



Deschutes County Board of Commissioners
1300 NW Wall St., Suite 200, OR 97701-1960
(541) 388-6569 - Fax (541) 385-3202
www.deschutes.org

Alan Unger, Commissioner
alan.unger@deschutes.org

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Kristie Miller, District Ranger
Forest Service
Deschutes National Forest, Sisters Ranger District
PO Box 249
Sisters, OR 97759

Kristie,

In early 2015, I agreed to work with a diverse group of Sisters Country residents that was seeking to gain approval from the Forest Service for a paved multi-use trail linking Black Butte Ranch, BBR to Sisters.

The Forest Service conducted an Environmental Assessment, EA of this trail in 2012 – 2014, which recommended approval, but pulled the decision back pending a clearer demonstration of community need and support. I informed the U.S. Forest Service that I was willing to gauge the interest in the proposed path. I was asked to crystallize and demonstrate community support. With my outreach efforts, I referred to the “preferred alternative” (Alternative 3) from the last EA as my starting point for discussion - that being a paved path built to Forest Service standards starting at the Welcome Center of Black Butte Ranch, following Highway 20 past the community of Tollgate, and ending at the city of Sisters, near Ray’s food market.

Suspecting that some in the community would continue to voice concerns/objections, I brought in “Oregon Solutions” to professionally improve mutual understanding, so that advocates and objectors could identify common ground to build from. Despite the best of intentions, this effort failed. Specifically, the lead objectors asked that I communicate their 21 page objection letter to the U.S. Forest Service EA, as that stated their position.

I moved forward to seek comments for and against the trail to determine the level of support within Sisters Country. As of September 30th, more than 1200 entities have stated an opinion about the trail via emails and letters to me, with letters to the editor of The Nugget, and by signing paper and electronic petitions. The majority of comments (93%) are in support of the proposed trail.

I did appreciate receiving letters and emails from many individuals, and thank everyone who took the time to reach out to me. My records indicate that of the 1200 entities that voiced an opinion about the trail, 256 people and organizations stated their support via email/letter to me.

I received emails/letters from 86 people in opposition to the proposed path. The positive letters stand out by the strength of their content and the civility of their discourse.

Members of communities adjacent to the proposed path, those with homes and property in Black Butte Ranch and Tollgate, clearly made the greatest effort to contact me to state an opinion. The majority of correspondence that I received, pro and con, came from members of Black Butte Ranch. Of the 256 emails/letters of support that I received, 164 (64%) of those were affiliated with the Ranch. Of the 86 individuals expressing written concern with the trail, 57 (66%) were property owners at Black Butte Ranch. Some at BBR said that the Ranch is a private community and expressed concerns with safety, security, and trail maintenance. These same concerns were brought up in Sunriver over the connection of Sunriver to the Lava Lands - Deschutes River paved path. The president of the Sunriver Homeowners Association recently wrote me stating that there have been no problems with the linked trails to date, and about 300 people a day from Sunriver use the Lava Lands paved path.

In July, the Black Butte Ranch Homeowners Association Board sent me a letter stating that “The Black Butte Ranch Board of Directors met on July 24, 2015 and voted unanimously to maintain their support for a potential paved path and to encourage the USFS to include funds for a new Environmental Assessment in their FY 16/17 budget.” The Board acknowledged that two surveys done of BBR property owners, in 2013 and 2014, showed majority support for the proposed path, with a final tally of 61% of respondents supporting a path linking the Ranch with Sisters. The BBR Board and management staff recently assured their members that they would continue to improve Ranch privacy and security enforcement efforts. The Board believes that people staying at Black Butte Ranch would use and enjoy the path.

While the Tollgate Homeowners Association did not contact me, the results of a 2013 survey done of their residents (67% of respondents supported the paved path) and a letter of support from the HOA Board to the U.S. Forest Service were not refuted. Tollgate residents who contacted me expressed these main thoughts: Opponents - a path close to Tollgate properties would invite unwanted people onto their property and make residents feel unsafe. The path crossing the Tollgate entrance road would have safety issues. Paving over the forest would be a waste of taxpayer money, a desecration of public land, a detriment to wildlife, and parts of the trail could not be made ADA compliant. They believed that there would be insufficient parking at trailheads and that a paved trail would be impossible to maintain. If there was going to be a path, some wanted it on the other side of Hwy 20. Supporters - a paved path would provide a more stable surface and much safer connection to Sisters and the forest, especially for those with mobility challenges. They would use it as an environmentally friendly alternative to driving a car and did not feel threatened by users of the path.

I met with members of the Sisters Kiwanis and Rotary service organizations to provide information and answer questions about the proposed path. I also spoke with concerned citizens via telephone and invited them to meet with me in my office. I did my best to hear both sides of the trail issue.

I have been extremely impressed with the widespread support for the proposed multi-use path. Many diverse organizations contacted me to encourage me to request a new Environmental Assessment for a trail:

The City of Sisters polled all businesses as part of their 2015 annual license renewal and 68% of respondents supported the trail. In a letter to me from the City of Sisters a statement was made, "The Sisters City Council supports your plan to work with the U.S. Forest Service to conduct a thorough and robust public process so that we end up with the best trail possible for our community."

The Sisters Chamber of Commerce, many business owners and the local economic development program endorsed a paved multi-use path. Letters of support were also provided by Central Oregon Visitors Association, Deschutes County Bike/Ped Committee, Commute Options, Oregon Adaptive Sports, Sisters Trail Alliance, National Forest Foundation, Sierra Club Juniper Group, Oregon Wild and The Environmental Center. I understand that Sisters Park & Recreation District Board voted during a recent meeting to provide a supportive letter. These groups emphasize a paved trail's benefit to the environment, the economy, and the health of residents and visitors to Sisters Country.

As information about the proposed multi-use trail was offered to Sisters Country over the past 9 months, the views of many of the trail objectors began to change. Fifty percent of trail objectors let me know that they would support a path if it was on the North side of Highway 20. What this change in stance indicates to me is that people are beginning to realize that there is value in a community trail.

In conclusion, I believe a strong majority of Sisters Country residents and businesses want you to start a new Environmental Assessment of a paved path connecting Black Butte Ranch through the public forest to the City of Sisters. The public is awake, aware and paying attention. They are ready to work with you right now to make a paved path happen in a timely manner. I am ready to work with you now and into the future if you choose to move forward. I have compiled many comments and have assured people that I will submit their opinions to the U.S. Forest Service. I will make myself available for discussion as you decide what actions you want to take on this matter.

Sincerely,



Alan Unger, Commissioner
Deschutes County