

Feds need to get priorities straight on Warren Wagon Road

Bicycle lanes on the planned rebuilding of seven miles of Warren Wagon Road along Payette Lake were discarded by planners as if they were incidental luxuries. The exact opposite is true, as bicycle lanes are as important to the project as are the lanes for cars, RVs and pickups heading into the national forest.

The Western Federal Lands Highway Division of the Federal Highway Administration is gearing up for a major rebuilding of the section of Warren Wagon Road starting two miles north of McCall and extending to East Side Drive. The charter for the project speaks for itself: “The road provides access to the Payette National Forest as well as many recreational opportunities on Payette Lake. Recreational vehicles, bicyclists and joggers use it extensively in the summer.”

But for some reason, dedicated lanes were never included in the project’s design to accommodate the bicyclists and joggers mentioned in the charter. We assume that is why the agency is not called the Federal Bicycle Administration, because the agency’s focus is on cars. Bicycle lanes, or at least wider shoulders, were considered after extensive public comment said accommodating them was important to the local economy and quality of life.

Engineers went back and looked at the cost of digging out the cliffs that line the roads west side or filling in road’s east side along the lake and came to the conclusion that their \$11 budget would be busted by bicycle lanes. So they thanked the commenters and went back to the original plan. But the planners are wrong.

Bike lanes on this project would be a logical extension of the current bike paths on Warren Wagon Road that now terminate at the project’s southern end. The McCall area is designated as a Silver-Level Ride Center by the International Mountain Biking Association. Warren Wagon Road provides access to a number of trails that earned this designation.

Mountain biking is a strong component in the recreation economy, providing 6.1 million American jobs, \$646 billion in outdoor recreation spending each year, \$39.9 billion in federal tax revenue, and \$39.7 billion in state/local tax revenue, according to the Outdoor Industry Association. There are six businesses in the McCall area that rely on bicycle sales and rentals and those businesses employ about 50 people, according to local estimates.

The federal planners should take one of two actions. 1. Shorten the length of the project and use the savings to build bike lanes along a shortened route. 2. Delay other projects on the federal project list and divert the saving to the Warren Wagon Road project. The second alternative is obviously the preferred one, because the cost would be less if all seven miles of roadway were rebuilt and bicycle lanes added at the same time.

Providing amenities to recreationists is vital to the future of local employers as the number of people seeking healthy outdoor vacations increases. To pass up the chance to add bicycle lanes to Warren Wagon Road now would be a serious blow to those efforts.

