

Trail: 'Projects like this take years'

Continued from Page A1

When Connie Soper, author of "Exploring the Oregon Coast Trail," was hiking the route, she just skipped the portions that required her to walk the highways. But she owns a second home in Manzanita and continued to wonder why the particular gap next door had never been fixed. With the support of the city and other groups, she has spent the past five years working to address it.

Now members of the Northwest Youth Corps are beginning to cut out a trail from the south Neahkahnie trailhead to the city — work funded by a state recreation grant Soper wrote for the city.

"This is pretty small, about 2 miles," Soper said. "Some of the other gaps are longer and more complicated."

The project was still complex. It involved a maze of state agencies and other organizations, the support and sponsorship of the city, and a transfer in land ownership halfway through that delayed the project for nearly a year but also completely altered what was possible.

When the connector is completed, hikers will have access to a scenic route that begins on state park land, crosses into land held by the Lower Nehalem Community Trust and takes advantage of utility district and Oregon Department of Transportation easements and right of ways. Manzanita will have a trail to offer visitors and a new pathway to lead through-hikers into town.

"Projects like this take years and years to happen," said Steve Kruger, executive director of Trailkeepers of Oregon, adding that the actual work of building the trail takes the least amount of time.

Trailkeepers of Oregon plans to organize community volunteer work parties on the trail this month and throughout the summer. The nonprofit agreed to take on long-term maintenance of the trail, a key agreement when it came to moving the project forward. With other Oregon Coast Trail gaps, the question of who is ultimately responsible for the new sections could complicate any solution.



Katie Frankowicz/The Astorian

Hikers starting at the north end of Neahkahnie must cross the highway to get to the trailhead. At the south trailhead, farther down, anyone hoping to continue on the Oregon Coast Trail must walk along the highway.

Clear ownership makes the work at Ecola State Park, and the gap that developed there in 2016, a bit easier to solve.

Beyond "trail closed" signs at Indian Beach and straight up a hill covered in downed wood and tangled salal shrubs, a Department of Corrections work crew followed a bread crumb trail of orange flags. Using small saws and rakes, they "brushed" the path, preparing the route for the construction of a new trail segment.

In 2016, a large landslide swept a portion of the original Oregon Coast Trail — which ran from Ecola Point to Indian Beach — into the ocean. The new segment will be constructed up to solid ground and over the landslide. State parks hopes to reopen the entire section of trail this fall.

All of the work will take place on state land, using state resources and state funds — complicated, expensive, but a relatively easy fix when it comes to closing a gap.

'Conservation values'

The Lower Nehalem Community Trust did not acquire the land outside Manzanita — 111 acres total — with the idea of building a new portion of the Oregon Coast Trail. The organization wanted the

land for wildlife and water quality protection primarily, along with the unique opportunity to start to move above the estuary and preserve upland habitat.

"We didn't get it for a trail," said Doug Firstbrook, a board member and one of the trust's founders. "We really did get it for its conservation values. But people are part of the landscape, too, and we want people to realize we value them and their health and well-being and their opportunity to be out on the land."

Some of the trust's properties are too small or too fragile to allow outside visitors, so this property represented a chance to provide some public access.

Before the trust took over the property, Soper had been working with the Department of Transportation to locate the trail section in a state right of way, off the highway but more or less parallel to it, a decidedly noisier and less scenic option than what the group has available now.

"I hope it can be an example of, like, look, it's possible to do this," Soper said of the work at Manzanita. "Get the right people around the table and start the conversation. But every situation is going to be different."

Mentors: Present a shift in the county toward a more pragmatic approach to drug, alcohol abuse

Continued from Page A1

places to stay. Sometimes, they just listen.

"We meet them exactly where they're at," Anderson said. "We explain to them that we're here to walk on this journey with you, whatever that journey looks like for you."

Pragmatic approach

Recovery allies are an example of the shift in Clatsop County toward a more pragmatic approach to drug and alcohol abuse. Over the past few years, ideas like needle exchange, medication-assisted treatment and a methadone clinic have caught on as strategies to reduce harm.

Hiring mentors with their own histories of addiction could help people who have debilitating substance abuse problems, but are resistant to hearing from a counselor, a doctor or a judge. The outreach is unconditional, with no requirement that people stay sober or follow prescribed treatment.

"These were folks who were really unlikely to come to our doors — or anybody else's doors, for that matter — to ask for help," said Amy Baker, the executive director of Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, the county's mental health and substance abuse contractor.

The agency is evaluating how to measure the impact of the recovery allies program. But anecdotal evidence since the outreach began last year suggests a cost-effective intervention. "Nobody is more passionate and understands it better than somebody who's been through it," Baker said.

Coordinated care organizations that oversee the Oregon Health Plan — the state's version of Medicaid — want to integrate behavioral and physical health care. Substance abuse is often linked with untreated mental illness and physical ailments.

One of the hopes is to reduce unnecessary emergency room visits, which are costly to the

government and a strain on hospitals. People on the Oregon Health Plan who have mental illness were 2 1/2 times more likely to use emergency rooms for physical health reasons, the Oregon Health Authority found in a report that looked at data from 2017.

"Whatever somebody's path to recovery is, we support that," Baker said. "I just want to make sure that we're out there trying to find the folks who need help."

'Ra-Ra Team'

Known as the "Ra-Ra Team," Anderson and Boudon are certified recovery mentors, not clinicians or trained drug and alcohol counselors. They speak the language of addiction and recovery from experience.

"It could be that one phrase. It could be that one thing that you say," Anderson said. "It could be introducing them to the right person in the sober community that is their niche."

"We just got to find that rock. We just got to find that little rock that's theirs, and then they can run with it."

Some of the people they encounter are familiar faces, an unavoidable reality of living on the North Coast. When someone stumbles, they get sad or heartbroken, but they are careful not to take their work personally.

"It does help because we've been there and we've got the tools to pass to them," said Anderson, sober since Sept. 20, 2009. "But, at the same time, we need to make sure that we know that we don't replace our personal recovery with our job."

Recovery is rarely a straight line. People who have alienated loved ones or ruined relationships with their addictions often ask why Anderson and Boudon care enough to keep showing up.

"It's hard for people who haven't walked through that path before to have that understanding," Boudon said. "But, personally, if people gave up on me when I was struggling the most, I wouldn't be here today."

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