

South Park pathway: worth SPET funds?

With the Highway 22 pathway still unfinished, debate builds over \$3.5M South Park connector.

By Michael Polhamus

Completion of the missing 1.8 miles of pathway that would circumnavigate South Park Loop Road is one of six specific purpose excise tax projects voters must consider next month.

Anticipated to cost up to \$3.5 million, the path would connect two others that currently end at Three Creek Ranch and at Melody Ranch. Though a high priority for pathway advocates, the planned connection has drawn fire from opponents who expressed reservations about its cost estimates and the taxation program itself.

Jackson Hole residents have made clear already that they want a completed pathway network, and they want it soon, Jackson Hole Community Pathways director Brian Schilling said.

“The community has clearly voiced their support for having a completed pathways network, and the trends over the last 10 years have shown that travel habits are changing even in places like Jackson, where there’s challenging weather for much of the year,” he said. “Trips by bicycling or other modes, or on transit, are on the rise nationwide, and trips by single-occupancy vehicles are on the decline.

“To say past travel habits are necessarily the way things are going to continue is not what we’re seeing, and as more and more people choose to ride bikes and walk, it is equally important that we make it so that it’s possible these modes can be done safely.”

Aside from the Highway 22 pathway under construction, Schilling said, completion of South Park Loop Road’s adjacent pathway is the pathway project most urgently desired by the public. It was listed in the top five pathway projects in the county’s 2007 pathways master plan, he said. The cost will be high for such a short length, Schilling said, but cost estimates are accurate. “On a per-mile basis this is going to be an expensive section to build, primarily because of topographical constraints,” he said. “We’re having to build a rather long stretch of retaining wall because of a constriction between the current road location and the adjacent hillside.”

However, Schilling said, the cost was estimated on the high end on purpose.

“I think there’s definitely a contingency built into that number,” he said of the \$3.5 million price tag.

“If construction costs go through the roof, we’ll be in a bad spot,” he said, “but I feel that this is a good number, based on the best information we have available at this time.”

This potential uncertainty chafes Jackson Hole Tea Party Vice President Ed Cheramy.

“I’m not going to object to pathways,” Cheramy said, “I just want to know

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what it's going to cost."

The Highway 22 pathway offers an instructive example of Cheramy's concerns, he said.

In 2008, voters approved a \$6 million SPET initiative "for the purpose of funding the acquisition of land and/ or easements, and for the cost of planning, engineering and construction of a pathway" from Stilson to the Flat Creek Bridge on Highway 89 in Jackson, according to the language on the ballot.

Voters expected that \$6 million to cover the entire project, Cheramy said.

Voters again approved a SPET initiative for the same pathway, at a cost of \$4.3 million, for the same purpose as the last, according to the 2012 ballot language. Voters thought that would then cover the project, Cheramy said.

Although Schilling paid for one-third of the cost with federal grants, the completed project is now anticipated to cost more than \$15 million, Cheramy said.

"The estimation process for these pathways has been abysmal," he said.

County staff should have a detailed, completed set of drawings and plans for future such projects, and spend enough time and work preparing these that estimates are more firm, Cheramy said.

Cheramy also opposed using SPET money to pay for the pathway.

Rather than sending the question to voters, elected officials ought to use their knowledge and judgment to decide what projects warrant funding. That's what they're elected for, Cheramy said.

Voters should take a time-out from SPET initiatives this year, Cheramy said, and not sign up for any more pathways connections until those currently under contract are complete. That isn't good planning, Schilling said, and even if it were, the pathways network as a whole couldn't be designed and built at once, he said.

“In an ideal situation I’d like to have a completed set of construction documents so we could get as accurate a number as possible,” he said, “but in looking at the slate of projects before us for completing the whole pathway system it’s good practice to have projects in different phases at once.

“We want to have other projects in the pipeline as well. It would be poor planning if we didn’t get started on development for the next project until we’re totally finished with the current project.”

Schilling agreed with Cheramy that many believed the \$6 million 2008 SPET would cover the entire cost of a path from Wilson to downtown Jackson.

“Ed’s right, that there’s a perception that when voters approved in ’08 \$6 million for a pathway — for many there was a perception that was it, and the project was signed, sealed and delivered,” Schilling said.

“The truth is, and any public official involved had a clear recognition even at that time that \$6 million was not enough to do the entire project as it was designed,” he said. “The \$6 million project was seed money to get it off the ground, to develop the design, to develop a cost estimate and to get the project rolling so it could be completed.”

The Highway 22 pathway bridge is expected to be complete by mid-September, Schilling said, and the completed pathway from Jackson to Stilson should be in place by late fall or early spring.

Voters can weigh in on the question of funding South Park Loop Road’s 1.8mile pathway connection in the primary election Aug. 19.