

Southwest trail to be named for Southern Pacific “Red Electric” interurbans

By Polina Olsen
The Southwest Portland Post



Ever wonder what people mean by the Red Electric Trail? Although stories about it routinely appear in local papers, the who, what, when and where remains hard to nail. The Southwest Portland Post turned to Don Baack, chair of Southwest Trails, for insight:

According to Baack, the trail’s plan really started when his wife brought home a beautiful Golden Lab/Hungarian dog named Siskiyou. “She needed walking so I began to explore,” Baack said. He couldn’t find maps or easy ways to get around and started chatting with neighbors. Then in 1996, Baack and others founded the Southwest Trails Group which one year later joined with Southwest Neighborhoods, Inc.

“We worked with each neighborhood identifying where people wanted to walk,” Baack said. Southwest Trails called their final product the spaghetti map. The city took the top seven suggestions from the spaghetti map and created the Urban Trails Plan. An early 1900s train route was among those selected.

According to *The Red Electrics* by Tom Dill and Walter R. Grande, the brightly colored red trains ran from

Portland to McMinnville. The west side route went through Portland’s west hills to the Tualatin and Yamhill valleys. The east side line ran along the Willamette River to Oswego, and then onto Sherwood, Newberg and Lafayette.

Red Electrics offered fine service along with new technology. According to Dill and Grande: “It was the only major electric railroad converted from steam to electric interurban passenger use; one of the few systems with all-steel equipment, and one of the largest 1500-volt systems in the country.”

While Southwest Trails researched six of the seven proposed trails now in the Urban Trails Plan, Portland Parks took over designing the Red Electric route. According to Baack, the city received funding for the study in 1999, started planning in 2005, and finished their report in 2007. Debate between the city, Southwest Trails and the neighborhood associations ultimately narrowed Red Electric Trail possibilities to three alternative routes.

“The one preferred by Southwest Trails, the Hillsdale Neighborhood Association, and the South Portland Neighborhood Association is the Barbur Boulevard/Slavin Road, Corbett Avenue, Gibbs pedestrian bridge route,” Baack said. “We’ll have a more desirable bike route. We won’t have steep hills. We can bike downtown via the waterfront or Barbur Boulevard.”

Although the public appears to have settled on a desired route, the Park Bureau investigation continues. And, funding for the Red Electric Trail is likewise undetermined. According to Baack, “it’s impossible to say when



Don Baack and his dog Tasha hike on a trail near their home in Hillsdale. (Post photo by Polina Olsen)

trail construction will begin. Number one, we don’t know if we’re going to get the money and number two, we don’t know when it will be available to spend.”

“We don’t have right of way for the whole trail,” Baack added. The first stage will be in Hillsdale. “If we got federal dollars we could complete the connection from Bertha to Capitol Highway/Vermont Street. If we got additional funds to add bicycle lanes on the Barbur /Newbury Bridge, we could do everything from Southwest 33rd Street and Bertha to downtown.

We have a lot of people testifying for it -- the neighborhood associations, Southwest Trails, the Business Association -- lots of individuals. It scored quite well, so I’m optimistic.”

For more information on the Red Electric Trail visit www.swtrails.org or www.portlandonline.com/parks. Enter “Red Electric Trail” in the search box.

For more information on the Red Electric Railroad read *The Red Electrics, Southern Pacific’s Oregon Interurban* by Tom Dill & Walter R. Grande, ISBN 0-915713-28-4 or visit www.pdx-history.com/html/red_electrics.html.

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