

MEMORANDUM

White Salmon Bluff Connector Trail Study



ENGINEERS ♦ PLANNERS
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS ♦ SURVEYORS
205 SE Spokane Street, Suite 200, Portland, OR 97202
PHONE: 503.221.1131 www.hhpr.com FAX: 503.221.1171

Date: September 25, 2024

To: Troy Rayburn, City of White Salmon

From: Thuy Cao, HHPRI

Subject: Stakeholder Meeting #1: Introduction and Identification of Issues
Meeting Summary and Notes

As part of the public involvement plan for the Bluff Connector Trail Study, the City of White Salmon hosted the first of three stakeholder meetings on September 12th, 2024, from 5 to 7 p.m. Harper Houf Peterson Righellis Inc. (HHPRI) presented key stakeholders with an overview of the project along with background information, considerations for the study, and discussion topics. This memorandum summarizes the stakeholder meeting and the key takeaways that emerged from stakeholder input.

Purpose

The purpose of Stakeholder Meeting #1 was to introduce the White Salmon Bluff Connector Trail study to key stakeholders within the project area and gather input on issues and concerns related to the proposed project. Feedback from key stakeholders will help identify project aspects that include both problematic incumbrances and creative opportunities that will inform the preliminary engineering and initial design for the proposed connector trail.

Key Takeaways

- The White Salmon Bluff Connector Trail Study is not a construction plan but rather a feasibility study to explore opportunities and constraints of the proposed trail. The project evaluates the possibility of a trail connection from SR-141 to SR-14 along the White Salmon Bluff, but no final decisions have been made.
- The main goals are to provide firefighter/emergency access to the bluff and create a safe pedestrian/bike connection from downtown White Salmon to the future Hood River-White Salmon bridge area.
- Significant concerns were raised by nearby residents about increased wildfire risk, liability, privacy, property values, and impacts on safety including suicide risks, emergencies on the stairs, and concerns with cars when children are playing on the private road in the area.
- Potential parking locations were discussed, but residents expressed skepticism about the city's ability to enforce no-parking zones in the neighborhood. The project team will further evaluate potential parking locations for the trail and clear signage including no-parking areas and wayfinding signs to available parking for the trail.
- The city will document all the questions and concerns raised and plans to address them in more detail at the next stakeholder meeting in November. An open house is also planned for October.
- No project timeline has been set, as this is still in the early feasibility study phase. The city is required to complete the study by the end of the year to comply with grant funding.

- Residents requested the city to consider alternatives to the staircase, such as an ADA-accessible trail or overlook, that may be less impactful. The city agreed to explore all options.
- Several residents expressed concerns about the proposed trail alignment going directly behind their homes and properties, citing privacy and safety concerns.
- The fire chief acknowledged the importance of providing firefighter access to the bluff, but some residents were skeptical that the stairs would improve fire response capabilities compared to other options like improving access on Dock Grade Road.
- Residents raised concerns about the project potentially attracting more people and activity to the bluff, which could increase the risk of wildfires, littering, trespassing, and other undesirable behaviors in the area.
- Some residents suggested the city should focus more on improving pedestrian and bike infrastructure on existing roads like Jewett Boulevard and Dock Grade Road.
- There were questions about the total budget for the feasibility study and whether the city has considered the long-term maintenance and liability costs associated with the proposed trail.
- The city acknowledged the need to be more careful with the language used to describe the project, as some residents felt the city had already made decisions about the trail's construction.

Topic Notes

Project Overview and Goals

- This is a feasibility study, not a construction plan - city is exploring possibility of the trail.
- Provide firefighter/emergency access to the bluff and create safe pedestrian/bike connection.
- Connects downtown White Salmon to future Hood River-White Salmon bridge area.
- Desire to achieve multimodal access and transportation alternatives beyond just vehicles.

Wildfire Mitigation and Concerns

- High risk of wildfires on the bluff due to dry vegetation, steep terrain, and exposure to winds.
- Proposed mitigation measures include using non-combustible materials, creating fire breaks, and providing water connections for firefighters.
- Fire chief emphasized the importance of access along the bluff for fire response, but residents questioned if stairs are necessary or how they would aid in emergency response.
- Concerns about increased human activity potentially igniting fires, even with mitigation efforts.

Pedestrian/Bike Access and Connectivity

- Currently no dedicated pedestrian routes in the area, forcing people to use high-traffic roads like SR-141 and SR-14.
- Proposed trail could provide an alternative transportation option and connection for pedestrians.
- Potential to link to existing/planned infrastructure like the park-and-ride and future Hood River-White Salmon bridge improvements.
- Residents questioned if other routes like Dock Grade Road could achieve similar connectivity.

Parking and Access Concerns

- Questions were raised about where trail users would park and potential impacts on neighborhood.
- The city stated they are looking at existing public parking lots, with no plans for new parking areas.
- Residents reported existing parking issues in the area that are not currently enforced.
- The project team mentioned exploring ways to encourage parking in commercial areas and discourage it in residential zones.
- No plans for a dedicated parking lot, relying on existing public lots like at Rhinegarten Park.
- Residents concerned about overflow parking in residential neighborhoods like River Watch Drive.
- Questions about enforcement of no-parking zones and impacts on private driveways being potentially blocked.
- Desire for parking to be directed to commercial areas, not residential streets.

Privacy and Property Impacts

- Adjacent homeowners expressed worry about loss of privacy and potential negative impacts on property values.
- Questions were raised about the exact trail alignment and its proximity to existing homes.
- Concerns were voiced about attracting more people and activity near private properties.
- Some residents requested consideration of alternative routes that would have less impact on privacy.

Safety and Liability

- Concerns were expressed about potential accidents on the stairs and emergency response access.
- Questions were raised about the city's liability if incidents occur on the trail.
- The project team mentioned they would consider suicide prevention measures in the design.
- Some residents brought up nuisance issues, such as the potential for kids to skateboard on railings.

ADA Accessibility

- Steep terrain of the bluff makes full ADA compliance difficult for the entire trail.
- Exploring options for an ADA-accessible route and viewpoint at the top of the bluff.
- Ensuring equitable access for all users, not just able-bodied pedestrians.

Environmental Impacts

- Concerns were raised about erosion and stormwater management on the steep slope.
- Questions were asked about potential impacts to existing vegetation and habitat.
- The project team stated they would be conducting critical areas investigations as part of the study.

Project Need and Alternatives

- Some attendees questioned whether the stairs are the best option for improving connectivity.
- Suggestions were made to improve existing routes like Dock Grade Road instead.
- Concerns were raised about ADA accessibility with a stairs-only design.
- The project team mentioned they are exploring an ADA-compliant alternative route as part of the study.

Design Considerations

- Alignment of the trail is a major concern, with residents questioning location behind private homes.
- Potential for issues like trespassing, littering, unsafe behaviors, and impacts on children playing.
- Desire to avoid creating a "gathering point" and maintain focus on the trail itself for transportation.

Public Input Process

- Adjacent property owners appreciated being consulted early in the process.
- Questions were raised about how public feedback will be incorporated into the decision-making.
- Some attendees requested a more balanced presentation of pros and cons in future meetings.
- The project team stated all comments and concerns would be documented and addressed in future meetings.

Project Benefits Discussed

- **Improved Firefighter/Emergency Access.** The fire chief acknowledged that the proposed trail would provide better access to the bluff for firefighters and emergency responders, which is currently lacking. Having a dedicated access point and potential water connections along the trail could aid firefighting efforts and help prevent fires from spreading to nearby homes and properties. This could aid in fire mitigation and response efforts on the bluff.
- **Alternative Transportation Options.** The trail would provide a dedicated pedestrian and bicycle connection, offering an alternative to just using vehicles to access downtown White Salmon and the future Hood River-White Salmon bridge area. This could promote more walking, biking, and multimodal transportation in the community potentially reducing vehicle traffic and emissions.
- **Connectivity to Existing/Planned Infrastructure.** The trail aims to link the new Hood River-White Salmon Bridge project, park-and-ride facility at the base of the bluff, as well as Downtown White Salmon where there are existing businesses to enhance overall connectivity. Improved connectivity between neighborhoods, commercial areas, and regional infrastructure like the park-and-ride could make it easier for residents and visitors to get around without a car.
- **Potential Economic Benefits.** Some residents felt the trail could bring more visitors and foot traffic to Downtown White Salmon, making it easier for people to access and explore the shops, restaurants, and other amenities in the city's commercial core and potentially benefiting local businesses and the overall economy.
- **Community Health and Wellness.** A few attendees suggested the trail could encourage more physical activity and outdoor recreation, improving the health and wellness of residents. Improved access and recreational opportunities on the bluff could enhance the community's quality of life and appeal as a destination.

Although only a few attendees raised these potential benefits, their input underscores that some residents recognize the value of improving access, fire response, and multimodal transportation options in the area.

However, it's clear from the overall discussion that these potential benefits discussed were vastly outweighed by the concerns raised by nearby residents about wildfire risk, privacy, property values, and other impacts. These concerns should be carefully considered throughout the course of the feasibility study when developing conceptual designs for the project.

Conclusion

The meeting provided a forum for the city and consulting team to present the initial plans and goals for the proposed White Salmon Bluff Connector Trail project, which is currently in the feasibility study phase. The primary objectives are to improve firefighter and emergency access to the bluff area, as well as create a safe pedestrian and bicycle connection from downtown White Salmon to the future Hood River-White Salmon bridge.

The discussion highlighted concerns raised by nearby residents, allowing the project team to better understand the potential opportunities and constraints of the project. Many attendees expressed skepticism about the project, citing potential risks such as increased wildfire hazard, privacy issues, impacts on property values, and safety concerns. However, some residents expressed their support for the project stating that the trail could be a positive addition to the community, given it is designed and implemented thoughtfully with consideration for the concerns raised by nearby residents.

The city acknowledged the need to carefully document and address these concerns as the feasibility study progresses. The next steps include an open house in October to gather broader public input, followed by a second stakeholder meeting in November to review the findings and potential design options.

Next Steps

Community Open House – October 10th, 2024

Stakeholder Meeting #2 – November 14th, 2024