

Bike path planning goes forward

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Andy Cripe, Gazette-Times

New Commissioner Xan Augerot, right, expresses support for a proposed bike path linking Corvallis and Albany via the Highway 20 corridor during her first meeting with the Benton County Board of Commissioners on Tuesday. Looking on, from left, are County Counsel Vance Croney and Commissioner Anne Schuster.

The Benton County Board of Commissioners voted unanimously on Tuesday to move ahead with the next stage of planning for a possible bike path through the Highway 20 corridor between Corvallis and Albany.

Phase 2, with a budget of \$51,000, will involve forming community and technical advisory groups to take a look at potential routes for a bicycle and pedestrian path through the corridor to determine if a viable alignment exists. Public Works Director Josh Wheeler said he would come back to the board this spring with a recommendation about whether to proceed to Phase 3, which would include preliminary engineering and design work on a specific route.

Wheeler added that the Oregon Department of Transportation has committed to pay one-third of the cost of the three-stage planning and public engagement process, up to \$50,000.

The project has been extremely controversial, especially after former Commissioner Linda Modrell said the county might use its power of eminent domain to compel reluctant landowners to sell right of way across their land. A proposed alignment that would have paralleled the Union Pacific railroad tracks on the north side of the highway was shot down in February 2015 by the Benton County Planning Commission amid strong objections from farmers who didn't want the path to cross their fields.

At Tuesday's meeting, two of the three commissioners expressed solid support for moving ahead.

"The need for a bike path has been spelled out numerous times," Annabelle Jaramillo said. "The location of it, as I understand it, is what we're talking about."

She cited the need for more alternative modes of transportation and noted that most of the money to build the path would come from state lottery revenues, not county coffers.

Xan Augerot, participating in her first Board of Commissioners meeting after winning the Position 2 seat in the November election, said the path would serve growing populations in North Albany and Adair Village.

"I think we need to be planning for this kind of multimodal transportation now, before this population growth happens," she said. "I think it would be great if we could go through an analogous process for south county as well."

Anne Schuster, who has voted against the project in the past, voted to move into the next phase of planning despite strong reservations about building a path anywhere along Highway 20.

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"I love bike paths, I love bicycles, I have nothing against them, but I have concerns about our priorities right now," she said. "I think there are other things we should be looking at right now, but I'm willing to make concessions."

Schuster said the focus should be on improving motor vehicle safety on the busy two-lane commuter route between Corvallis and Albany, even though the Oregon Department of Transportation has repeatedly said no money will be available anytime soon for adding lanes or making other major improvements to Highway 20.

"If we work with neighbors, work with farmers and really put forth the effort, maybe we could get bumped up in the priority list," Schuster said.

Rhonda Hynes, the lone member of the public to speak during Tuesday's meeting, expressed similar sentiments, arguing that the county should work on getting the highway widened.

"I think money spent or anticipated being spent on any bike path could be put to better use by the county," said Hynes, who lives on the highway.