

# County supports compromise on Fern Ridge bike path

By Karen Irmsher  
Of the Emerald

Lane County commissioners agreed this week to support a Eugene-to-Fern Ridge bike path route they hope will please both environmentalists and cyclists.

The compromise route avoids disrupting the rare plant and wetland areas that conservationists have termed a prime habitat for wetlands game and non-game birds unique to the Eugene/Springfield area. At the same time, bicyclists got a commitment from the county that it eventually will provide them with a 13-mile path connecting the city with Fern Ridge Lake.

The controversy centered on where the trail should enter the lake area and how much of the shoreline it should skirt. In 1974, when both the county's and the lake's master plans called for bike trails entirely circling the lake, wildlife preservation was not a major concern. But several years ago, when the corps began an update of its master plan, they scrapped that

circle of cycling trails as incompatible with conservation of the lake's natural resources.

"In 1974 they had some different concepts of what was appropriate development. That plan was a recreation plan. It didn't deal with the natural resources," Fern Ridge Lake Manager Jim Beal said.

Since then, he said, agencies such as the Army Corps of Engineers, which owns the lake, and the U.S. and Oregon departments of fish and wildlife have become increasingly environmentally conscious.

"Over the last nearly 50 years, Fern Ridge Lake has developed into a prime freshwater marsh habitat," Beal said.

The area threatened by the original bike path route passes through an area that contains rare and endangered plants and wildlife and has been carefully nurtured by conservation groups for a number of years.

Fred Meiner, the president of the Eugene chapter of the Izaak

Walton League, said members of his group have volunteered hundreds of hours in the past few years developing the area as a nesting area for ducks and geese. Many of these have not previously nested in the Willamette Valley, he said.

"Some people have tried to make this an issue between hunters and bicyclists, and it's not," he said. "It's a bicyclists versus conservationists issue."

Meiner has no objection to a bike path as long as it doesn't disturb this one estuary, about three-quarter miles long, in which he and other conservationists have spent so much time, money and energy creating a wetlands nesting habitat, he said. Putting a path around the edge of the lake through that area would have the same effect as climbing up your apple tree to examine the contents of a nestful of eggs, he explained. "The mother will fly away, and the babies will die."

An invasion of cyclists and their dogs would have affected

the waterfowl the same way, Meiner said.

Bicyclists were willing to compromise on the originally proposed route in view of altered lake management needs. What they were asking for at this point was safe access to the area and a commitment from the county to include this leg of the path in its master transportation plan. In the 1974 plan, this segment was part of a bicycle corridor that would extend from the Mount Pisgah Arboretum to Fern Ridge.

Eugene Bicycle Coordinator Diane Bishop said she is delighted with the county's decision. But she hopes too many years don't pass before the path becomes a reality, she said, because the wait already has been too long.

The county's decision to support the path is not the last word, however. A final decision on whether to include plans for a bike trail in the Fern Ridge Plan of Management and Development lies ultimately

with the Portland office of the Army Corps of Engineers. Beal said the corps has been holding off on writing the final draft of the plan until they heard what the county had to say.

"We're not bound by what they decided, but we're trying to be receptive," he said.

The Portland corps office will make the final decision during the next two months, Beal said. He added that for him, the bike path was just one of many decisions to be made in revising the master site plan for the lake.

Beal sees the extensive airing of the issue in recent weeks as extremely valuable, he said.

"A lot more people are now aware of the conflicts and tradeoffs," he said.

The county didn't make a final decision on the exact route of the last mile of trail, just the decision to be supportive and involved in path construction. Cyclists would leave the Amazon Canal and head north at Fir Butte. An easement running from Fir Butte would feed either Eaton, Spires or Shore lane and go on to Orchard Point.

No final decisions will be made on this until area residents are consulted and other relevant information is gathered.

Construction could still be many years down the line, according to the county commissioners.

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