

# TOUCHET VALLEY TRAIL

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## ***Background Information, Benefits, and Frequently Asked Questions***

### **What is the Touchet Valley Trail?**

The Touchet Valley Trail will connect the main streets of Dayton and Waitsburg along the existing active rail line. This rails-with-trails project has the potential to increase tourism, improve economic development and health outcomes in the community, and provide better access to recreation and nature. It is part of the proposed Blue Mountain Region Trails plan.

### **Where did this idea come from?**

In the early-2000s, the idea for more paths and trails in Columbia County first came out of a local committee called Columbia Cares that works to improve the health of Columbia County citizens. Further interest in a trail between Dayton and Waitsburg was shown at the 2015 and 2016 annual Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Meetings held each December. The trail became a regional priority as part of the Blue Mountain Regional Trails planning process in 2017. The City of Dayton, Columbia County, and the Port of Columbia adopted the trail concept as part of the 2018 update to the Cooperative Parks Master Plan for all three municipalities. (Please see back page for detailed trail history.)

### **Where will the trail start and end?**

The trail will have two trailheads – one at the north end of Main Street in Waitsburg, and one near the courthouse and Depot on Commercial Street in Dayton. There will be several parking areas along the route for users who want to start in the middle.

### **What are the benefits of a trail?**

**Economic Vitality:** Trails and other recreational opportunities attract people and dollars. Trail towns benefit from the influx of visitors going to restaurants, snack shops, and other retail establishments. They also increase the attractiveness of nearby properties. When considering where to move, prospective homebuyers rank proximity to walking and biking paths as one of their top priorities. Studies show that businesses often choose to locate in areas with good trails because it is an attractive feature for their workforce. Studies also show that trails are an amenity that potential new residents look for when considering relocating.

**Health:** Trails improve physical and mental health outcomes in communities by providing access to low-cost exercise opportunities. This is one of the best ways to improve community health.

## **Will tax dollars be used to build and maintain trail?**

A trail is like a park, so there is no dedicated revenue stream to fund a trail other than taxes. Tax dollars are frequently used to support parks, fairgrounds, and other recreation assets. The good news is that the grant funds received for design of this trail are not local tax dollars. They are from a grant from the state, and these types of grant funds are used to help spread the wealth of taxes generated in the Puget Sound to other parts of the state. Other state granting programs will likely fund construction. Local taxes are more likely to be used for maintenance of the trail in conjunction with volunteer efforts. Any increase in taxes specifically for the trail would have to be proposed by one of the local governments and then voted on by the people. Until a maintenance plan is firmly in place, we can't say whether or not that would happen. There has been community interest shown in the formation of a parks and recreation district to fund other facilities, such as the fairgrounds and a pool, so the trail could be included in that kind of effort if desired.

## **Why can't these trail design funds be used to fix our road, or fix our pool?**

The trail design funds are coming from WSDOT's Pedestrian & Bicycle Safety Program. They can only be used for projects related to that use, not for other road infrastructure projects or for community projects like pools. If we reject the funds, they will go to another project on WSDOT's list and will not be able to be used here.

## **Will private property be taken for this trail? Will I be forced to move my house?**

No. The trail will be built entirely within the railroad right-of-way, which is owned by the Port of Columbia. Within the cities of Dayton and Waitsburg, some of the trail may be located on city-owned right of way. Surveying and a title search to verify boundaries will be conducted during the design process.

## **Which side of the tracks will the trail be on?**

We don't know yet. That will be determined during the design process. There are many factors that determine which side, and the trail is likely to switch sides more than once along the way.

## **What if I farm next to the trail? Does this mean I can't spray?**

No. You can maintain your traditional farming practice and any other activities you enjoy on your own private property. Columbia County and Walla Walla County are both Right-To-Farm communities. Farmers can continue to farm their land as they always have once the trail is built. They are allowed to spray their crops. It's even possible, on busy harvest or crop transportation days, to close portions of the trail if requested.

In fact, one idea for trail design is to put up signs letting trail users know that this is a "Right to Farm" community, and that by ordinance it is expected that all trail users will respect adjacent farm activity.

If adjacent landowners have questions or concerns regarding how trail use may impact their property, we'd like to hear what those concerns are so we can work to alleviate any conflicts. It really helps to look at a map of the trail corridor when discussing concerns. Please contact Kathryn Witherington at 509-382-2577 or [kathryn@portofcolumbia.org](mailto:kathryn@portofcolumbia.org) to schedule individual meetings, look at maps and discuss any concerns in more details.

### **What is a “rails-with-trails” project? Why not just take out the rail line?**

A “rails-with-trails” trail runs adjacent to an active rail line. There are many such trails throughout the country. Since the rail line itself is still an important economic development asset to the community, the Port of Columbia has not intention of taking it out.

### **Is it safe to have a trail adjacent to an active rail line?**

Yes! The rail operator thinks the trail will improve safety along the rail line by taking pedestrians off the tracks and on to the trail. The train can run, at maximum, 10 miles per hour along this stretch of track. Fencing may be added in certain parts if deemed necessary for additional safety.

### **How will this trail increase safety along Highway 12?**

This trail will move bicyclists and walkers off the highway and on to the nearby trail. This will improve their safety by not being next to high speed traffic.

### **Why is the Port of Columbia involved in this project? Are they even allowed to build a trail?**

The Port is involved for multiple reasons:

- The project meets the Port's mission and is included in the Port's comprehensive plan, which guides the work of the Port district.
- The best location for a trail between Dayton and Waitsburg is on the Port-owned railroad right of way.
- RCW 53.08.255 grants Ports the authority to build and operate tourism facilities. This same authority does NOT grant Ports the right of eminent domain for this purpose. The Port will not be taking any private property for the trail.
- The state constitution designates Ports as economic development agencies, and trails bring economic vitality to the towns around them.
- The trail idea was brought to the Port by community members over and over again. The Port of Columbia is responding to a community need.

### **Do other Ports own trails?**

Yes, many. The Port of Skagit, the Port of Kalama, the Port of Seattle, and the Port of Bellingham to name a few.

## **Do trails lead to an increase in crime along the corridor?**

Generally, trails in an area decrease crime by bringing legitimate users to an area that may have been used for crime in the past. Surveys of other trails in the region show very low to no crime.

## **Who will patrol the trail?**

Both Columbia County Sheriff's Department and Walla Walla Sheriff's Department have indicated they have the capacity to respond to any incidents along the trail. The Columbia County Sheriff has suggested that trail design should include a barrier, like a gate, to keep vehicles off the trail, but have an access code that would allow emergency vehicles onto the trail. Currently, it is very difficult for law enforcement agencies to patrol the tracks. The trail would actually increase their ability to patrol the corridor.

## **Will I be held responsible if a trail user gets hurt on my property?**

The trail will be designed to encourage users to stay on the public right-of-way. If trail users do trespass, private landowners are NOT liable for injuries that occur on their property by a trespasser.

## **Who will be allowed to use the trail?**

The trail can be used by bikers, walkers, runners, and strollers. Some residents have expressed interest in allowing horses on the trail, but if that happens it would likely be an adjacent use. Pets will be allowed if on leash. Vehicles such as ATVS are not allowed.

## **Who is involved in the planning and how long will it take?**

The Port of Columbia, in collaboration with the National Park Service, has convened a Touchet Valley Trail Steering Committee to guide the planning process for the trail. The steering committee is comprised of stakeholders for the project, listed below. The goal is to have a concept plan completed by the end of 2019, with engineering and design scheduled for 2020. The steering committee will be pursuing construction grants in 2020 and 2021, with construction hopefully completed by the end of 2022.

### **Touchet Valley Trail Steering Committee**

Meagan Bailey, Planning Director, Columbia County and City of Dayton

Trina Cole, City Clerk / Administrator, City of Dayton

Genie Crowe, Recreationalist

Shaun Darveshi, Director/Transportation Engineer, Palouse RTPO

Jennie Dickinson, Executive Director, Port of Columbia

Clara Dickinson-McQuary, Program Specialist 2, Washington State Parks

Paul Didelius, Owner/President, Columbia Rail

Chuck Eaton, Public Works Director / County Engineer, Columbia County

Paul Gonseth, Planning Engineer, WSDOT

Randy Hinchcliffe, City Administrator, City of Waitsburg  
Joy Smith, President, Waitsburg Commercial Club  
Alex Stone, Community Planner, NPS RTCA Program  
Terry Lawhead, Recreationalist, Waitsburg  
Kathryn Witherington, Economic Development Director, Port of Columbia

### **What is the timeline of the trail project?**

**2019:** Planning and design work starts

**2020:** Planning and design work continues. Applications for construction funds will commence.

**2021-2022:** Trail construction and completion

## **TRAIL PROJECT HISTORY**

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**Early-2000s:** The desire for more paths and trails started in the early-2000s when a local group dedicated to finding ways to improve the health of Columbia County residents was formed. One of the first ideas they discussed was the development of a trail between Dayton and Waitsburg.

**July 2015:** Community Council, a group dedicated to improving the lives of residents in the Walla Walla Valley, released their report on "Enhancing Outdoor Recreation Opportunities". This report, put together after extensive meetings and workshops in the region, examined ways in which adding recreation to the region would impact the social, environmental, and economic growth of the area. One of the recommendations of the report was to build more trails in the region. (The Community Council defines the Walla Walla Valley as the region stretching from Dayton to Milton-Freewater, following the same area that is considered the functional economy of the region.)

**December 2015:** At the annual Columbia County Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy meeting, local residents and community leaders ranked a "recreational path between Dayton and Waitsburg" as the #2 priority project.

**December 2016:** At the same Columbia County Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy meeting in 2016, the trail project was voted the #1 priority project.

**January-May 2017:** Following up on the Community Council's Outdoor Recreation Study recommendation, trail planning community meetings were held in the region to gather input from the public. One was held in Dayton on January 30, 2017 in which over 100 people attended, and a follow-up was held on May 1, 2017 in Dayton. Many other meetings with

the same format were held in Walla Walla and Milton-Freewater. Meetings were held in both English and Spanish and gathered more than 1,000 comments on different trail needs in the region.

**May 2017 – January 2018:** Based on input from those meetings, workshops, and online comments, a committee of city, county, and port representatives, transportation planning organizations, community organizations, and recreationalists from 3 counties and two states continued to meet monthly, and with assistance from the National Park Service created what is now called the Blue Mountain Region Trails plan.

**January 2018:** The Blue Mountain Region Trails Plan was completed and officially adopted in January 2018. The Touchet Valley Trail was identified as one of the top priorities in that plan. This plan was adopted by the Palouse Regional Transportation Planning Organization (which serves Columbia, Garfield, Asotin, and Whitman Counties) in January 2018 and by the Walla Walla Valley Metropolitan Planning Organization in February 2018.

**October 2018:** Port of Columbia applied to WSDOT for trail design funds through their Pedestrian & Bicycling Safety Program. These funds cannot be used for other community projects.

**December 2018:** An update to the Cooperative Park Master Plan for the City of Dayton, Columbia County, and Port of Columbia, which includes the Touchet Valley Trail concept, was adopted by the three municipalities in December 2018. Public hearings were held by each municipality prior to plan adoption.

**January 2019:** The Port of Columbia, through a technical assistance grant from the National Park Service, began developing a concept plan for the Touchet Valley Trail.

**March 2019:** National Park Service were guest speakers at the monthly Cup of Joe meeting in Dayton, which is open to the public, and over 40 people attended to learn more.

**June 2019:** Landowners directly adjacent to the trail corridor were mailed invitations to participate in a Listening Session with the Touchet Valley Trail Steering Committee members.