

Happy Trails To You

Community's three-pronged plan aims to get local residents out of their cars

By Christina Fuoco-Karasinski
The News

Within the Apache Junction city offices and the community, there is a movement to improve the Sheep Drive Trail—which borders the city on the east and the north—as well as the equestrian trails, bike routes and sidewalks that, in the future, will be connected to it.

“We don’t have something like this wide and full length continuous trail around a community anywhere else in the Valley,” said David Fern, the City’s Public Works director, said of the ambitious plan for which there is no funding yet.

The Parks and Recreation, Public Works, Economic Development and the Development Services departments, as well as citizens Wayne Standage and Bev Hansen, have had a hand in the project, which as of yet has no proper name. But preliminary maps reveal the project’s goals.

The multi-use Sheep Drive Trail is open to everything, including pedestrians, equestrians and bicyclists, but not motorized vehicles, said Jeff Bell, the Parks and Recreation Department director. The City acquired that property years ago for that purpose under 25-year lease from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

“We’ve been focusing over the years on protecting that to eliminate the trash dumping, the transient camping, those types of things,” Bell said. “It does allow for connectivity to Maricopa County’s Utery Mountain Park. We’re also interested in connecting regionally. Someone can unload at Prospector Park, say on a horseback, and could ride all the way to Silly Mountain. That’s been the longterm focus for 20-plus years, getting all that property.

“Miles and miles of fencing have been installed by our staff and volunteers, in cooperation with State Land Department, to protect some of their adjacent property, too. A more recent push—it’s on the City Council’s work plan for this year and driven by Councilwoman (Robin)



Barker—is an interest in developing trails from inside the community connecting to the perimeter to get folks out of their cars and give them access the businesses in towns, the schools, those types of things.”

There are three nonvehicular areas with which the City is focusing: equestrian trails/routes, sidewalks and bike routes. Public Works has taken the lead on sidewalk and bike route inventory and needs. Bike lanes, as opposed to bike routes, are currently not economically feasible within the developed city.

“A bike lane is actually paved surface adjacent to the roadway traffic with a stripe that separates the two,” Bell said. “Sometimes there’s a bit of a buffer between the road and the bike lane. A bike route is identified simply through signage, letting people in vehicles know this also serves as a bicycle route. It’s done through signage on the road and is intended to provide low traffic volume and safe routes to many local areas of interest like City facilities, community colleges or other popular destinations.

“There was a lot of development in the community before we became a city. The development standards prior to us becoming a city didn’t require sidewalks or bike lanes or bike routes. The challenge we are faced with is retrofitting those into existing roadways. Sometimes the

roadways aren’t wide enough to accommodate those things. Obviously, there’s lots of additional cost when you’re adding additional asphalt to roadways, sidewalks. That’s what’s been the challenge for our existing developed areas of our community. Most of those were developed prior to the standards being established.”

So the logical choice is to go with bike routes, whereas the only cost is creating the signs, which can be done in-house.

“For \$20,000, plus or minus, we can do signage for the entire bike route system,” Fern said. “That’s currently not funded. But if we see a grant opportunity to apply for, or when the economy starts picking up, we’ve got all this planning in place so for the grant applications we can say, ‘Here’s the plan.’ That adds more likelihood of getting the grant. For funding level improvements, we can start allocating more funds to implement installations sooner, either incrementally or in larger segments as funds become available. This is a very good place to start.”

But in Portalis, the new development south of U.S. Highway 60, that will call for bike lanes.

“When you look down south of U.S. (Highway) 60, it’s much easier to work with a blank sheet of paper than it is to retrofit unplanned amenities,” Bell said. “Everything down south is being planned

that way. Those things will be a requirement of development—sidewalks, bike lanes. The bike routes are the easiest way to go back and retrofit something. We can identify by signs that you’re sharing a road.”

That said, there is one bike lane within the city, on Royal Palm Road. “They went in, put in sidewalks with enough right-of-way to incorporate a bike lane,” Bell said. “You have your vehicular lane and a striped bicycle lane. It’s on both sides—northbound and southbound. That’s the only actual bicycle lane in the community.”

As for sidewalks, Public Works has finished the first phase of planning which called for an assessment and inventory of all of the city’s existing sidewalks.

“Quite some time ago, the City Council stated they wanted to make the city more pedestrian-, bicycle- and equestrian-friendly because we’re not like that now,” Fern said. “So you first have to inventory what you have before you can start making informed decisions about when and where and how you propose to start doing those improvements to that system.”

The first priority will be to connect existing sidewalks within a mile radius of all Apache Junction Unified School District’s schools.

“The Apache Junction Unified School District recently passed a rule to save money that if your family lives within a mile from school, your child will have to walk to school versus ride the bus,”

Fern said.

“Starting with that premise, we did one-mile radiuses around the schools and looked at where the sidewalks were presently at. It was time consuming and difficult starting from scratch, but by doing the inventory, we were able to collect priority little segments of sidewalks that are missing that will complete and connect longer continuous sidewalk sections. We’ve done the inventory. We’ve mapped out the system and we’re in the public outreach process. Now we’re much more likely to get funding—if they know you’re really serious about things.

“This (sidewalk project) isn’t funded, but there are all kinds of grants out there like Safe Routes to Schools that we can apply for now with a much better chance of getting them with all our inventory and mapping elements completed to include with those grant proposals.

Fern said his department has identified about \$50,000 in sidewalk work. Once it secures the funding, Public Works will work on the schools project first.

The equestrian trails touch on or go near the 20-some riding stables within the city of Apache Junction.

“We’re focusing on the more of our rural parts of the com-

munity, the north and the east where we have a lot of folks that own horses,” Bell said. “We’re trying to identify some routes again where the street’s big enough. Horses don’t want to walk on the pavement. They want some kind of granite or natural surface. We hope to identify those as equestrian routes through signage so people on the roadway know that they’re sharing those roadways with people on horseback.”

To gauge the community’s response, the City’s Parks Superintendent Nick Blake and Fern met with the Superstition Horseman’s Association (SHA). They said input from SHA was invaluable as was the opinions from and research by Parks and Recreation Commissioner Standage and SHA member Hansen.

“As part of the process, we’ve reached out a little bit to the Superstition Horseman’s Association and got some input from a lot of community people like Wayne Standage, who’s been working on this for probably four years. What we’ve done is basically the inventory data collection phase of the project and started a backbone layout of what we think is a pretty good starting point for continued public input.”

• Next week, we talk to Wayne Standage.

from State Park, A-1

continues to support efforts to protect the Heritage Fund, a primary funding source for enhancing recreational opportunities across the state, from further legislative sweeps.

The City of Apache Junction has initiated discussion with the Arizona State Parks Foundation to explore the formation of a “Friends of Lost Dutchman State Park” group.

The community is advised to send supporting letters and e-mails to Stephen Filipowicz (sfilipowicz@ajcity.net), Economic Development director, City of Apache Junction or Ellen Bilbrey (pio@azstateparks.gov), public information officer, Arizona State Parks.

Also on the City Council’s agenda under New Business is:

- Proposed Resolution No. 10-01 authorizing the submission of an Arizona Department of Environmental Quality Grant Application. The grant is for \$7,500 and will enable the City to conduct Phase I and Phase II Environmental Site Assessment on a 240-acre plot of State Trust Land.

- Presentation and discussion on the expansion of the Central Arizona College campus.

The City Council agenda lists four public hearings:

- Application for an extension of premises for Elks Lodge No. 2349. The lodge is requesting a temporary extension of premises for Lost Dutchman Days on February 25 and 26.
- La Raza Steaks and Ribs is also requesting a temporary

extension of premises permit but for February 20.

- Public hearing for appeal to development fee ordinance. Debbie Johnson is requesting that the required \$9,508 development fee for a proposed manufactured home located in the 500 block of North Acacia be waived by City Council.

- Presentation and consideration of Ordinance No. 1357, adding new subsection (K) to Apache Junction City Code, Vol. I, Chapter 4, Article 4-8, Section 4-8-1. Ordinance No. 1357 will enact (1) a new municipal court-supervised probation fee of \$65 for individuals who are qualified and placed on supervised proba-

tion; (2) a court monitoring fee of \$50; (3) a court verification fee of \$50 for completion of court-ordered education treatment and/or counseling; and (4) a \$15 failure to appear fee for missed appointments with the court compliance officer. These fees are needed to offset the expenses for a court compliance officer which will, in large part, be paid for through a federal grant. The grant pays for the first two years of employment-related expenses, but year three must be provided by the City through the above-noted court fees.

The City will also direct staff on the extension of the .2 percent city sales tax.



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