

Whittier OKs purchase for Greenway Trail extension

Council approves purchase for Greenway Trail extension
By Peter Fullam, SGVN

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WHITTIER -- The City Council OK'd the purchase of nearly three miles of railroad easement Tuesday for the extension of the popular Greenway Trail with an eye toward eventually establishing a regional system that would include the cities of Brea, La Habra, Pico Rivera and Orange County.

"Tying the trail into La Habra and Brea will eventually give us a safe path to bike or hike all the way to the Santa Ana River Trail," new Whittier Mayor Bob Henderson said in a press statement Wednesday.

"I think the extension is going to be great," said Sam Guyan, secretary of the Whittier Wheelers, a bicycle club. "If we can link with La Habra and Brea, even better. "

However, despite help in negotiating with Union Pacific Railroad Co. from Rep. Grace Napolitano, D-El Monte, the city was only able to secure a 15-foot-wide easement rather than the 25-foot easement that would accommodate separate biking and walking paths, something the city wanted.

"People don't know how one of our congresswomen got involved and basically saved (the talks)," said Councilman Joe Vinatieri regarding the ongoing negotiations with Union Pacific. Talks began in 2002.

"She was absolutely fantastic," Henderson said of Napolitano's help negotiating with the railroad. "I've dealt with Grace in a lot of things, and she really is a bulldog, but, my goodness, she really brought these people to yield.

"Nobody wins against the railroads, and she brought them to the table, and they actually waived a national policy for us," Henderson said.

Napolitano asked Union Pacific to reconsider its standard liability language. Her request got Union Pacific to return to the table and ultimately the city and Union Pacific agreed on revised liability language, according to Nancy Mendez, assistant city manager. Under the deal, the city will pay \$2.4 million for 2.3 miles of easement north of Lambert Road between Mills and First avenues, Mendez said. The city also has an option to purchase a half-mile easement from First Avenue east to the city limits with La Habra.

The city has five years to purchase the additional half mile of trail.

"We managed to build the Greenway Trail entirely with grant funding, even though it took us years to accumulate," Henderson said. "The council wants to compete for restricted funds that otherwise would build a similar project in another community."

The city attempted to buy a 25-foot easement, but Union Pacific was unwilling to consider any sale wider than 15 feet due to the frontage on Lambert, according to staff and Henderson.

"(It) was not what we wanted, but was all we could talk them into," Henderson said.

However, if the railroad eventually abandons the tracks, the city could try again, according to Mendez.

The purchase will be funded with \$1.8 million from a federal grant and \$600,000 from the local matching portion of \$600,200 from Proposition C funds, according to the staff report.

The Greenway Trail began in 2001 with the purchase of 4.5 miles of abandoned railroad corridor from Union Pacific to develop a bike and pedestrian trail. It opened in 2009.

The trail has been extremely popular and neighboring communities have expressed interest in developing their own off-road bike and pedestrian paths.

The city has applied for grants to fund the purchase of the half-mile option and other trail development.

"Once we have the property available it becomes extremely likely ... funding the rest of it, both for construction and for acquisition" would become available, Henderson said.

The pedestrian-bikeway would connect Los Angeles and Orange counties to the benefit of both regions. "It becomes just this magic thing of tying a very short piece of the property together where then La Habra and Brea can really start working on their extensions, so it becomes regionally . . . a massive project, and we think it's very likely that we get the funding," said Henderson, a member of the Greenway Trail Enhancements and Expansion subcommittee. "But if we don't get it started they're very reluctant to get into this (much) funding," he added.

La Habra has applied for a grant from the Orange County Transportation Authority, which ranks a bikeway strategy as its highest priority for that district, Mendez said.

Brea has purchased and is developing a small abandoned rail spur. "They're very eager to capitalize on this," Mendez said.

"There's also been interest in the past of Pico Rivera wanting to get into play, and that goes in a whole different direction," Henderson said. "But the more this becomes a known regional pathway, the more it's going to attract funding and political effort," Henderson added.

Councilman Fernando Dutra noted the success of a similar project, a 25-mile pathway in Spokane, Wash., that has been used for marathon and bike race events.

"It pulls communities and areas together and has a real strong impact on the entire region - so hopefully we can make it happen," he said.

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