

My Generation

Community Champions

by Margaret Stewart
Communications Director
Community Foundation of Western Nevada



In my position at the Community Foundation of Western Nevada I am fortunate to meet people who are passionate about our neighborhoods, surroundings and people in northern and western Nevada. Janet Phillips is a connector, a champion, an extraordinary person who devotes her life to a project that would intimidate most of us.

Janet Phillips was crushed as she left the meeting with the Union Pacific Railroad where she was told that the Tahoe Pyramid Bikeway would never, ever, receive permission to build a trail on railroad property. She describes it as her "worst day". Did it give her pause? Yes, of course. Did it sway her from her vision of building a 116 mile trail along the Truckee River from Tahoe to Pyramid Lake? Not at all.



Photo: Margaret Stewart

Phillips moved to Reno in 1980 to work on the water resources of the Truckee River. One of her positions was Ditch Rider. She walked and rode up and down the river adjusting the water flow. She grew to love the river during her career and felt it was a shame that most of the area's residents' appreciation was limited to what they could see traveling alongside at 65 mph.

In the thirty-four years since Phillips began working along the river, the people of Reno and Sparks are drawn closer to the Truckee. Downtown water parks are flourishing calling more of us to its shores. We can thank Janet for many miles of the paths along the river banks that invite people of all ages to stroll, walk their dogs, skate, and bicycle.

It is a misconception to think that the trails and parks were created completely through public funds and governmental agencies. From Yosemite National Park to Rancho San Rafael regional park in Reno it took a champion, a plan, philanthropy, and long-term commitment to create a public space as grand as the envisioned Tahoe Pyramid Bikeway. In 1979 Alex Fittinghoff, Community Development Director with the City of Sparks, envisioned the Sparks river path from Cottownwood Park to Vista Blvd. He was the person responsible for first publicly posing the idea of the Tahoe-to- Pyramid path 35 years ago.

Phillips retired from Sierra Pacific Power and spent a year investigating the route and feasibility of her dream trail. She went public with her concept in November 2003 at a meeting at Bartley Ranch Park. The trail was enthusiastically welcomed and one supporter handed her a check written on the spot for \$30,000 to start the project. In 2006 the Tahoe Pyramid Bikeway became an all-volunteer nonprofit organization led by Janet as CEO, wheel barrow pusher, spokeswoman, and champion.

Janet toured the area speaking on the possibilities of the trail, sharing her vision that one day the trail would lure bicyclists from around the world to ride it. During this time Janet became passionate about bicycling herself. Now she is seen riding daily to her appointments, speaking engagements, and on her errands. And she rides with bicycle groups on the weekends.

When asked if she ever doubted herself or the feasibility of the project, she answered that at first it looked easy. Not knowing what she was in for, she fully expected it would be completed in 5 years. Now 10 years after the initial public meeting, 65 miles of trail are completed with the most difficult still ahead.



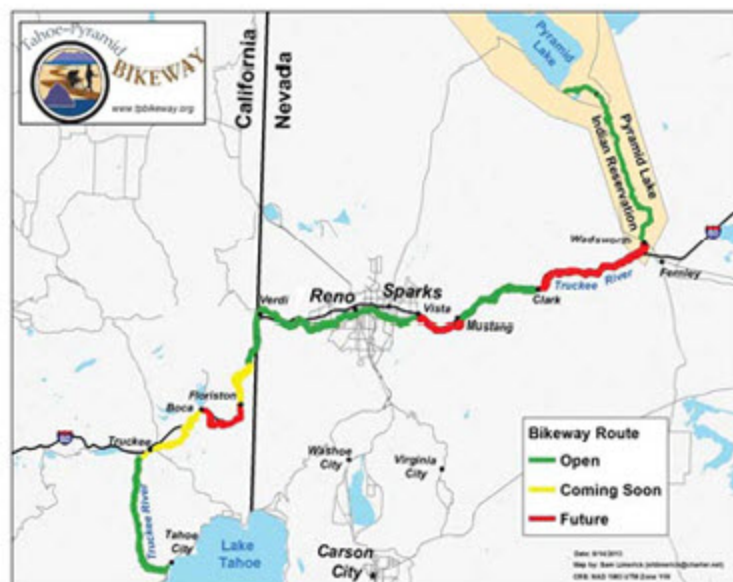
Photo: Jeff Ross

The first completed section was opened in May 2005. It provides an off-freeway bicycling route between Reno and Verdi, a popular road ride. The biggest challenge to completing the full 116 miles of trail is the rocky, steep terrain in California near Floriston. After testing shovel-and-pick work by volunteers for parts of the early trail building, the Bikeway has decided to primarily continue with professional construction firms. The future trail from Boca to the Nevada state line will be scenic but expensive – up to \$2 million.

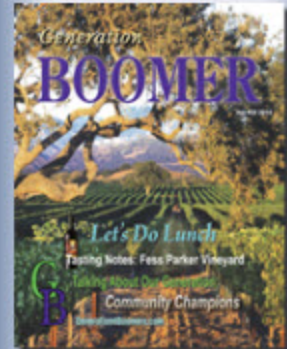
The fact that the toughest hand building days are over relieves volunteer trail builders who haven't put away their picks and wheel barrows just yet. The majority of volunteers, many from architectural and engineering careers are retired.

"You can't play golf or even ride your bike all day. It is important to do something meaningful with your life. I live by the quote from John F. Kennedy, 'The ancient Greek definition of happiness was the full use of your powers along lines of excellence.' I have no children – the trail is my Legacy."

Janet's eyes shine when asked about her best day. She answered easily and directly "the day we cut the ribbon on the Fleisch Bridge portion of the trail." As Janet is in trailchampioning role for the long haul, many more best days are ahead of her.



If you want to learn more or help: Tahoe Pyramid Bikeway: 775-825-9868 www.tpbikeway.org or tahoepyramidbike@aol.com



[Senior Spectrum Newspaper Current Edition](#)