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Washington State is about to become the home of the longest rail-to-trail conversion in America thanks to the generosity of seven Idaho farmers.

Will this recent development spur the Washington Legislature to reverse a decision last month to strip the Tekoa Trestle renovation from a grant program and to defund the John Wayne Trail?

May 12, 2017

This past week in Tekoa, WA, the Tekoa Trail and Trestle Association and seven Washington and Idaho farmers made history. They began a process to connect two state wide trail networks and create the longest rail to trail conversion in America. Seven farm families have agreed in principle to allow the recreational use of a trail bed that runs through their property and connects Washington's only cross state trail, the John Way Trail with Idaho's Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes.

A person may soon be able to get on their bicycle in Eastern MT and peddle all the way to Seattle on a non-motorized vehicle trail. This is all being done by private citizens and their donations.

The new trail link connects an additional 6 miles of the John Wayne Trail, in Tekoa WA(253 miles long) to the Trail of the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes in Plummer ID(69 miles long) and then to the Trail of the Hiawatha(15 miles long) which ends in East Portal MT. The new continuous trail length is a total of 353 miles is 67.5 miles longer then Missouri's Katy Trail the former record holder.

It was Cheryl Morgan an active volunteer for her community and lifelong Tekoa resident who spoke with each of the farmers individually regarding their concerns and needs before an easement arrangement could be reached. She is the wife of Monte Morgan the Vice President of the Tekoa Trail and Trestle Association and lifetime friends with most of the farmers.

"I can't deal with the politics of it, I'm not a politician, but I can deal with the farmers, because I love farmers. I was born a farmer's daughter" said Cheryl Morgan.

"It's fine with us if someone wants to go through there if there are not going to mess with anything" said Don Hay, a fourth-generation Washington farmer who is one of the seven private landowners whose land the trail crosses.

“The major goal for the Tekoa Trail and Trestle Association is to make sure all trail users; bicyclists, hikers and horse riders understand that it’s farmers first.” said Tekoa Trail and Trestle Association President Ted Blaszak “We are taking strong measures to ensure that their business of running a farm is not interfered with, such as temporary closures signs controlled by the farmers when moving equipment etc., liability insurance, and making trail bed repairs with agricultural use in mine.”

This stretch also contains land belonging the bureau of land management and the City of Plummer.

Said Mayor Bill Weem of Plummer, “If these trails can be connected, it will create the longest rail-to-trail continuous bicycle trail in North America. People will be able to experience the beauty and wonder of an aspect of the Pacific Northwest previously unavailable to them. That alone is worth the effort. The potential for tourism dollars can't be ignored either, and small communities like ours can use that extra boost economically.”

That economic boost to many small farm towns in the Palouse is expected to come from tourism via the “Cheryl and Monte Morgan Trail Link”. 200,000 people a year use the Western portion of the John Wayne Trail and 300,000 a year use the Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes.

“That’s only six miles of a beautiful trail to our town of 843, that’s a big deal! I’m very excited about the increase business to many small stores like my own.” Said Tekoa Pharmacy owner Patty Primmer.

The Big Hold Up from a complete trail - The Washington State Legislature

In 2016 1.2 million was awarded to restore the Tekoa Trestle through the WWRP/ROC grant program. \$83,000 dollars was raised to help pay in part for this project by private citizens in the Tekoa area. The funds would restore the decking and open the trestle up to pedestrian traffic.

The Tekoa Trestle has been in a state of mild disrepair and closed to the public since the trail was first created in 1985. It has always been intended to be repaired by the WA Parks Department as vital part of Washington’s cross state trail system. The Trestle hovers above the town of Tekoa(pop 843) and is major part of the town’s identity.

It was stripped from the grant program by Tekoa’s our own State Senator, Mark Schoesler who lead an unusual GOP lead effort in the State Senate last month to do so. If the funds are not re-allocated back to the Trestle they will go

instead to the next projects on the list; a park pavilion and a beach campsite relocation near Gig Harbor.

Sen Schoesler himself two years ago supported the Tekoa Trestle repair project and offered to introduce legislation to fund its repair but then withdrew this kind gesture after the community objected to his covert closure of the trail in the final days of the 2015 legislative session. The budget proviso closure that would have given 135 miles of trail, all land owned WA Parks, to adjacent landowners at no cost them was not implemented because of a typo.

“Well of course we’re real happy that Idaho government and our farmers understand how to help their small rural economies with tourism opportunities, but we are very disappointed that our own 9th District legislators, Schmick, Schoesler and Dye don’t. We hope that this will change their minds about punishing Tekoa just because we passed a resolution to keep the trail open.” said Tekoa Mayor John Jaeger.

“The legislative session is still going on, they have both the power and the time to restore the John Wayne Trail Projects.” Said Ted Blaszak President of the TTTA “We hope that with this turn of events, of developing this great tri-state trail, will make the difference for him and he will have a change of heart and let Tekoa have its trestle repaired.”

Please visit our web site at savethejohnwaynetrail.com to sign our petition to save the trail.

Contact: Ted Blaszak, President Tekoa Trail and Trestle Association

tekoatrailandtrestle@gmail.com (home)509-284-2354 (cell)503-481-9052

savethejohnwaynetrail.com FB: Tekoa Trail & Trestle Association