

Bridge opens over Columbia River

By TOM BANSE
Northwest News Network

The Columbia River has long divided the two halves of Washington's cross-state Palouse to Cascades State Park Trail. Now, a rebuilt rail trestle over the river south of Vantage connects the two sides making it easier for cyclists, horse riders and hikers to undertake a spectacular east-west journey.

The Palouse to Cascades Trail stretches for 285 miles from the outskirts of North Bend to the Idaho border, including a 2.5 mile tunnel under the Cascade Crest. Fred Wert, of Winthrop, has traversed the full length once and biked and walked it in sections many times. He sometimes calls it the "invisible trail" because it is not well known.

"I try to tell people this is a secret way to get across the state," Wert said. "One of the beauties of it, it's away from everything else in general. It's open year-round. It goes from the deep forest to the wheatlands of the Palouse. It's a challenging, but fascinating journey to take."

The mostly gravel rail trail still has a bunch of gaps necessitating detours. The wide Columbia River presented one of the most troublesome barriers for trail riders because the next closest public crossing was the Interstate 90 Vantage Bridge, which has no sidewalk or shoulders. Through-hikers and riders typically would need to hitch a ride in a vehicle to get across.

"A lot of people stopped at the Columbia River," Wert said in at the foot of the refurbished Beverly Bridge. "The fact that this is open will make a big difference."

Wert leads the nonprofit Palouse to Cascades Trail Coalition to promote this long-distance route and advocate for improvements. He and several hundred other outdoor enthusiasts gathered on the trail last week to celebrate one of their biggest victories yet, the opening of the rebuilt trestle over the Columbia.

A marching band led the crowd on a ceremonial first crossing of the Beverly Bridge. The Wahluke High School band played for a while because the bridge is nearly two-thirds of a mile long. The dedication event took place in blustery weather that forced the dignitaries on stage to clutch their speaking notes tightly and sent numerous ballcaps flying in the direction of the looming brown cliffs of Sentinel Gap.

"I'm very excited to see this. This is something we've been working for years on," Washington Gov. Jay Inslee said.



Tom Banse/Northwest News Network

Riders cross the newly rebuilt Beverly Bridge on the Palouse to Cascades State Park Trail.

"This is a national asset."

"The lands you're walking across, the water, is still sacred to our people," said Lela Buck, a tribal representative from the nearby Wanapum village. "As you take your animals, as you take your bikes, as you take your feet across this bridge, continue to remember that this here is a place that continues to connect us to who we are."

"The idea is a trail all the way to the Pacific Ocean — the Idaho line to the Pacific cross-state trail," former Washington Secretary of State Ralph Munro said when his turn came to speak.

"We're getting closer and closer with segments here and there," the 78-year-old Munro said with rising enthusiasm. "Everybody keep it on, don't give up. You

better do it soon or I'm going to be dead!"

Munro played a role in the early 1980s along with the Back Country Horsemen of Washington and many others in getting the state to acquire the right-of-way abandoned by the bankrupt Milwaukee Road railroad. The Beverly Bridge was completed in 1909 by the railroad to connect Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul to the Pacific terminus in Tacoma.

The rails-to-trails conversion was originally called the John Wayne Pioneer Trail and Iron Horse State Park. The state parks commission renamed the route in 2018 to the more descriptive Palouse to Cascades State Park Trail.

"This has been the highlight of my career," said Adam Fulton, the project manager on the Beverly Bridge rehabil-

itation for Washington State Parks. He is moving right along to work on replacing a double trestle over a creek 10 miles to the east. The trestles burned down in a wildfire.

The Washington Legislature last month approved \$2 million to reconstruct the Crab Creek Trestle. Much farther east, the 2020 Babb fire burnt three other bridges near the small town of Malden, requiring trail users to use roads until the state parks department can complete repairs.

On another chunk of the route in Grant and Adams counties, riders must detour onto rural roads and a state highway because a short line railroad is still actively using the rails there. Elsewhere, priorities include improving the trail surface and providing restrooms in more places.

"There's a few missing pieces — ownership, some bridges are being replaced, trestles being replaced," Fulton said in. "By and large, it's all ready to go. There are plenty of walk-arounds and workarounds."

Refashioning the century-old Beverly Bridge cost \$5.5 million dollars. It also cost one construction worker his life. Gabriel Zelaya, 39, died last August when he fell from the bridge approximately 60 feet to the ground. The Washington State Department of Labor & Industries fined contractor Boss Construction more than a quarter-million dollars in January for "egregious serious willful" safety violations that the agency said led to the worker's death. The Bellingham-based contractor is appealing the agency's judgment.

Next month, an equestrian group named the John Wayne Pioneer Wagons and Riders Association will repeat their annual cross-state trail ride for the 41st time. Veteran rider and association president Tom Short, 80, of Woodinville, plans to bring a team of horses pulling an open carriage.

"We are looking so forward this year to this because we'll come down off that hill, we'll see the river and we will just keep going all the way to Beverly," Short said in the warm afterglow of the bridge dedication. "It will be so awesome."

"I predict in 10 years, you'll have families — multi-age families — doing a two week summer vacation going from North Bend to Idaho and camping along the way," Short continued.

Short said the attraction of the Palouse to Cascades trail for him is going through almost all the ecosystems, geology and weather of Washington state as well as enjoying small town hospitality and history along the way. On horseback, the through ride takes about 12 days with shuttles around the gaps, not counting rest days.



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Forum presented by American Association of University Women, Astoria Branch in collaboration with Clatsop Community College, The Astorian and KMUN Coast Community Radio.

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