

Eugene connection to Pacific Crest Trail nearing finish

By Edward Klopfenstein
Oregon Daily Emerald

Imagine throwing on a backpack some morning, walking out the front door and heading straight for Mexico. If Jerold Williams has his way, that hiking ideal may become reality.

The 61-year-old Eugene resident has directed construction of the Eugene To Pacific Crest Trail for the past 13 years. The 108 mile walking path (he knows it's 108 miles because he walked it with a measuring wheel) is now 80 percent complete with just 20 miles left to build.

He said the trail's official opening could be as early as next spring. The trail will connect Eugene to the Pacific Crest Trail, which runs along the West Coast from Mexico to Canada. The Pacific Crest Trail opened June 5.

The trail connects a patchwork of smaller trails. It starts from the Ferry Street Bridge in Alton Baker Park and winds through Eugene, Springfield, Lowell and Oakridge, following the middle fork of the Willamette River and then the Bunchgrass Ridge until it meets the Pacific Crest Trail at Waldo Lake.

Accessing the trail at the Ferry Street Bridge can be done through Eugene's bike path system.

The project started in the late 1970s when Jack Remington, who was Willamette National Forest Trail coordinator at the time, mapped out a trail designed to provide access to the partly completed Pacific Crest Trail, borrowing a trailhead-in-the-city approach started in Scandinavia.

Remington designed the current trail over a mid-1800s shortcut that originally directed settlers to Eugene from the Oregon Trail. It worked, said Williams, by boosting the city's population 100 percent. It also brought Williams' great-grandfather into the area.

Williams joined the local chapter of the Sierra Club after hearing of Remington's plan and has managed the project ever since.

Finishing the trail is now being stopped by the very people it was first designed to attract to Eugene: land holders.

Much of the last 20 miles of the trail runs across private land. Gaining land-use permits or access rights has proved very difficult.

Della Web, Willamette National Forest Trail coordinator, said the Forest Service is trying to arrange a land swap or obtain a right-of-way permit for use of the private land.

Web said another concern lies in gaining access to the Sprit Fire area north of Highway 58 and east of Oakridge. She said the ruling from an environmental impact statement could close access to hiking in that area. However, Web also said a letter writing campaign for access could open the area.

Such bureaucratic battles don't slow Williams' zest for the foot path. He has laid out alternative paths to the original plan that include using public roads.

Volunteers still go out to the trail the second Saturday of every month, from April to November.

More people are welcome, he said. Car pools start in front of the Amazon Community Center on Hilyard Street at 8 a.m. Work usually lasts until 3 p.m. The next outing is July 11.

Williams' philosophy on the project is "sharing it with people."

"If we create a corridor," he said, "we will be able to take people and have them to be part of the woods. Then maybe they'll say, 'Let's not clear cut.' I'm optimistic that people will have some sort of ownership over this when it's done."

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