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Hwy 20 bike path gets fresh start

BENNETT HALL Corvallis Gazette-Times Mar 1, 2016



Godofredo Vasquez, Gazette-Times

A man rides his bike on the shoulder of Highway 20 in January. Benton County officials voted on Tuesday to launch a public outreach process to explore possible routes for a separated bike path along the Highway 20 corridor between Corvallis and North Albany.

A divided Benton County Board of Commissioners took the first step toward reviving plans for a bike path linking Corvallis and Albany via the Highway 20 corridor by deciding to hire a consultant to engage the public in exploring possible routes.

The concept has been on the Public Works Department's drawing board since 2004, but a proposed route along the north side of the Union Pacific railroad tracks was blocked by the county Planning Commission in February 2015 in the face of determined opposition from farmers whose land would be intersected by the path.

Many of those who opposed the plan said they might support an alternate route through the Highway 20 corridor if it didn't cut through their land or disrupt their operations and if they could have a say in deciding where the path went.

Since then, the county has put out a request for proposals from consulting firms to evaluate potential routes and get the public involved in the process. A pair of surveys commissioned by the county showed broad support for the idea, although a minority of respondents expressed strong opposition.

At a work session Tuesday morning, the Board of Commissioners voted 2-1 to hire the firm of Barney & Worth to begin the public route-planning process. Annabelle Jaramillo and Jay Dixon voted yes, with Anne Schuster voting against the motion.

The estimated cost of the planning and outreach process is \$150,000, with the county paying \$100,000 of that and the Oregon Department of Transportation picking up the rest of the tab.

It's a three-step process, and the county will be able to call a halt after each phase if it appears that no viable route can be found. The cost of phase one is about \$45,000.

The commissioners heard public comments on both sides of the issue before reaching their decision.

"I think we would see a monumental use of a nonmotorized link between Corvallis and Albany," said Sheila Lyons, one of a half-dozen people who spoke in favor of the project.

"In Corvallis we have the highest bike commute rate in the United States of America," she added. "I know this has been a troubled project, but the need has not gone away regardless of the issues."

Kevin Grant, who lives in north Corvallis and bikes to his office in Albany, said previous opposition was focused on a particular alignment and not all potential routes in the Highway 20 corridor.

"On one side, cyclists were saying we need a path," he said. "The farmers were saying don't do this path."

Benton County Farm Bureau President Wesley Miller said he would love to be able to bike between the two communities but argued against choosing a route that traverses private property.

"We live in a state where two-thirds of the land is already owned by the public," Miller said. "I think we should make an effort to route the path on public right of way."

And Tina Galloway of Stahlbush Island Farms, which was one of the most outspoken foes of the previous proposal, served notice that the company would be keeping a watchful eye on any future efforts to site a path in the area.

"Mr. Grant was right," she said. "As farmers, we're not against a bike path. We want the right bike path."

Schuster raised a number of objections to the proposal before casting her vote against it.

After the meeting, she said she is generally supportive of bike paths but thinks spending money for that purpose now sends the wrong message to Benton County voters, who might punish the board by voting against the next county operating levy.

"I'm worried about community perception," Schuster said. "The community is not looking at us favorably right now."

Instead of appropriating funds to explore potential routes for a Corvallis-to-Albany bike path, she said, the county should be focused on maintaining and expanding its facilities, especially the Health Department building, which is badly overcrowded.

"I feel so much pressure for so many things that we need that this just doesn't rise to the top for me," she said.

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