

Legislation would close gaps along the Oregon Coast Trail

Hikers want to avoid highway

By ZACH URNESS
Statesman Journal

SALEM — Few pathways conjure up more conflicting emotions than the Oregon Coast Trail.

One moment you're hiking to the top of a rocky headland and looking upon a vast sweep of ocean. The next you're risking life and limb on the shoulder of U.S. Highway 101 as cars and trucks scream past a few feet away.

The 367-mile trail, which stretches from the California state line to Astoria, brings hikers to Oregon's most beautiful coastal viewpoints and cliff-walled beaches. But it also forces them onto one of the state's busiest highways, sometimes for miles at a time.

"It's an incredibly beautiful trail — the only one of its kind in the nation," said Connie Soper, an author and expert on hiking the Oregon Coast Trail. "Unfortunately, it's unfinished. Having to walk on the highway is dangerous, unpleasant for hikers and drivers, and really stops the trail from reaching its potential."

Now a collection of hikers and lawmakers is hoping to change that. Legislation intended to help complete the pathway will have its first hearing Tuesday morning at the Capitol.

An advocacy group, Friends of the Oregon Coast Trail, has been formed by Soper and Salem resident Dan Hilburn to spearhead the project.

'Village-to-village'

They say making it possible to hike the trail end-to-end — without long stretches on the highway — could make the trail a world-famous destination, providing a "village-to-village" experience unmatched in the United States.

"It has the potential to allow people to hike the entire length of the coast without carrying a tent or stove," Hilburn said. "It's set up to let people hike from town-to-town, staying at hotels and eating at restaurants. That's very popular in Europe, and it could be huge for Oregon's coastal economy."

The first step has already been taken. A 2011 report by the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department identifies 33 "critical gaps" in the trail totaling around 50 miles. The report even sets a date — 2021 — as a goal for connecting the entire route.

House Bill 3149 is an attempt to keep the state



AP Photo/Don Ryan

Depoe Bay is one of the stops on the Oregon Coast Trail.

focused on that goal. The bill, sponsored by Rep. David Brock Smith, R-Port Orford, and with 10 sponsors, requires the parks department to create a development plan that would get the project as close to shovel-ready as possible.

Parks officials said they've made some progress on closing the gaps. But finishing the trail by 2021 — given complexities with private land, river crossings and other issues — will be a tall order. It would also require shifting resources away from other projects, such as repairing state park facilities. "With or without legislation, it's an ambitious goal," said David Stipe, state parks planning and design manager. "That said, I love a challenge. If our state Legislature and the governor say this needs to be a priority, we'll get to work."

Two moments

Two moments in Oregon's history made the Oregon Coast Trail possible.

The first is well known. In 1913, Gov. Oswald West designated the ocean shoreline for the public. That concept was upheld and expanded with the 1967 Beach Bill that ensured every Oregonian would have access to the state's sandy shores.

The idea for a trail stretching from the Columbia River to the California border came from Dr. Samuel N. Dicken, who hiked the coast and wrote about it in his book "Old Oregon," published in 1959.

"A traveler along Highway 101 has many opportunities to see spectacular scenery in turnouts and from the highway," he wrote. "But in many sections

... the best scenery is lost to a person who stays on the road. A trail will be necessary."

Dicken's idea took root and in 1971 construction began. By 1988, the trail was deemed "hikeable."

Yet the trail never quite became a household name in Oregon. The trail is unsigned and confusing in many places, and the inherent danger of hiking along Highway 101 turns many people off, Soper said. In one particularly scary area, between Heceta Head and Baker Beach, hikers must travel through a highway tunnel with no sidewalk or guardrail.

"I refused to do it," said Soper, who hiked the entire trail for her book "Exploring the Oregon Coast Trail." "But someone in my party tried it with us following him slowly in a car with our lights flashing so he wouldn't get killed."

Mired in obscurity

While the trail has remained mired in obscurity, the Pacific Crest Trail, which runs in one unbroken line through Oregon's mountains, has ascended to superstar status. It was featured in the movie "Wild" and hosts armies of hikers every year.

The Oregon Coast Trail, meanwhile, isn't even well known in its own state.

"I've lived in Oregon for 25 years and consider myself an avid hiker," Hilburn said. "But until last spring, I hadn't even heard of the Oregon Coast Trail. The reason many people haven't heard about it is that it was never finished."

For an example of what's possible on the Oregon Coast, Hilburn pointed to the Camino

de Santiago Trail in Spain.

The 495-mile trail follows a historical pilgrimage route through countless small villages. It's hiked by upward of 278,000 people each year, most of whom stay in hotels and hostels and eat at restaurants along the way.

"It was such a fun experience," said Hilburn, who hiked the Camino in fall of 2016. "It's full of people from around the world, happy to shell out money for a mattress and roof every night."

Other village-to-village routes include the Queen Charlotte Track in New Zealand, Coast to Coast Path in England, and 88 Temples Trail in Japan.

Done right, supporters think the trail, which cuts through numerous small towns on the coast, could become the United States' first village-to-village trek.

Small towns

"There are the beaches, capes and forest that are all wonderful," Soper said. "But one of the highlights is that the trail passes through small towns. People get the chance to visit these coastal communities on foot and really get to know them. A connected trail would really give them the chance to shine."

Two good examples, Soper said, include Depoe Bay and Yachats.

"I particularly love coming into Yachats from the beach, up the historic 804 Trail alongside a dramatic bluff and through town," she said.

The idea of long-distance hikers arriving on the Oregon Coast and spending money appeals to Oregon's lawmakers.

Smith, the bill's chief sponsor, said as a former restaurant owner in Port Orford, he saw a major benefit from bicyclists who rode the length of Highway 101 and stopped to eat along the way. There would be even more customers for local businesses with a completed trail.

"Anytime we can drive eco-tourism to rural Oregon, let's do it," Smith said. "There's no downside to this for the coast and its communities."

More than 450,000 Oregonians could lose health coverage under GOP plan

Medicaid costs would hit state

By PARIS ACHEN
Capital Bureau

SALEM — As many as 465,000 Oregonians would be unable to afford coverage and lose health insurance by 2026 under the U.S. House GOP health care proposal, according to an analysis released by the state.

And it would cost the state an additional \$2.6 billion through 2023 to maintain Medicaid coverage extended to 375,000 Oregonians and subsidized by the federal government under President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act, the state analysis says.

The Republican plan, known as the American Health Care Act, would also cost 42,000 jobs, the state says.

"This bill is not about improving health care. This bill is about giving tax breaks to the wealthy," Gov. Kate Brown said during a news conference Thursday where she took no questions.

The Governor's Office did not specifically address an emailed question about whether Brown intends to have Oregon make up the losses from the federal government, if the GOP bill becomes law. However, Brown and her communications director, Chris Pair, said she plans to share the report with federal officials and Congress to "influence their deliberations on the AHCA."

Most of those who would lose coverage now benefit from the Oregon Health Plan, the state's Medicaid program.

In addition to losses in Medicaid coverage, state officials expect coverage provided by employers also to decline because the proposal eliminates the tax penalty for employers who don't provide insurance.

Patrick Allen, director of Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services, said he is concerned some insurers might drop out of the market as a result of the changes. That agency regulates commercial insurance companies and manages the state health insurance marketplace.

Da Yang: Will pay civil penalties starting this month

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"Oregon's wage and hour protections help ensure the health and safety of our workforce," Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian said in a release. "We're committed to fair enforcement of worker protections so that employees are treated fairly and other law-abiding businesses have a level playing field on which to compete."

Da Yang will pay the civil penalties in six monthly allotments of \$10,000 starting this month. The state will suspend \$24,000 in additional civil penalties if Da Yang complies with wage

and hour laws for at least three years. By signing a consent order, the company waived the right to a contested case hearing.

Following the Da Yang investigation, the bureau's new proactive investigation and enforcement unit audited other seafood processors to ensure compliance with wage and hour laws.

In December 2015, the state Department of Environmental Quality fined Da Yang \$85,319 for discharging wastewater from its Pier 2 processing plant into the Columbia River between June 2008 and May 2015 without a federal permit.

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