

County revisits Highway 20 bike path

BENNETT HALL Corvallis Gazette-Times Dec 14, 2016



Godofredo Vasquez, Mid-Valley Media

Corvallis resident Sarah Bronstein writes down her thoughts on one of the maps of the area where a bike path could be built between Corvallis and Albany during a public meeting at the Corvallis Waldorf School on Tuesday.

Close to 100 people filled the gym at the Corvallis Waldorf School on Tuesday evening to discuss the possibility of building a bicycle and pedestrian path through the Highway 20 corridor between Corvallis and Albany.

It was the first public meeting on the topic since an earlier effort to route a path along the Union Pacific railroad tracks north of the highway was shot down by the Benton County Planning Commission in February 2015 amid staunch opposition from farmers who didn't want the path to cross their fields.

The first thing county officials did at Tuesday's 90-minute meeting was to inform the audience that there would be no attempt to revive that route.

"I want to reassure you that is off the table," County Commissioner Annabelle Jaramillo said.

Benton County Public Works Director Josh Wheeler echoed that pledge. He said he wanted to gather ideas from area residents about where a path could be built that would be acceptable to the community while accommodating the needs of bicycle commuters, recreational cyclists, walkers and other users. The purpose of the meeting, he said, was to start that discussion and get a sense of whether there was enough community support to proceed with further planning.

"Tonight we want to hear from you," Wheeler said.

The Board of Commissioners will discuss the matter at its work session and meeting next Tuesday (see box with this story) and decide whether to move to the next phase of the plan, which would involve more in-depth community discussions of possible routes. Only after a route emerges that appears to be feasible and have solid support from the community would the plan move into the engineering and construction phase.

"If we come up with one that really works, that's the one we would pursue funding for," Wheeler said.

After a short presentation from the county's consultants about previous opinion surveys and stakeholder interviews and some of the design considerations involved in siting and building a multiuse path, the audience was invited to review maps of the project area and possible routes for a path. Comment cards were provided, and staff members and consultants were on hand to answer questions.

People clustered around the large-format maps, peering at color-coded routes showing a range of route options to link existing bike paths that currently terminate in northeast Corvallis and North Albany. Among the preliminary options were bike lanes on either side of Highway 20, a winding path hugging the bank of the Willamette River and a number of alignments following existing roads to the north, including one that would follow the shoulder of Highway 99W up to Adair Village before cutting back toward Albany on Ryals Avenue.

Bill Chambers of Stahlbush Island Farms, who along with his wife, Karla, helped lead the opposition to the earlier alignment, was dubious about the alternate routes outlined on the county maps.

"It depends on what the purpose is," he said. "A path for commuting up over these hills in North Albany is not going to work. ... It's a quandary."

Cyclist Rick Olson, who used to live on Highway 20 before moving to south Corvallis, said he used to ride his bike to work every day at Hewlett-Packard but would be hesitant to brave the traffic today.

"Now, my goodness, there's so many cars," he said. "Now it's like a two-lane freeway."

Olson acknowledged the difficulties in finding a workable route for a bike path through the corridor but said he thinks it's worth pursuing.

"There's not an easy way," he said. "It's going to be a compromise if they ever work something out."

Don Goodhouse, who raises cattle on property near the North Albany end of the corridor, came away shaking his head.

"The route along the river? Impossible," he said. "It'd be underwater a lot of times."

Goodhouse dismissed any route that would have to cross the highway as unsafe. He said bike lanes on the edge of the road would have to cross too many driveways, while a separated path would take farmland out of production.

But he refused to bet against the county moving ahead with a route somewhere in the Highway 20 corridor.

"I think they're going to figure one out," he said, "but not one that's going to fit everybody's opinion, that's for sure."

Reporter Bennett Hall can be reached at 541-758-9529 or bennett.hall@lee.net. Follow him on Twitter at [@bennethallgt](https://twitter.com/bennethallgt).

DECISION POINT

The Benton County Board of Commissioners will discuss whether to proceed with planning for a possible bike path along the Highway 20 corridor during a work session at 9 a.m. next Tuesday in the county boardrooms, 205 N.W. Fifth St., and could put the matter to a vote at their noon meeting. Both the work session and the meeting are open to the public.

To comment on a possible route for the path, email Public Works Director Josh Wheeler at publicworks@co.benton.or.us or call him at 541-766-6010. More information about the project is available online at <https://www.co.benton.or.us/publicworks/project/corvallis-albany-bikeway>.