

### SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

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## Safety a driving concern along Burke-Gilman Trail's 'missing link'

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P-I REPORTER

The Burke-Gilman Trail, a 14-mile ribbon from the northern tip of Lake Washington south and west to Ballard, attracts national buzz and 2,000 cyclists each weekday as a scenic, nearly seamless and relatively safe bicycle and pedestrian corridor.

Except where it dumps cyclists into a tangle of decaying roads, tricky railroad crossings, bridge columns and heavy freight traffic in industrial southern Ballard.

The famous trail infamously vanishes east of the Ballard Bridge near the corner of 11th Avenue Northwest and Northwest 45th Street. There begins what cyclists and other trail users call the "missing link": a 1.5-mile trailless zone stretching to the Ballard Locks.

"You kind of duke it out on deteriorating roads that were made 50 years ago and are used by an awful lot of trucks ... roads without shoulders, without sidewalks, without proper drainage. They haven't been well maintained," said cyclist David Hiller. "It's not a great setup for anybody down there."

**WILL SEATTLE FILL THE BIKE GAP?**

At issue is a 1.5-mile gap in south Ballard on the Burke-Gilman Trail. Four years ago, the Seattle City Council approved a route for filling that gap. Last year, the city got a federal grant and money from the Bridging the Gap levy to design a fix. On Thursday, the city will present basic details of the plan.

Source: Seattle Department of Transportation

SEATTLE P-I

After years of political debate, resistance from some businesses and lack of funding, Seattle transportation officials are a step closer to closing that gap. They have basic designs in hand, and plan to present them to the public Thursday. They have some of the estimated \$11 million they need to build the expansion, thanks to a voter-approved levy.

But they also have some major hurdles left to overcome.

"We are at the beginning of the end," said Hiller, advocacy director for the Cascade Bicycle Club. "We've just sort of outlined the closing chapter to complete the trail and as soon as 2010 we could be done."

Still, the trail won't be completed without millions of additional dollars from taxpayers. Even with transportation officials about to unveil their designs, the City Council on Friday put the brakes on an unusual budget proposal that might have boosted funding considerably.

The entire project is estimated to cost \$11 million. So far, the city has about \$3 million.

The Cascade Bicycle Club helped City Councilwoman Jan Drago draft a budget amendment proposal that might have contributed millions more from real estate taxes. The measure would have committed to the trail whatever money the city collects in such taxes beyond what has been projected, if any. The council rejected the idea. Drago did not return calls seeking comment.

Even with more money, the trail expansion effort likely faces continued resistance from longtime Ballard industrial businesses that fear it is designed for tragedy.

For more than a decade, fans of the trail have been calling on the city to close the gap and extend the trail. West of the "missing link," city crews are already stretching the trail from the locks to Golden Gardens.

But the "missing link" problem has proved more vexing. Some businesses in the area worry that the trail will block access to their land and create hazards -- and warn of broad economic consequences.

Warren Aakervik, owner of Ballard Oil Co. near the trail, said cyclists and dozens of large industrial trucks are incompatible.

"Are they going to build a safe trail? I don't think they can. I don't think there's any possible way that it can happen," said Aakervik, who has eight employees and 10 trucks that regularly cross the trail.

"You can't put people in conflict with each other knowingly," he said. "And you have an equal responsibility to protect the industrial sector of your city as you do the private enjoyment of your individuals."

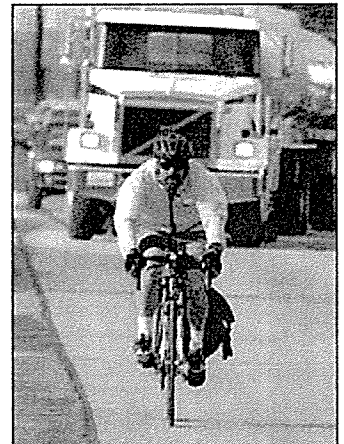
Only four companies in Washington provide the sort of marine fuel that Ballard Oil sells, Aakervik said. Two of them, including Ballard Oil, are near the trail. When the inevitable truck-bike collision happens, that company will lose its insurance, he said.

"This will actually put us out of business," Aakervik said. And if the fuel companies in Ballard fail, so does the maritime industry in Seattle, he said.

Paul Nerdrum, an owner of Salmon Bay Sand and Gravel on Shilshole Avenue Northwest, with 85 employees and a fleet of 42 trucks, added: "There's no way to underscore or minimize the loss of any life and unfortunately when a cyclist and a vehicle tangle, the people that are going to suffer the most injuries are the people on the bicycles. And that's a huge concern for anybody in business."

In general, recent reaction to the project from business owners near the Ship Canal has been mixed, said Kirk Jones, who manages the project for the Seattle Department of Transportation.

Hiller believes the plan strikes a good compromise. And with the number of cyclists rapidly growing and housing construction under way in Ballard, he said, closing the link is "more important now than ever."



zoom Gilbert W. Arias / P-I

Cyclist John Higgins navigates through heavy traffic as he rides down Shilshole Avenue in Ballard, part of the "missing link" of the Burke-Gilman Trail. The 1.5-mile gap travels through an industrial area of Ballard.

"We're growing quickly and if we don't provide some safe way to get through what is an area with a lot of different users, we're going to have more conflicts," he said.

And more injuries. Many people who regularly bike the trail know at least one person who has taken a hard spill trying to cross the railroad tracks near the bridge. In fact, several neighborhood businesses told Jones they stock up on first-aid supplies each spring for the inevitable wipeouts. The city plans to reroute the trail so cyclists cross the tracks at a safer angle.

Rob Mathewson's wife once broke her collarbone crossing those tracks, he said.

"I know one of these days I'm not going to be paying attention and they're going to eat me up," said Mathewson, who commutes on the trail from his Ballard home to his sales and marketing job in Interbay.

Completing the trail with clear layout and signs is key, "if (city officials) want to get as many people on bicycles as they say," he said.

Safe bike options are especially important because Seattle has terrible public transit offerings, said Ballard resident Seonaidh Davenport, who rides the trail each day to take her 4-year-old daughter to school in Fremont. (Her daughter rides a trailer bike.)

Davenport's husband also uses the trail to commute to Microsoft, she said.

Davenport thinks a variety of users can safely share the roads with proper precautions. Finding compromise is part of "being part of the community -- which I think is important for businesses," she said, adding that she has known at least one Salmon Bay Sand and Gravel worker who commuted by bike.

As it stands, some bike accidents are hard to avoid. Davenport's friend badly injured her knee in a wreck after heavy traffic forced her to cross the tracks at an awkward angle, she said.

Indeed, hundreds of people have fallen on those tracks in the nearly one decade since a group of trail fans formed Friends of the Burke-Gilman Trail to advocate for extending the route, said Kevin Carrabine, who commutes on the trail and is a co-founder of the group.

Getting the designs now is "extremely exciting," Carrabine said. Still, he's "cautiously pessimistic" the city will complete the trail anytime soon.

"In 2003, they said, 'Let's do it.' In 2007, we're going to get a design. And who knows when money will be available to actually build it.

"The pessimism is knowing and understanding to some extent the depth of opposition within certain businesses in Ballard against even one more foot of trail being constructed in what they consider their territory."

After years of lobbying by trail advocates and cyclists, the City Council in 2003 approved a route for completing the link. After that, the idea was largely shelved because it was not funded in the city budget. It was revived last year, thanks to cash infusions from a federal design grant and the Bridging the Gap levy.

Since then, Seattle transportation officials have completed preliminary design work to sketch out some details for developing a multiuse trail. It will be a combination of a dedicated paved trail and two "interim" detours along existing streets and sidewalks while some of the thornier issues are hashed out.

One of the detours avoids heavy truck traffic along Shilshole Avenue Northwest. Instead, signs will direct cyclists to follow the "trail" along Ballard Avenue Northwest for several blocks.

While this detour is considered temporary, there is no timeline for developing a long-term solution because engineers have yet to come up with a plan for safely integrating bike traffic with truck traffic there.

The other detour diverts users off Shilshole for another four blocks. This interim route is needed because, before the city can build a trail there, it plans to buy from private owners a 12-foot swath of land along the southern edge of their property between the railroad tracks and the property, Jones said.

Officials have begun negotiations with the landowners. In the meantime, cyclists will be directed to travel along a dedicated portion of the wide sidewalk on the south side of Northwest Market Street.

## **SEE FOR YOURSELF**

The Seattle Department of Transportation plans to unveil its design plans for completing the Burke-Gilman Trail's missing link Thursday from 6 to 8:30 p.m. at Whitman Middle School, 9201 15th Ave. N.W. For more information, call 206-615-0862 or visit [seattle.gov/transportation/ballardcorridor.htm](http://seattle.gov/transportation/ballardcorridor.htm).

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