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## Cyclists, walkers inaugurate Chehalis Western Trail span

by Christian Hill

One down, two to go.

A ceremony Monday formally opened to the public the first of three bridges needed to join the northern and southern sections of the Chehalis Western Trail.

The \$1.6 million bridge over Interstate 5 means users of the popular regional trail no longer have to detour to the overpasses on Sleater-Kinney or Lilly roads to cross the freeway.

"This is a legacy project we can all be proud of," U.S. Rep. Brian Baird, D-Wash., said to more than 130 people who attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony. Many people rode their bikes to the event and crossed the bridge for the first time despite stormy weather.

Attention now turns to securing the rest of the money to build bridges over Martin Way and Pacific Avenue.

Officials have secured \$7.1 million for the project, which is estimated to cost \$11 million.

They will seek more state grants and federal money. Baird said it's unlikely he can get additional federal dollars for the project.

Elected officials who spoke at the ceremony remained optimistic about finding the remaining dollars.

"We'll take anything we can," Lacey Mayor Virgil Clarkson said. "We're going to finish this project."

The Chehalis Western Trail draws tens of thousands of outdoor enthusiasts a year who walk and bike on the paved path.

Users can travel its 22-mile length — from state Route 507 to Woodard Bay — without detouring except for the half-mile gap.

The new bridge is a "big step" in a project that should have been finished years ago, said John Twelves, former president and longtime member of the Wanderers Hiking Club of Olympia, which regularly uses the trail.

"We're happy to see them making one connection," said Twelves, an 87-year-old Olympia resident. "They have to make one more yet."

Former state Rep. Sandra Romero, who helped secure \$2 million for the project, said the political winds are turning in the favor of these types of projects.

State lawmakers were reluctant to set aside money for projects that served nonmotorized vehicles in the past, she said. With more of the populace aware of global warming and its effects, she continued, they are now taking those investments seriously.

"We can stand as a community that bucked the old way of thinking, and look where we are today," she said.

The "Bridging the Gap" project began in 2001 when a suggestion by Pete Kmet, Tumwater's current mayor pro tem, prompted the Thurston Regional Planning Council to set aside \$500,000 for property acquisition.

Many agencies soon joined and contributed to the initiative, including the cities of Lacey and Olympia, Thurston County and the Washington state Department of Transportation.

Charlotte Claybrooke, 43, a state transportation planner from Olympia, rode to the ceremony with her 10-year-old son and his friend.

Her trail use has been restricted to the southern section because it was too troublesome to cross I-5. Not anymore.

"We can go all the way up to the bay. That's awesome. ... It really opens up our ability to bike," she said.

Another frequent trail user, Jerry Bunce, said the first bridge should have crossed one of the streets because neither has an existing overpass nearby like I-5.

"Now you take your life in your hands going across Martin Way and Pacific," he said.

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