THE TAHOE-PYRAMID TRAIL

Workers from California State Parks and the Truckee Donner Recreation and Park District check out a new section near Farad Tahoe Pyramid Trail

The Tahoe-Pyramid Bikeway was conceived by Janet Phillips at a propitious time when preservationists were working to improve recreation along the Truckee while recreation enthusiasts nationwide - in an era that began roughly in the 1980s - were creating what might be called semi-long trails in scenic areas. While these paths would forever be dwarfed by existing mammoth trails such as the Pacific Crest stretching some 3,000 mountain miles from Mexico to Canada, they would be longer than the more traditional trails of two to ten miles or so. Notable in the northwestern Nevada region was the 165-mile Tahoe Rim Trail, completed in 2001 after nearly twenty years of effort. The bikeway (as it was called until 2018) when finished would parallel the river corridor from Lake Tahoe to Pyramid Lake at an estimated cost of five to ten million dollars. It is a shining example of what can be accomplished with a long-term goal that is followed consistently and patiently under dedicated and resourceful leadership. Here is the chronology:

Phillips knew the Truckee River well. From 1982 to 1985 she had been deputy federal water master; beginning in 1989 she handled water issues for Sierra Pacific Power Company, retiring in 2001 as director of water policy and planning. Although a self-described casual bike rider, she soon began to study the possibility of a bikeway. At that time there existed only limited access, principally along paved pedestrian/bike paths from Tahoe City to Truckee, and from Mill Street in Reno to Vista in Sparks. When Phillips announced her concept in 2003, the idea quickly generated enthusiasm; and by the end of the year she had accumulated $30,000 in donations and two hundred supporters. Begun under the auspices of the Nevada Land Conservancy, the effort soon developed its own nonprofit organization.

As conceived by Phillips (now president) the bikeway would use certain existing routes, including specifically marked streets such as Reno’s Mayberry Drive. It would cross public land where possible to create additional segments and acquire permanent
easements across private property where necessary. It was hoped that private-property easements would be facilitated by the availability of tax deductions and by California and Nevada laws protecting owners from liability. The urban portions would be paved; the rural sections would be dirt or pavement and sometimes more difficult to traverse than the smooth-riding urban ones. Some sections would reveal spectacular scenery.

The initial project, opened in May of 2005, provided a mile-long paved path between Verdi and Mogul and was much praised by bicyclists, enabling them - at last - to ride between Verdi and Reno without risking the I-80 freeway. Also that year Sierra Pacific finished installing new planks and side fencing on its bridge near Mogul and made it available. Later in 2005, with the support of the Pyramid Lake Tribal Council, volunteers opened the northernmost section across the reservation, and by late 2008 a full 25 miles had been completed, suitable for hikers and fat-tired bikes, stretching from the lake to Wadsworth. This section contained some of the trail's most scenic sections, as described thusly on the organization's website:

"Riders are on top of a ridge overlooking a valley carved by the Truckee River filled with pasture and giant cottonwoods along the river. This area was once part of Winnemucca Lake and the ancient Lake Lahontan. What appear in the distance as giant sand dunes under the Truckee Range actually are giant domes of silt left by the ancient lake.... Then the trail turns west for about a mile along several small lake beds and meanders down to the canyon floor. The silence is awesome."

Not everything went smoothly, however. In 2007 Storey County refused to permit the trail to continue there due to two landowners who protested designating the road public. As a result the organization forfeited a $486,000 state grant to build a bridge at Pioneer Crossing two miles east of Sparks.

In 2008 a $54,000 grant was received from Nevada State Parks for a two-mile section connecting Waltham Way to USA Parkway east of Sparks; the Truckee Meadows Water Authority agreed to open its maintenance trail above Verdi for three miles if several issues could be resolved; and Mayberry Drive was restriped with a bike lane.

The year 2009 saw the organization receive approval of its California Environmental Quality Act environmental report for the California Canyon.

In early 2010 came the Waltham connection as the bikeway crossed private property for the first time with the permission and construction assistance of NV Energy and the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center. Mars Petcare, situated across the river, consented to be caretaker. This gravel path stretched from a road near the Mustang Ranch brothel (Waltham Way) to USA Parkway. While these two miles remained unconnected to the rest of the trail, it was hoped that eventually they could be joined on the west end to Nature Conservancy land and property operated by the conservancy in conjunction with the Bureau of Land Management. Volunteers built one and one-half miles of trail at McCarran Ranch east of Sparks.

On the downside, a $350,000 grant request was rejected for construction of a Hirschdale to Iceland section, illustrating the difficulty of acquiring funding during the Great Recession of the time.

By 2012 the long-awaited nine-mile route from Mustang to USA Parkway opened. But a three-mile addition in the Truckee Canyon west of Verdi was delayed due to the required improvement of the Truckee Meadows Water Authority’s Fleish suspension bridge.
More happily, that same year the bikeway was named one of the nation’s top trail projects by the Coalition for Recreational Trails. Then in 2013 the Federal Highway Administration awarded it that year’s Environmental Excellence Award for non-motorized and multimodal transportation. And the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency presented it with one of only six environmental excellence awards in the western states. In subsequent years, five regional awards were received.

In 2013 improvements were completed to the 1928 Fleish footbridge, enabling the water authority to open its 3.5-mile Fleish Dam maintenance road at the beginning of the Truckee Canyon. Mountain bikes were then able, for the first time, to proceed from Verdi into California. This new section was a partnership between the utility and the organization, with each paying part of the cost of making the bridge safer, including handrails and wire fencing. The water authority also built a new wood bridge near the dam’s hydropower facility that could be used by bikers and hikers. The bikeway was now 65 percent complete.

As evidenced by an April-November traffic count at Mogul, the route was proving increasingly popular, averaging 150-250 users per day.

By December 2013 some 73 to 74 miles had been cobbled together out of new construction and existing paths. These included the 15-mile stretch between Lake Tahoe and Truckee; 20 miles from Verdi through Reno to Vista in east Sparks; nine miles from Mustang to USA Parkway (Waltham Way); and the 26 miles on the Pyramid reservation from Wadsworth to the Lake.

Still unavailable were three proposed sections: Truckee to Verdi, Vista Boulevard to Mustang, and USA Parkway to Wadsworth. Reluctant landowners posed the main difficulty for the latter two, so alternate routes were being studied. In the California section, the bikeway faced difficult construction in a narrow canyon. However, in mid-2013 the organization received permission from NV Energy and the Truckee Meadows Water Authority to locate two miles of trail in the California Canyon from Floriston to Farad. Conveniently, the town of Truckee’s ongoing construction of its Legacy Trail was creating a ready-made route of which the bikeway could take advantage.

In early 2014 prominent Reno resident William Douglass wrote that the trail could be useful in the attempt to reinvent area tourism at a time when numerous tribal casinos in California were intercepting significant numbers of gamblers. In an article in the Gazette-Journal, Douglass said the business community was largely neglecting one of its most obvious opportunities; and although roughly two-thirds of the trail would be complete by the end of the year, “The remaining third poses serious political and physical challenges. Doubters remain to be won over, and at least one section will have to be carved out of sheer canyon walls. Progress is still measured in relatively modest increments. Under the present program, completion of the Reno-to-Truckee section could take at least five years, and Reno to Wadsworth might require 20. Many cyclists today are young professionals, often organized into clubs that seek exciting new places to cycle together. I can imagine a whole new market of group business for Northern Nevada tourism - with Reno-Sparks as its hub. Completing the Tahoe-Pyramid Bike Trail as soon as possible should be among the highest priorities of the RSCVA [Reno-Sparks Convention and Visitors Authority] and state and local tourism and business agencies.”
Also in 2014 the bikeway organization finally received permission from the California Department of Fish & Wildlife to build an important seven hundred feet of trail in Sierra County, linking the Fleish Bridge to land upstream.

By the end of 2016 the trail was 75 percent complete and the organization had received numerous additional awards, created a “Century Circle” for donations of $100 or more per year, and—vitally important—received an endowment pledge of $1,550,000 from hiker Ernest E. Tschannen of Orangevale, California. Said the organization: “The significance of his gift is huge, as the bikeway cannot continue without permanent funding, which grants rarely provide. Ernest’s pledge provides a substantial start to an endowment fund to sustain the bikeway”.

In 2017 the 1.2-mile section was completed from Hirschdale east, with panoramic river views. With the path 80 percent complete in May 2018, the connection with Floristone and then to Reno was expected by the end of 2018. With these done, only the Sparks to Mustang and USA Parkway to Wadsworth sections would remain to finish, with an eye toward 2025.

In 2018 the bikeway officially became the Tahoe-Pyramid Trail rather than Bikeway, for two reasons: first, many people, including walkers-runners and fishers, avoided it, thinking it was only for bikes; and second, bikeways elsewhere are paved, so tourists would be misled into thinking this one was entirely paved when it wasn’t. However, 2018 construction carried over into 2019 when the final link between Truckee and Reno was expected to be complete. Also in that year the project officially became the Tahoe-Pyramid Trail rather than Bikeway, for two reasons: first, many people, including walkers-runners and fishers, avoided it, thinking it was only for bikes; and second, bikeways elsewhere are paved, so tourists would be misled into thinking this one was entirely paved when it wasn’t.