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## Speech from today

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Kit Johnston <JohnstonK@yamhillcounty.gov>  
To: Yamhill County News <yamhillcountynews@gmail.com>

Fri, Jan 30, 2026 at 7:19 AM

Below are my notes for yesterdays presentation.

Thank you,  
Kit

### **BACKGROUND**

I think we mostly know the background on the rail corridor so I will be brief. Since the rail corridor was purchased the county has struggled to uphold its grant obligation. The obligation required the construction of a multimodal trail from Gun Club rd to Gaston.

This project is known as the Yamhelas Westsider trail which was called out specifically as a bicycle and pedestrian trail.

On page 92 section 5.6 Yamhill County Transportation Project List it states "At least once a year, Yamhill County will review identified transportation projects and if necessary, add, delete, and/or reprioritize them to accommodate new conditions." And on page 97 the estimated cost, over 10 years later is still listed as "TBD."

This brings me to the public comments about the comparison of Yamhelas to the Banks Vernonia Trail. There are very large differences in these projects, the number one difference being the funding mechanism.

The Banks-Vernonia Trail is managed and funded by the Oregon State Parks and Recreation Department. It has the backing of state-level law enforcement, state-level maintenance budgets, and state-level legal resources.

Much of this trail passes through State Forest land or managed timberland. While there are private neighbors, the primary industrial activity (forestry) is generally more compatible with trail use than intensive specialty ag like the proposed Yamhelas Westsider Trail.  
(Bisected farm story--state owned!)

With all that being said, the Yamhelas has a massive land use hurdle. Over the years, and multiple Land Use appeals later, the project is still stalled. We are approx. 9 years into our grant with approx. 11 left to develop a trail. The repayment obligation is approximately 1.7 million dollars.

It requires that farm impacts be satisfied to be able to get a conditional use permit before construction can start for a trail. There are many things that go into satisfying the farm impacts and this is not the first project in Yamhill County that has not been completed because the bar is so high to satisfy the impacts to neighboring farms on land zoned for Exclusive Farm Use.

We are fortunate in Yamhill County to have these laws in place to protect our high value agricultural land. This is one of the reasons why it is so important to me that we have farmer representation on this

board.

Because of this and with no likely path forward, the county has to start planning for what our future of trails projects looks like in Yamhill County, and the most responsible way to repay the prior administration's 1.7 million grant obligation.

### **CARLTON LETTER AND TOWN HALL**

In early 2025, all three of us met at one time or another with electeds in Carlton to discuss their project. Their city council voted unanimously on March 4th to begin a conversation to purchase their section of rail corridor that goes through town. After that meeting on March 10th I received an email that stated the following:

"The City is expressing its intent to explore controlling or purchasing the rail corridor within Carlton city limits. Our goals in this endeavor are to improve transportation efficiency and enhance fire and public safety."

After this email, the city of Carlton posted notice of a town hall in July that read:

"The City of Carlton invites you to a community town hall on July 23rd at 6pm at the Civic Center to explore a potential opportunity to enhance safety, connectivity, and mobility for our residents.

We're beginning a conversation with Yamhill County to explore the possibility of improving the rail corridor area within City limits. The goal? To look at options that could lead to better road crossings and safer access for fire and public safety."

I believe this is a huge step forward and one example of a project that has more viability than the one being removed.

In initial conversations with ODOT, they seem receptive to the idea that as long as Carlton up holds the stipulation to build a trail on their section within city limits that ODOT would transfer that value of that portion of Rail Corridor to Carlton and relieve the County of it's grant obligation. This is no money out of either the County or the City of Carlton's pocket.

### **HWY 47**

Another project, I would like to talk about also involves ODOT and addresses public comments about utilities. We had some initial contact with ODOT to see if they would be willing to receive ownership of the Rail corridor that borders Hwy 47 in exchange for relieving partial or all of the grant obligation. I think it's important that ODOT retain this section for future utility projects. The most prominent right now being the Regional water projects that have been discussed for the City of Yamhill and that potentially run all the way to Carlton. I will advocate to have any utility be ran along Hwy 47.

### **WHITESON**

Another project that I would like to briefly mention to address public concerns that we lack outdoor recreation places in the county for families to safely bike and walk is Whiteson Park.

Whiteson Park is a county owned property on the outskirts of Whiteson off Hwy 99 that is 93 acres. Its back history is that it used to be Monroe Park and Monroe Landing. This project has already been through the tedious land use process and currently has a Conditional Use Permit which gives us the greenlight to begin development.

This property is ideal to fit into our water way enhancement projects that we have been discussing for the last couple of years. It is ideal for constructing biking and walking trails. Besides having a Conditional Use Permit already in place, we have also recently finished up our Parks Master Plan which opens the door for more funding opportunities.

This is a process I am highly involved in along with Visit McMinnville and Willamette Valley Visitors Association.

In fact, we just met yesterday with employees from the National Park Service to discuss additional funding opportunities. Thank you Lisa Macy-Baker and Karen Olson for helping to navigate this process. I am hopeful we can start archaeological studies soon. Whiteson is a piece of county property that I have been very invested in to see come to fruition.

## **METSKER**

Additionally, to address more outdoor recreation . . . Most recently, our Parks Manager and I were able to negotiate with Weyerhaeuser to remove the deed restriction on Metsker Park. Huge shout out to Travis for getting that over the finish line. Part of those negotiations were to add additional park land in the form of an access easement to Baker Creek Falls. Part of the requirement from Weyerhaeuser is to develop a trail from Rainbow Lake out to Baker Creek Falls within the next two years.

Initially, a parks board group met out there and discussions seemed to lean towards a boardwalk style trail. The trails that have been there for decades are over grown and need some overhaul. Again, with the Parks Master Plan in place, this opens the door for funding opportunities for these projects. Just a few weeks ago I signed on to be part of the steering committee for the Travel Oregon Recreation Ready Program which is an initiative focused on enhancing Charles Metsker park.

Oregon Dept of Fish and Wildlife also has a vested interest in Metsker Park to help restore fish access by removing the damn at Juliette Park (another county owned property with no public access) and building a fish ladder into Rainbow Lake. This could also be a potential funding source for getting Rainbow Lake dredged.

## **PANTHER CREEK**

The last project I'd like to mention today is a transportation project in a current right of way on our county roads.

This has a high likelihood of completion with potential funding depending on size and scope. The project is safety enhanced bike lanes on Meadow Lake road out to Panther Creek Rd which could connect the soon to be built 25 mile bike park on Panther Creek right here in Yamhill County.

Senators Wyden and Merkley were able to secure 3.1 million in funding through the Community Initiated Projects grant. This CIP grant for these 25 miles of bike paths on BLM land was just signed last Friday by President Trump.

With all that being said, we have a lot of project opportunities for our County. Some have funding, some don't. Some have Conditional Use Permits, some don't require it. Some are as simple as a group of people coming together on a few weekends and beginning work. I would urge us to use the energy that we have seen just in the last few months to coordinate our efforts on these viable projects.

## **FOLLOW UP and INVOLVEMENT**

Again I'd like to double down on the ask that we all use the energy that we have seen in the last few months to coordinate our efforts on these viable projects. I have proven that I am committed to recreation in our county. I just want to say that I have put my own time and money into showing what the possibilities are for Yamhill County parks and transportation projects. I know there is a lot to unpack here and nothing is ever 100 percent a done deal, but I feel very good about the potential for these projects.

I am always available by email or phone and I have my monthly Chat with a Chair coming up next Thursday February 5th.

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**Sent:** Friday, January 30, 2026 7:13 AM

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**Subject:** Re: Speech from today

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