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**MAJOR GAPS IN THE OREGON COAST TRAIL**

There are around 33 gaps in the OCT, totaling an estimated 40 to 50 miles that would be connected by hiking on the side of Highway 101.

Here are some of the largest gaps:

- 1) Barview Jetty to Garibaldi Marina, Tillamook County, 2 miles
- 2) Bob Straub State Park to Winema Road, Tillamook County, 6 miles
- 3) Neskowin Beach to Roads End, Tillamook and Lincoln counties, 7 miles
- 4) Schooner Creek to Gleneden Beach, Lincoln County, 3.5 miles
- 5) Cummins Creek to Muriel Ponsler Memorial State Scenic Viewpoint, Lane County, 6.5 miles
- 6) Heceta Head to Baker Beach, Lane County, 4 miles
- 7) Empire Docks to Charleston, Coos County, 5 miles
- 8) Cape Arago to Seven Devils Wayside, Coos County, 7 miles
- 9) Humbug Mountain to Ophir Wayside, Curry County, 11 miles
- 10) Pistol River to Arch Rock, Curry County, 5.5 miles

# CONNECTING THE TRAIL

*Oregon coastline's 367-mile attraction an 'unfinished gem'*

ZACH URNESS STATESMAN JOURNAL

Few pathways conjure up more conflicting emotions than the Oregon Coast Trail.

One moment you're hiking to the top of a rocky headland and looking upon a vast sweep of ocean. The next you're risking life and limb on the shoulder of Highway 101 as cars and trucks scream past a few feet away.

The 367-mile trail, which stretches from the California state line to Astoria, brings hikers to Oregon's most beautiful coastal viewpoints and cliff-walled beaches. But it also forces them onto one of the state's busiest highways, sometimes for miles at a time.

"It's an incredibly beautiful trail — the only one of its kind in the nation," said Connie Soper, an author and expert on hiking the Oregon Coast Trail. "Unfortunately, it's unfinished. Having to walk on the highway is dangerous, unpleasant for hikers and drivers, and really stops the trail from reaching its potential."

Now a collection of hikers and lawmakers is hoping to change that. Legislation intended to help complete the pathway will have its first hearing Tuesday morning at the Capitol.

An advocacy group, Friends of the Oregon Coast Trail, has been formed by Soper and Salem resident Dan Hilburn to spearhead the project.

They say making it possible to hike the OCT end-to-end — without long stretches on the highway — could make the trail a world-famous destination, providing a "village-to-village" experience unmatched in the United States.



PHOTOS BY ZACH URNESS/STATSMAN JOURNAL  
 Connie Soper and Dan Hilburn are advocates for connecting the Oregon Coast Trail.



To follow the entire Oregon Coast Trail, hikers must sometimes walk along the shoulder of Highway 101.



Hikers on a more natural stretch of the Oregon Coast Trail.

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PHOTOS BY ZACH URNESS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Dan Hilburn, from left, Connie Soper and Lucy Hilburn are advocates for connecting the Oregon Coast Trail. There are 33 gaps in the trail that total approximately 50 miles.

## Trail

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"It has the potential to allow people to hike the entire length of the coast without carrying a tent or stove," Hilburn said. "It's set up to let people hike from town-to-town, staying at hotels and eating at restaurants. That's very popular in Europe, and it could be huge for Oregon's coastal economy."

The first step has already been taken. A 2011 report by the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department identifies 33 "critical gaps" in the trail totaling around 50 miles. The report even sets a date — 2021 — as a goal for connecting the entire route.

House Bill 3149 is an attempt to keep OPRD focused on that goal. The bill, sponsored by Rep. David Brock Smith (R-Port Orford), and with 10 sponsors, requires OPRD to create a development plan that would get the project as close to shovel-ready as possible.

OPRD officials said they've made some progress on closing the gaps. But finishing the trail by 2021 — given complexities with private land, river crossings and other issues — will be a tall order. It would also require shifting resources away from other projects, such as repairing state park facilities.

"With or without legislation, it's an ambitious goal," said David Stipe, OPRD planning and design manager. "That said, I love a challenge. If our state legislature and the governor say this needs to be a priority, we'll get to work."

### History of the OCT

Two moments in Oregon's history made the Oregon Coast Trail possible.

The first is well known. In 1913, Gov. Oswald West designated the ocean shoreline for the public. That concept was upheld and expanded with the 1967 Beach Bill that ensured every Oregonian would have access to the state's sandy shores.

The idea for a trail stretching from the Columbia River to the California border came from Dr. Samuel N. Dicken, who hiked the coast and wrote about it in his book "Old Oregon," published in 1959.

"A traveler along Highway 101 has many opportunities to see spectacular scenery in turnouts and from the highway," he wrote. "But in many sections ... the best scenery is lost to a person who stays on the road. A trail will be neces-



Connecting segments of the Oregon Coast Trail can often mean just creating a trail on the side of the highway.

sary."

Dicken's idea took root and in 1971 construction began. By 1988, the trail was deemed "hikeable."

Yet the trail never quite became a household name in Oregon. The trail is unsigned and confusing in many places, and the inherent danger of hiking along Highway 101 turns many people off, Soper said.

In one particularly scary area, between Heceta Head and Baker Beach, hikers must travel through a highway tunnel with no sidewalk or guardrail.

"I refused to do it," said Soper, who hiked the entire OCT for her book "Exploring the Oregon Coast Trail."

"But someone in my party tried it with us following him slowly in a car with our lights flashing so he wouldn't get killed."

While the OCT has remained mired in obscurity, the Pacific Crest Trail, which runs in one unbroken line through Oregon's mountains, has ascended to superstar status. It was recently featured in the movie "Wild" and hosts armies of hikers every year.

The OCT, meanwhile, isn't even well known in its own state.

"I've lived in Oregon for 25 years and consider myself an avid hiker," Hilburn said.

"But until last spring, I hadn't even heard of the Oregon Coast Trail. The reason many people haven't heard about it is that it was never finished."

### Village-to-village hiking

For an example of what's possible on the Oregon Coast, Hilburn pointed to the Camino de Santiago Trail in Spain.

The 495-mile trail follows a historical pilgrimage route through countless small villages. It's hiked by upward of 278,000 people each year, most of whom stay in hotels and hostels and eat at restaurants along the way.

"It was such a fun experience," said Hilburn, who hiked the Camino in fall of 2016. "It's full of people from around the world, happy to shell out money for a mattress and roof every night."

Other village-to-village routes include the Queen Charlotte Track in New Zealand, Coast to Coast Path in England, and 88 Temples Trail in Japan.

Done right, supporters think the OCT, which cuts through numerous small towns on the coast, could become the United States' first village-to-village trek.

"There are the beaches, capes and forest that are all wonderful," said Soper. "But one of the highlights is that the trail passes through small towns. People get the chance to visit these coastal communities on foot and really get to know them. A connected trail would really give them the chance to shine."

Two good examples, Soper said, include Depoe Bay and Yachats.

"I particularly love coming into Ya-

chats from the beach, up the historic 804 Trail alongside a dramatic bluff and through town," she said.

The idea of long-distance hikers arriving on the Oregon Coast and spending money appeals to Oregon's lawmakers.

Smith, the bill's chief sponsor, said as a former restaurant owner in Port Orford, he saw a major benefit from bicyclists who rode the length of Highway 101 and stopped to eat along the way. There would be even more customers for local businesses with a completed OCT.

"Anytime we can drive eco-tourism to rural Oregon, let's do it," Smith said. "There no downside to this for the coast and its communities."

### An ambitious goal

Soper and Hilburn aren't asking for 50 miles of entirely new trail.

There are places where the OCT could connect to trails on federal lands, at Cape Perpetua, for example. And they'd be fine with trails built alongside Highway 101.

They just want some movement, which is why the legislation simply asks for the study.

OPRD is open to the idea. Parks director Lisa Sumption even called it a priority.

But the big problem — what kept OPRD from completing the trail in the first place — is that the Oregon Coast is filled with private land and development. In addition, there are wide river crossings, multiple land management agencies and little extra money available, officials said.

"Simply put, the easy work has been completed, and we'll continue working on it," OPRD spokesman Chris Havel said. "But we have to think about what we're willing to sacrifice to get something like this done. As uncomfortable as it can be, our highest priority is taking care of existing park property."

The legislation doesn't force OPRD to connect the trail — it only asks them to study the issue and report back.

Soper and Hilburn think that the time has come to complete the dream of a fully connected Oregon Coast Trail.

"It would be a win for everybody in the state," he said. "It's time for them to get this done."

Zach Urness has been an outdoors writer, photographer and videographer in Oregon for eight years. He is the author of the book "Hiking Southern Oregon" and can be reached at [zurness@StatesmanJournal.com](mailto:zurness@StatesmanJournal.com) or (503) 399-6801.

STATESMAN JOURNAL

# Opinion

## Editorial

# Make the coast trail whole

Just do it.

We're invoking the Nike slogan, sans swoosh, because that's how we want the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department to handle the Oregon Coast Trail.

Finish it already.

The OPRD tells us the easy work already has been completed on the 367-mile trail that hugs the oceanfront from Astoria to the California state line along Highway 101.

The trail offers unparalleled scenic vistas. The problem: 33 gaps in the trail that force hikers to scramble from a foot path onto the highway and then try to avoid being hit by fast-moving and unforgiving traffic. The gaps account for between 40 and 50 miles, and can keep hikers off the path for miles at a time.

The OPRD says filling these gaps would require federal approval, significant alter-

ations to Highway 101, and securing private property (read using eminent domain or the taking of private property for public use). In ordinary speak, this means it will cost more money.

But this is an agency that gets 47 percent of its revenue from the Oregon Lottery, another 47 percent from visitor and recreational-vehicle fees and 6 percent from federal grants. It is the same department that from 2004 to 2013 added nine new park properties to its 256-member state park property rolls.

It's time to refocus on existing properties. Bridging the gaps in the Oregon Coast Trail will make it a gem on the West Coast. It has the potential to become a destination for hikers and day tourists alike.

Imagine the possibilities if folks could walk from end to end without highway traffic. Village-to-village hiking is popular

in Europe, and the towns have become worldwide destinations. Think Cinque Terre in Italy or between fishing villages along the Mediterranean Sea in Spain. Having a complete trail would definitely put the Oregon Coast on the map and in many guidebooks.

In other words, the Oregon Coast Trail has the potential to become world famous.

Advocates of a completed trail envision hikers walking between towns and staying overnight in hotels, motels and campgrounds along the way. These walkers would likely eat in different towns and boost the economies of local coastal communities. Visitors would walk, shop and buy ice cream. OK, maybe that's wishful thinking, but not many hikers would need persuading if they were ambling along the trail and came across the Tillamook Ice Creamery.

## To learn more

The House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources will hold a public hearing on the bill on March 21 in Hearing Room D. The meeting starts at 8 a.m., but almost a half dozen other bills will also get time at the hearing.

House Bill 3149, which would require developing a plan for the trail, will get a hearing Tuesday. With 10 House and Senate members from both parties supporting it, it's hoped the Legislature can get behind this economic stimulus plan for the coast.

But we need more than a plan. We need a commitment from the state and a deadline for making this happen. Its time is long overdue.