

Young people play key role in rebuilding community trails

By KATIE WILSON
EO Media Group

ILWACO, Wash. — How many middle schoolers does it take to fell a tree? Answer: Usually five. Three to throw their weight against the narrow trunk, one to dance around kicking at the roots and commenting on everyone's incompetence and one more to actually dig her knees into the dirt, bend until her hair gets in her eyes and tighten her grip on the hand saw, slowly deepening a pencil-thin cut into the tree trunk. The tree was in the way. It needed to go.

Minutes later, to resounding yelps of "Timber!", the tree went crashing to one side.

In March, Nick Haldeman, chairman of Ilwaco's Parks and Recreation Commission, proposed several new trail projects to the Ilwaco City Commission. He described a portion of Josh's Trail — a winding, steep off-shoot of the trail that snakes around Black Lake behind Ilwaco High School — that has chronic mud issues. It would be easy enough to re-route that, he told them, as well as create more trail opportunities in and around the city.

Students invest sweat in trails

On May 15, he and the students he leads in Ilwaco Middle School's mountain biking class were completing the first of several trail projects Haldeman hopes to accomplish this year.

Approximately 20 middle schoolers cleared out the short section of rerouted trail in just 45 minutes, shaping it with shovels and rakes, forcing stumps from the ground, chopping at roots that snaked across the trail and could be hazardous to hikers and bikers alike if not removed, throwing dirt — productively, they assured Haldeman and middle school science teacher Jake Gold.

Though the crew was loud and a little chaotic, work was getting done, and rapidly, Haldeman noted, pleased.

The rerouting of Josh's Trail is one of many changes unfolding in Ilwaco recently to improve quality of life in the small, quiet city. Earlier this spring, a citizen group called Envision Ilwaco organized a community cleanup day prior to Spring Break and now this trail work continues goals set by the Parks and Recreation Commission to make better use of the city's public green spaces.

"We're eliminating a problem and creating a new trail today," Haldeman explained, looking up the scar of freshly turned dirt and the students working busily along its length.



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Seventh-grade student Hunter Manecke, center, helps push against a tree in the middle of a new trail section near Black Lake in Ilwaco while Ilwaco Middle School science teacher Jake Gold saws at the trunk. A group of middle school students kicked off the first of what the city of Ilwaco hopes will be several trail improvements and additions this year.



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Middle school students survey a tree they just helped fell while working on a reroute of Josh's Trail, a short, steep trail that breaks off from the main trail that circles Black Lake in Ilwaco.

He hopes to use students in the community to do much of the trail work he has planned. He received a grant from Pacific County's WellSpring Community Network to purchase the simple hand tools needed to build trail: tools like mountain rakes, pruning shears, folding saws and various shovels. One of the stipulations of the grant was that Haldeman get kids involved.

Building a community

It is work they have taken to enthusiastically and Haldeman believes their involvement benefits the community in more ways than one. By building these trails themselves, the students feel ownership, he said. They are invested now in a way they would not have been otherwise.

Or, as seventh-grader Juan Avalos said: "After we finish, we'll get to ride it. I think it's a good idea because we get to build it the way we want it."

Landin Frank, who is in eighth grade, thinks about how they are improving a problem trail and giving future hikers and mountain bikers a better route.

"We're setting a trail for them to use," he said, adding, "Hopefully it doesn't get destroyed."

Hunter Manecke, one of only two girls in the mountain biking class and the only girl present during the trail building, said she prefers this kind of outdoor work.

"It's fun and dirty," she said. A few of her male peers gave her a hard time as she went to work sawing at another

tree in the middle of the trail.

"You're doing it wrong," they insisted, leaning back against other trees lining the new trail.

Though quick to joke around with them and trade insults, Manecke paused only long enough in sawing at the trunk to fix her eyes on the loudest of the group and tell him, "You'd be surprised at what I can do."

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