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## Ceremonial dig kicks off trail's bridge construction

by **Christian Hill**

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LACEY - Local dignitaries wore safety helmets and most in the audience wore bike helmets Saturday as they crowned the start of the Interstate 5 Chehalis Western Trail bridge project.

□ The \$1.9 million project, scheduled for completion in December, is the first of three bridges that will span the gap for walkers, runners, bicyclists and rollerbladers between the northern and southern segments of the trail.

More than 70 people, many arriving by bike, attended the groundbreaking ceremony in which local leaders put on safety helmets and turned dirt with golden shovels at the intersection of the Chehalis Western and I-5 Bike trails.

Officials still need to secure about \$4 million to complete the entire project - the other bridges over Martin Way and Pacific Avenue and a permanent trail along the western border of South Sound Center - but are excited to see it moving from vision to reality after five years of preparation.

Trail systems are good for citizens' health, the economy and the environment, said U.S. Rep. Brian Baird, D-Wash., who helped secure millions for the project.

"This is the wave of the future, and I'm proud to say (the local cities) and Thurston County are leading that wave," he said.

The interstate has long represented a giant gulf for walkers and bicyclists on the Chehalis Western Trail, forcing them onto the Lilly Road or Sleater-Kinney overpasses to reach the other trail segment.

The gap may prompt some beginning and recreational bicyclists to take shorter riders because they're turned off by having to share the road with cars or attempting to navigate a way over Interstate 5, said Blaine Wheeler, president of the Capital Bicycling Club.

"I commute to work (by bike) and getting across Sleater-Kinney and over to the trail is a little dangerous sometimes and this should make it a lot better," said Jay Fletcher, 56, a state employee who lives in Lacey.

Planners expect that adding the most urban length of the trail will draw more users and stimulate economic development to serve them, including housing and retail.

They expect the gap to be closed within the next five to six years.

Officials will hold a ribbon-cutting ceremony when the bridge is completed to formally link the southern and northern segments of the trail. The northern segment reaches to Woodard Bay and the southern stretch ends at state Route 507, where trail users can go on to Rainier, Yelm or Tenino.

"I see many bicyclists here," Lacey Mayor Virgil Clarkson said. "There will be many more when this is completed."

**Bridge construction**

Motorists can expect traffic shifts, nighttime lane closures and occasional ramp closures on Interstate 5 now that work has started on the new bridge.

This week, motorists can expect traffic shifts on both directions of I-5, depending on the needs of the contractor, closing up to three lanes Tuesday and Wednesday nights.

Work hours are between

8 p.m. and 6 a.m. Southbound

I-5 should not be affected.

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