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Bicycles or wildlife?

Biologists worry about widening the Burke-Gilman trail

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P-I REPORTER

LAKE FOREST PARK -- For years, the clash over widening the Burke-Gilman Trail through this town that abuts northeast Seattle has seemed mostly a matter of trailside neighbors duking it out with bicyclists, with much of the back-and-forth over who should have to stop for whom where the trail crosses driveways.

Now, with a crucial hearing on the proposal expected early next year, two wildlife biologists are trying to draw attention to environmental questions they say have gotten short shrift.

They're asking: What about paving over wetlands that shelter salamanders and frogs, whose population is shrinking worldwide? What about the dozens of big trees to be removed, which shade the wetlands and provide a welcoming roost for birds?

Although Brad Hanson and Melanie Paquin have tried to bring up these issues, "The wildlife has gotten a sort of 'duly noted' response," Hanson said. "It hasn't gotten much consideration."

In fact, the final environmental impact statement for the project includes five mentions of amphibians, the class of animals that includes salamanders and frogs. Three of those five mentions are contained in materials Hanson and Paquin submitted after the draft report didn't mention amphibians at all.

In the home the two biologists share by Lake Washington sit piles of books, including "Evolutionary Genetics of Fishes," "Atlas of the Snakes of the World," "Conservation Biology" and one that's proved useful lately, "Compensating for Wetland Losses Under the Clean Water Act."

"The presence of amphibians is the gold standard of a functioning wetland," said Paquin, who earned a master's degree in biology studying herpetology, the science of amphibians and reptiles. In her home she keeps a pet tiger salamander, a common species, named Chubby.

Proponents say the 2-mile widening project will be an environmental plus. For one thing, it helps the legions of bicyclists who use the trail, which the Cascade Bicycle Club says keeps 9,000 pounds of Earth-warming carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere on an average day -- CO₂ that would have come out of tailpipes of cars if the bikers had driven instead.

David Hiller, advocacy director for the bicycle club, says the concerns about wildlife are being raised way too late in the process, after the major environmental study has been finished. In mid-

January, a city-hired administrative judge is expected to hold a hearing where everyone concerned can hold forth. The date is expected to be announced next week.

"This is another red herring," Hiller said. "When people attempt to use an issue that's a serious issue, such as wetlands and critical habitat, to do something that doesn't serve the environment, that deserves to be called out."

Hiller points to a report by an arborist that says five of the 10 species of trees most commonly found by the trail aren't native.

The trail is being expanded by King County, which counts the Burke-Gilman as part of its parks system. The trail is 8 to 10 feet wide in Lake Forest Park, the same as when it was built in the 1970s on an old railroad bed. Under modern standards, it would be expanded to a width of 12 feet, with additional shoulder space of 4 feet. That would help bicyclists avoid collisions with others using the trail, including some who are pushing baby strollers or using wheelchairs, the county says.

The redevelopment is needed to modernize the trail and make it safer, said Kevin Brown, director of the King County Parks and Recreation Department.

The county would remove non-native plants, including some that can be aggressive and overrun the ecosystem, such as English ivy. The county would also place large logs in areas alongside the trail to benefit animals in the area.

In exchange, the county says it plans to remove 60 large trees -- a figure Hanson disputes as too low after recently getting copies of detailed plans. And the county would fill or clear about a half-acre of wetlands, much of it shallow marshy ditches beside the trail.

"A lot of these trees are ornamental and should not have been planted there," Brown said. "Cottonwood and poplars drop limbs pretty easily in windstorms."

In addition, he said, shallow roots burp up under the pavement, causing ripples in the surface. The widening will help improve bicyclists' ability to see what's ahead, too.

"The biggest reason for the project itself is the safety," Brown said.

Hanson and Paquin remain unconvinced. Instead of widening the trail into wetlands, they ask, why not post signs that say something like "Trail Narrows. Use Caution"? They note that the trail will remain its current width immediately to the south, where it enters the city of Seattle.

Despite her background in wildlife, Paquin didn't even know about the salamanders until about five years ago when she encountered a boy using a net to collect something alongside the trail.

"Hey, what are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm collecting salamander larvae," he answered, identifying them as long-toed salamanders.

It was for a science project. She asked the young man how he knew the little tadpolelike creatures were the long-toed species.

"I grew one up," the student replied.

Later, when she and Hanson were planting native plants such as salal and salmonberry along the trail, she saw adult salamanders. Earlier this year, she found dozens of salamander larvae alongside the trail.

"It's a seemingly unremarkable wetland," Paquin said as she walked the trail in the rain recently, "but there are amphibians living in there. ... No one is looking out for these critters. You could ride the trail for years and never know there were salamanders there."

In front of Hanson and Paquin's home, with Lake Washington out the back door and the trail out front, four Douglas firs are to be toppled. King County will replant a tree for every one removed, but it will be decades before they offer the shade and roosting spots the current big trees do.

Among the wildlife spotted along the trail by the biologist couple: the pileated woodpecker, Cooper's hawk, barn owl, bats, mountain beaver and the native band-tailed pigeon. Plus, of course, long-toed salamanders and Pacific tree frogs.

Hanson and Paquin are pretty sure that taking down the tall trees that shade the trail will dry out the wetlands and change the leafy, cool character of the area.

Paquin, who bikes the trail herself regularly, wonders how many of her fellow bicyclists would support expanding the trail if they could see how it would look afterward, and if they knew about the impacts on wild animals that have somehow kept a toehold on life in the city.

A recent visit to the trail demonstrates the reason the county wants to widen it: Two women walking a golden retriever stood shoulder to shoulder in the middle of the path. A cyclist approached fast from the rear. He whistled, but they were oblivious.

The cyclist slowed, banked left, passed the unobservant duo and shot on.

"We're not saying the trail should not be redeveloped," Hanson said. "We're just saying there are some special spots that should be given some extra consideration."

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