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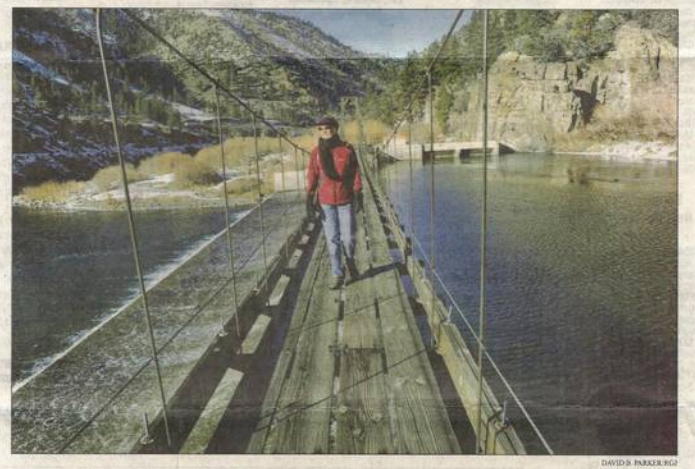

DAVID B. PARKER/RGJ

Janet Phillips, the guiding force behind the Tahoe-Pyramid Bikeway, walks across the Fleisch bridge over the Truckee River on Dec. 23. Improving the small bridge, located near Floriston, is a critical step in getting work on the bikeway started next year.

Trail group tackles Truckee River Canyon

First section of Tahoe-Pyramid Bikeway may be built this year

BY SUSAN VOYLES
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After six years of following the path of least resistance in building the Tahoe-Pyramid Bikeway, the volunteer group is now tackling the Truckee River Canyon — with high hopes of building the first sections of trail into high Sierra this year.

This is the big one awaited by many local cyclists.

The route would follow the river and Interstate 80 up the steep canyon faced with high rock walls and rock croppings to Hirschdale near Truckee. Dirt roads from Boca Reservoir to Dog Valley Road in Verdi would create one giant loop for diehards.

Chris Askin, a nonprofit executive who frequently rides along the railroad tracks or abandoned highway road from Truckee to work in Reno in the summer, said he expects the bike route would be as popular as the one to the top of the Haleakala dormant volcano on Maui.

"I think it's going to be hugely popular and it will figure into tourism of our area in a big way," he said.

It's the biggest missing link in finishing the bikeway following the river from Lake Tahoe to Pyramid Lake, said Janet Phillips, who founded the group of volunteers working on the project.

Their mission, she said, is get a bikeway designed as quickly as possible, following the river on its 116-mile journey and then go back and make improvements such as paving.

The Truckee River Canyon requires routing the trail across two states, along a federal highway and on utility land. Of the 10 miles, Phillips said seven miles is on old roadbed from the Lincoln Highway and three miles of new construction will be required.

"There's a huge transportation history in that canyon and we are going to bring some of it back to life," Phillips said.

In two years of planning for the project a big hurdle was passed on Dec. 10 when the Truckee-Donner Recreation and Park District Board approved an environmental study for the project that was required by California.

With that study done, serious fundraising can begin and Phillips already has applied for two grants.

The California Department of Transportation, the biggest landowner involved, also has to endorse the environmental study. Phillips said Caltrans officials have been cooperative thus far because they want to get bikes off of Interstate 80.

"They are, of course, interested in the engineering aspects of this," she said.

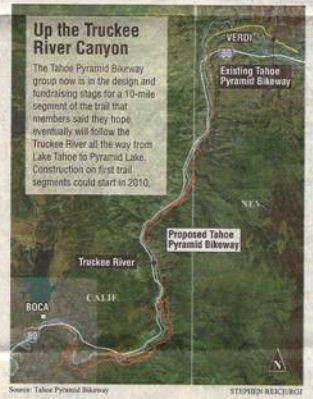
The Washoe County parks department has allocated $125,000 for the canyon bikeway bi-state plan from a $10 million share for the Truckee River provided by the Nevada 2002 outdoors bond issue. About $25,000 already has been spent. Funding also is being sought from sources in California, Phillips said.

Routing the trail in the narrow canyon shared by Interstate 80, Union Pacific Railroad and the river hasn't been easy.

The bikeway would be on Truckee Meadows Water Authority land for the first two miles west of Verdi. Then it will be on Caltrans right-of-way.

From Verdi, the trail would start on

SEE BIKEWAY ON 3E



Source: Tahoe Pyramid Bikeway

STEPHEN REICH/RGJ

Details

Tahoe-Pyramid Bikeway formed in Reno six years ago. The group's goal is to piece together a bikeway following the Truckee River on its 116-mile journey from the aspen lake to the desert lake. Cooperating with the Pyramid Lake Tribal Council, it has opened a 26-mile trail on the Pyramid Lake Reservation and worked with others on sections in the Tracy area. Its first project was a long-sought bikeway between Mogul and Verdi. The group already has raised $400,000 for the trail project, starting with a bikeway between Mogul and Verdi. And it obtained approval for a $500,000 grant to build a bridge east of Sparks, but Storey County Commissioners rejected that project. The effort is headed by Janet Phillips, a retired Sierra Pacific Power Co. executive, and about a dozen other recently retired engineers, builders and professionals form the core group. Another 60 to 70 people are involved.

DETAILS: www.tpbikeway.org.

Bikeway/Trail will cost $6.2 million to build

From 1E

Quilici Ranch Road and then follow Fleisch Road for two miles. The private road, owned by TMWA, is on the south side of the river.

About a mile into California, the trail would cross the Fleisch suspension bridge owned by TMWA and then the trail would remain on the north side of the river to Hirschdale.

The Fleisch bridge is the only river crossing until Hirschdale.

But a pedestrian bridge has to be built over Interstate 80 about three miles east of Hirschdale and then another bridge is required nearby where the freeway is deeply cut into the cliff.

The route requires using only two existing crossings over Union Pacific Railroad tracks.

"The intent is to use the old Lincoln Highway roadbed as much as possible," she said. "It's already there, and it has historic interest."

In all, Phillips estimates the 10 miles of trail will cost at least $6.2 million to build.

While it's a long shot, she said the group has applied for a $6 million economic stimulus grant to build it.

Much of the money would go into building the two bridges and two miles of rock walls where the trail will cut into the big cliff between Hirschdale and Floriston. The group has applied for a $350,000 grant from California to get that started.

Here, motorists on Interstate 80 can see a very visible and long dirt road leading to a large cabin on the south side of the river. But the landowners don't want the trail on their private road.

Here and elsewhere, "we arrived at this trail route by process of elimination," Phillips said.

With Caltrans already providing informal parking areas along Interstate 80, people could bring bikes to ride in the canyon or use it for snowshoeing or cross-country skiing in the winter. People already use these spots to go fishing or check out a favorite swimming hole.

California Fish and Game own property and eventually intends to create a gateway with paved parking about a mile into California, Phillips said. This is the same area where the Fleisch suspension bridge is located. With two large outcroppings, she said it's also a popular spot for rock climbers known as River Rock.

But other than the dirt parking areas, the only amenity for visitors in the entire canyon is a portable restroom at Floriston for kayakers, Phillips said.

If grant funds are obtained, Phillips said trail work would begin at both ends of the canyon.

From the Verdi side, the first major task is improving the TMWA suspension footbridge. It's a little bouncy walking across it, and it needs more railings and a sealed deck.

Phillips said those improvements have yet to be negotiated and are not included in the $6.2 million estimate.

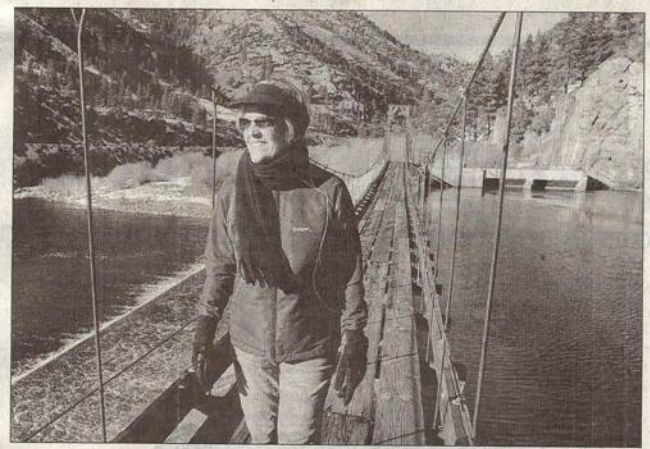
At the top, work would begin on that difficult route between Hirschdale and Floriston, cut alongside the freeway.

The pedestrian footbridge over the highway could be similar to the one built near Saint Mary's Regional Medical Center in downtown Reno and has been estimated at $862,000. If Caltrans requires a taller bridge, it could cost several million dollars.

And then there's another hurdle to be overcome. Nevada County plans to abandon in a few years a bridge at Hirschdale that's considered unsafe. From there, riders would take Hirschdale Road to get to the freeway near the Boca Reservoir exit.

If the bridge is not replaced, the route would follow West Hinton Road to Boca, adding more miles of climbing on a dirt road.

"It's not a fatal flaw but it's not as scenic as the bridge route," she said.



DAVID B. PARKER/RGJ

Janet Phillips, the guiding force behind the Tahoe-Pyramid Bikeway, walks across Fleisch bridge, near Floriston, over the Truckee River on Dec. 23.

Details

An article about building the Pyramid trail, by Janet Phillips and with photos by RGJ photo chief Tim Dunn, appears in the current issue of American Trails magazine. It can be viewed at www.AmericanTrails.org.

Glenshire man bikes 32 miles to work for great view

By day, Chris Askin is the executive director of the Community Foundation in Reno.

But in the early morning hours or occasionally after work, the 50-year-old resident of Glenshire, near Truckee, can often be found riding his bike along a dirt road in the Truckee River Canyon.

While it can be an ordeal, Askin considers it one of the spectacular commutes on the planet.

"It's pretty fast through the canyon," he said. "It's a beautiful ride, a spectacular ride. You go by old hydropower generator plants and see the flumes and the railroad trestle."

He also crosses a pedestrian suspension bridge at Fleisch, about a mile into California from the Nevada state line, his favorite spot. He stays on the south side of the river most of the trip.

In all, his commute from Glenshire, a neighborhood that sits on the hill above Hirschdale, south of Boca Reservoir, is about 32 miles to his office at Arlington Avenue and Plumb Lane in Reno.

The canyon ride totals about 10 miles. As a sole rider, he takes a private dirt road from Hirschdale and follows it deep into the canyon and then takes old sections of Highway 40 and rides on the gravel along the railroad tracks. That cobble, he said, is the worst part of the ride.

By the end of fall, Askin is in great shape. And he's been doing the commute for the past five years when he has time. Early spring, he rides once every two weeks and then weekly through summer and fall.

The downhill ride takes two hours. Uphill is 2½ hours.

He takes the Dog Valley route about 60 percent of the time. Dog Valley Road from Verdi leads up to Boca Reservoir. That's 36 miles and takes an extra half hour. But he competes with trucks and boat trailers near Boca, saying it makes it more dangerous than the canyon route.

He's very much in support of the proposed trail, saying he believes stretches of it will be used by many people once it is paved, including mothers on roller skates pushing baby strollers.

— *Sue Voyles, RGJ*