

A PATH TOO FAR

Disciples of Dirt work with local government to bring mountain biking trails to Lane County

STORY AND PHOTOS BY COLIN HOUCK

Oregon is, indisputably, a mountain biking destination. With more than 2,000 miles of world-class trails spread to almost every corner the state, some might even call it a mecca for the sport.

Every year, thousands of riders — from beginner to enthusiast to expert — descend on Oregon's plethora of parks and open spaces in search of adventure. Rarely are they disappointed.

For busy residents in Oregon's metro areas, however, finding time to travel to these wonderful yet far-flung places can be a challenge. This holds especially true for Eugene and Springfield residents.

With just a handful of bike and shared-use trails within a 50-mile radius, and even fewer within city limits, many would-be riders are staying home or finding other activities instead of heading to the mountains.

In other words: Despite being surrounded by mountains, the Eugene metro region has a mountain biking accessibility problem.

But local riders will soon have reason to be at least a bit more optimistic. Members of a local mountain biking club, Disciples of Dirt (DoD), have been working in partnership with Springfield's Willamalane Park and Recreation District for the past year to open a 1.5-mile section of single-track trail in the new 665-acre Thurston Hills Natural Area.

That trail is slated to be open by this summer, according to DoD.

Willamalane, the agency spearheading the project, was able to secure \$150,000 in grant funding due, in part, to DoD's pledge to provide at least 1,500 hours of volunteer labor. So far, the club has logged more than 1,000 hours, and expects to far exceed the original hours pledged before the trail is completed.

Additionally, DoD raised \$13,000 for the project, primarily from individual donations as well as funds raised through events and membership dues.

Peter O'Toole, DoD's trail work coordinator and board member, described the mountain biking community's response as very enthusiastic.

"This close to town? This is incredible," O'Toole says of the project. "This is unbelievable what we've got going on here. And this is just the start. BLM is currently doing analysis for building several miles of trails on federal land just east of here."

DoD board chairman Lee Wilkinson echoed O'Toole's sentiments, adding that this project has been a long time coming.

"One of the main things that's been missing in this area is a close, urban mountain biking experience," he says. "Currently there's only the Ridgeline Trail down in the south Eugene hills. Otherwise you have to drive 30, 40 [minutes], sometimes even an hour to get to a really nice trail head that allows mountain biking."



DISCIPLES OF DIRT VOLUNTEER BILLY RAMSEY WORKS ON THE THURSTON HILLS MOUNTAIN BIKE TRAIL

"Allows" would seem to be the key term needed for understanding the lack of mountain biking opportunities in the immediate Eugene/Springfield area. Hiking trails abound throughout the region, but nearly all feature some kind of signage forbidding bikes.

Of course, the separation is for good reason. Mount Pisgah, Spencer Butte, Mount Baldy and other popular trail locations are heavily trafficked by hikers, making the risk of collision high. On the other hand, that's also a good reason for Eugene, Springfield and Lane County officials to work with groups like DoD to bring more mountain biking opportunities to the area.

Zack Geyer, a two-time youth mountain biking champion, relocated to Eugene from Wisconsin in 2015, partly because of the area's relatively urban lifestyle in close proximity to outdoor recreation. But, like so many others, work and life obligations leave little time, even for just day-trips.

"Cycling has been a life-long passion of mine," Geyer says. "When I was a kid, I travelled all over for mountain bike adventures and competitions. But now, being a busy young person in the workforce, it can be a struggle to carve out time for long drives to Oregon's great mountain bike destinations."

"I'm so excited by the potential of the Thurston Hills trail system," Geyer adds.

In addition to the Thurston Hills trail, area mountain bike enthusiasts could have more reason to be excited about the prospects of easily accessible mountain biking opportunities. The Eugene Parks and Open Space Department, again in partnership with DoD, has been working to include dedicated mountain biking trails to Suzanne Arlie Park. That work, however, has come in fits and starts.

Eugene purchased the land for the 515-acre park in 2008 and in 2011, but has yet to complete the project. City officials cited funding as the primary reason the project has stalled, but an upcoming bond measure on the May ballot, if passed, would help provide the funds necessary to see it through.

Those same officials also noted that the addition of mountain biking to the park has wide community support.

Although there is a long way to go in terms of catching up with towns like Bend and Oakridge, both of which are widely recognized as Oregon's leading mountain biking destinations, Eugene and Springfield have a lot to look forward to in coming years. With the work that DoD is doing, at least part is coming sooner than later.

For more information on DoD's work, or to get involved, visit disciplesofdirt.org. To get to the Thurston Hills Natural Area from Eugene, take Oregon Route 126 east toward Springfield; turn left onto Main Street/McKenzie Highway, continuing for approximately two miles. Look for park signage on the south side of the road, just east of 75th Street. ■



ZACHARY GEYER BIKES ON BLM LAND NORTH OF MARCOLA



DOD 'TRAIL CZAR' PETER O'TOOLE AT WORK IN THURSTON