

Washington State Trails Coalition Annual Meeting

I had the pleasure of attending the Washington State Trails Coalition (WSTC) annual meeting in Ellensburg on October 25, 2007. The WSTC is open to any recognized trail or outdoor-oriented organizations, public agencies and companies with an involvement in recreation and transportation trails, and individuals with similar interests. The purpose of the organization is to “protect, promote and enhance a statewide system of trails for both motorized and non-motorized outdoor recreation and transportation through voluntary and public involvement and in cooperation with landowners and land managers.” It is safe to say that the WSTC has major representation from the federal and state public land agencies (NPS, USFS, WSP, DNR), the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO – formerly IAC), and a host of trail organizations throughout the State of Washington. The current President of WSTC is Elizabeth Lunney of the Washington Trails Association.

The focus of WSTC has been to put on a state trails conference every other year with topics in line with current issues connected with the development and management of land and water trails in Washington State. The last conference in 2006 was in Yakima and had around 240 attendees. Topics included funding, dealing with trail opposition, lobbying and activism, reaching new generations, private sector support, and so forth. The next conference will be in the fall of 2008 in the Spokane area.

The purpose of the recent Ellensburg meeting was to perform some preliminary planning of the 2008 conference including a compilation of topics for which panel discussions or agency presentations would be useful. There were over 40 organization representatives at the meeting, clearly a very diverse group composed of motorized recreational land/water user groups, non-motorized land/water recreational groups, and public agency staff. It is amazing how many topics an assembly of these varied interests could come up with. Chronic funding shortages; grant writing; trail design and construction techniques; infrastructure design standards for bridges, puncheons, crib walls, etc; cooperation (and lack thereof); legislative action (and lack thereof); and so forth.

Prior to the WSTC meeting was a special meeting with representatives of Washington State Parks including Rex Derr, Director. Director Derr is a strong supporter of trails and has backed getting WSP more involved in trails wherever possible. What few folks may realize is that some of our major cross state trails under development are State Park trails. These include the Iron Horse Trail near I-90, the Columbia Plateau Trail following the Columbia River, and the Willapa Hills Trail in southwestern Washington. The State Parks Commission is gearing up for their Centennial 2013 celebration, and they have been setting goals both for their parks and their trail system in preparation for this (one of the projects which is currently on hold was the development of a new state park at Miller Peninsula).

Director Derr was seeking input from WSTC participants about what trail projects we felt State Parks might prioritize, giving the public the most for their money over the next several years. One of the issues with the cross state trails is that because of the number of trestle crossing, surfacing issues, and right of way acquisitions, funding will need to be secured for many years and construction will be scheduled out beyond Centennial focus projects. While there is great support for these long term projects, State Parks also would like to look at immediate trail related projects that the public would like to see happen.

The discussions on this topic were lively to say the least. I did bring up the importance of the Pacific Northwest Trail (PNT) between Deception Pass State Park and Sequim Bay State Park – which would pass by Fort Ebey through Fort Casey, by Fort Worden, through Anderson Lake, by Miller Peninsula. (Of course, this lowland PNT route *is* the O.D.T. across Jefferson County). Others brought up different trails in their areas – east side – west side. Once all the different exciting projects were discussed, the overall perspective was that instead making a few single projects as the focus, WSP should look at constructing and/or completing community connectors to (and in) existing state parks.

I found the motorized trail representatives to be very considerate during these discussions with WSP. It was clear that the trails under consideration with State Parks were non-motorized ones, but the motorized users willingly participated in the discussion and gave some very insightful input on trail use, etiquette, and education. I don't know why this should be any different. Motorized users end up walking a great deal, and non-motorized users drive to trailheads. The issues of responsible conduct and use are the same for all groups.

I highly encourage anyone interested in trail promotion and advocacy to consider attending the WSTC conferences. It is an opportunity to meet a cross-section of representatives from companies and agencies in the business of trail based recreation as well as a vast variety of activists and volunteers from non-profit agencies.

For more information, <http://www.washingtonstatetrailscoalition.org/>

Jeff Chapman, Jefferson Trails Coalition