

District Ranger explains paved trail process

By Sue Stafford
Correspondent

Kristie Miller, district ranger for the Sisters Ranger District of the Deschutes National Forest, provided the Sisters City Council and members of the public some context regarding the possibility of a paved trail somewhere between Sisters and Black Butte Ranch (BBR).

According to Miller, in the late 1990s the Forest Service provided grants to small communities to enable them to develop plans for projects to enhance the growth and health of the communities.

The grant in Sisters was used to establish a committee to determine what could be done to build the recreation capacity in Sisters. The consensus was that by increasing the number and quality of trails around Sisters, the opportunities for recreation would be improved and could promote tourism.

Once the goal was determined, the grant money was used to build a plan for the trails, enlisting volunteers who eventually became the Sisters Trails Alliance (STA). They began as a subgroup of the Sisters Community Action Team in 2000. They then operated as a partner committee of the Sisters Park & Recreation District, but as of November 2013, the organization became an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation, supported by donations and grants. The STA is an all-volunteer organization dedicated to planning, constructing and maintaining not only biking trails but also hiking and equestrian trails.

Miller suggested that the 2012 proposal for a paved trail between Sisters and BBR put forward by STA reflected the community interest in paved paths that was first identified in 2003 during the formation of the Sisters Community Trails Plan, and again reiterated during the 2011 update of that plan.

Results of a 2003 survey ranked paved paths as a high priority for respondents from the general public as well as students. Again in 2011, 29 percent of respondents chose paved paths as their top priority, reflecting similar priorities in statewide surveys. In the 2011 update survey, community participants identified three proposed paved paths: Crossroads-to-school path; Sisters-to-Tollgate path; and Tollgate-to-BBR path.

The people who came forward in opposition to the paved trail from Sisters to BBR objected to it on environmental grounds (seven

miles of asphalt through the forest); the projected cost; its purported inability to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act; some questions regarding the validity of the survey results; questions of ongoing maintenance; and privacy issues for residents of BBR.

When no compromise on the trail could be reached last spring, the Forest Service withdrew from a proposal to build the paved trail and Miller has indicated that the Forest Service would maintain a hands-off stance unless and until a new proposal is brought forward that has broad community support by community leaders, elected officials, individual citizens and local organizations.

She reiterated very clearly that the first draft decision that was withdrawn is no longer valid. It is a dead issue.

If a new trail proposal is submitted to the Forest Service, there is a very clear process for handling the proposal. Miller would consult with Forest Supervisor John Allen, objections review officer, and they would decide whether to accept or reject the proposal. They look at whether the proposal is something the Forest Service would normally do or could do if it was within the bounds of their mission. Because building a trail is a normal project they would undertake, the proposed trail fits within the agency's mission.

With acceptance of the proposal, the next step would be to conduct an environmental assessment (EA), which can take anywhere from a year to two-and-a-half years to complete. Miller indicated there is no money in the 2015 budget for an EA and it is on the list for 2016 but is unfunded.

Social and natural impacts of the proposal are compared to the Deschutes Land and Resource Management Plan to check for compliance. What is the specific piece of land in the proposal allocated for under the management plan — tourism, recreation, conservation? Essentially every acre in the Deschutes National Forest has a specific allocation and the proposal must comply with the allocation.

During the EA process, all appropriate specialists are consulted regarding the impact of the project, including hydrologists, timber, heritage, fisheries, and wildlife. If it is determined there will be a significant impact, then an environmental impact statement must be completed, which is a more detailed, time-consuming,

and expensive process than an EA.

The Forest Service proposes an action, based on purpose and need. There is then a 30-day period for public comment, during which time possible alternatives may be identified. An alternative driving issue is often identified during community meetings and open houses. Someone objecting to a trail impacting his backyard privacy is not enough of a factor. But if the proposed trail would cross over a wildlife migration route or through the habitat of a specific endangered species of plant or animal, that would be significant enough to require moving the trail.

The more alternatives to be considered, the more surveys and analyses that must be completed, and the greater the cost.

Scoping is conducted with people affected by the action. Notices are placed in *The Bulletin* and *The Nugget* announcing the proposed action. Letters are mailed or hand-delivered to a wide variety of people, from those

who may have already commented on the previous EA or sent correspondence over the past year, to those who request to be notified any time any action is proposed.

In the case of subdivisions like Tollgate and BBR, information is sent by the Forest Service to the homeowners associations that are then responsible for notifying all of their members.

If a citizen wishes to comment on a proposal, Miller suggests it is much more helpful if the comment is specific about what should be analyzed or changed. Just saying you do or don't support the trail is of little value.

Following the public comment period, a draft EA is made available to the public on the Forest Service website, and a hard copy or disc is available at the district ranger office. There is another period, usually 30-45 days, during which the public has another opportunity to make comments. Determination will be made if the subject of the comment is covered in the EA. If not, it will be analyzed and may

be incorporated into the final draft.

If the final draft decision finds no significant impact and the proposal is approved, the public can still raise objections, but only if they are on the record as having commented during the previous comment periods.

Allen meets with the objectors to hopefully find opportunities for resolution of differences or compromise. This was the point during the previous proposal process when it broke down and the draft decision was pulled.

With the possibility of a new trail proposal in the offing, the citizens of Sisters Country will have another opportunity to thoughtfully study and rationally consider the benefits and drawbacks of a trail heading west from Sisters toward Black Butte. The best possible outcome could be for the citizens to hopefully listen to one another and find a compromise that meets the desires of the greatest number of people while enhancing the community.

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