try and promote the trail enough to where a constant stream of users are on the trail, which would in turn lower vandalism and trespassing.

The meeting to present the final recommendations to the board of commissioners will be at their regular meeting on July 21 in Clarkston and the public is encouraged to attend.

The meeting will be at the Quality Inn and Suites located at 700 Port Drive in Clarkston.

For more information about the current process or to provide a comment go to http://www.parks.state.wa.us/979/John-Wayne-Pioneer-Trail-Planning.