

# Bicycle Skills Park Rolls Forward



The Vernonia Bicycle Skills Park recently received national attention as one of 6 recipients of a Bikes Belong Coalition Grant, which awarded Vernonia \$5,000 on May 2, 2007. The Vernonia Skills Park was considered an “outstanding bicycling project” and “demonstrated a solid plan” according to the Boulder, Colorado organization which funds projects that increase and promote bicycle ridership in communities across the United States.

The Bikes Belong Grant was awarded specifically to assist in the initial construction of the skills development trail, one of the first elements planned for the park. “The awarding of this grant is really exciting for this project. It gives Vernonia national recognition, and credibility. It really is a reward for everyone who has worked so hard to bring this project this far,” said Vernonia City Administrator M.R. “Dick” Kline. The Skills Park has also received a grant from Cycle Oregon for \$10,000, cash donations from the community of \$760, and numerous pledges of in-kind services, donated materials, and labor.

In another important development, on May 17 and May 21 the cities’ request for a Conditional Use Permit for the Oregon American Mill Site was granted by the city Planning Commission and then by the City Council for the Skills Park .

With about 60 people in attendance, the Planning Commission heard a staff report from City Planner Aldie Howard and then testimony from numerous citizens about the proposed development of the mill site. Vernonia’s citizens appeared to be overwhelmingly in favor of the project, and the Commission voted unanimously to approve the Conditional Use request, and send it on to the city council for final approval. The City Council unanimously approved the request at its meeting on May 21, 2007.

The Bicycle Skills Park project has been moving steadily forward for the last year, when some local citizens and the Chamber of Commerce took an idea that had been presented to city council, and starting working to bring it to life. The city hired Ric Balfour and Associates of Forest Grove to develop a Master Plan for the Skills Park, and then hired Balfour’s firm to also complete a site plan for the entire OA mill site. Ric Balfour and Associates led the community through four public meetings to gain citizen input into the planning, which was used to develop the Master Plan for the park. An informational meeting with the Planning Commission was held in April.

Balfour has fully embraced his relationship with Vernonia and the Skills Park project. In addition to presenting the complete Master Plan for the park, Balfour has volunteered hours of his time to fundraise, help with grant writing, produce a newsletter- “The Vernonia Velo News,” put on the “Wheels of Fire Bicycle Film Fest” in March, and spoke to middle and high school students about the project. Balfour will also be volunteering during the Cycle Oregon visit on June 23, giving visitors tours of the Skills Park site.

Phase I of the project will be developed throughout the summer of 2007. Plans for the first phase include: A BMX track and a Pump track, a loop trail, a skills develop-

ment trail, with Technical Trail Features, a cyclocross trail, an informational kiosk, and a parking area. Once additional funds are secured, Phase II development can begin in the summer of 2008. The project has applied for a grant from the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department’s Local Governments Grants Program to help fund Phase II construction. Phase II plans include: additional parking, permanent restrooms, a picnic pavilion, a kids and beginners area, and a bike mechanic and washing station. The Skills Park has also set aside property for the construction of a Skateboard Park, which would be adjacent to the Skills park and is being developed by the Lion’s Club.

The Conditional Use Permit granted by the Planning Commission allows the development of parks and city structures in an area zoned Low Density Residential. Included in the Conditional Use request by the city was the development of a Mill Site Interpretive Center, which would feature information about Vernonia’s logging history and the Oregon American Mill, the new Senior Center facility (see related article on page 14), which would include a new home for the Vernonia Cares food pantry; a new RV and tent camping area; and the development of an event amphitheater on the still privately held 4 acres owned by the Nehalem Valley Development Corporation. All of these proposed uses including the skateboard park, were granted conditional use, allowing them to continue to develop their plans. Each use, as it becomes ready to begin construction, will be required to return to the Planning Commission in a public hearing to request approval of a design plan. The Bicycle Skills Park is the only use that was granted permission to begin construction.

## What is a Skills Park?

What exactly is a Bicycle Skills Park? Well, that’s a good question. Because Mountain Biking is a sport that is continually changing, and since there are few models from which to base a design, a Bicycle Skills Park can be whatever we want it to be.

Basically, the intention is to provide mountain bike riders of all skill levels with a place to practice, develop, and improve their skills in a contained area, with the use of Technical Trail Features (TTF). A TTF is an obstacle intentionally placed within the trail line to provide a more interesting and exciting riding experience. A TTF can be integrated into the trail in three ways. The first is to incorporate existing natural features. You can route the trail over rock slabs, ledges, rock gardens and fallen trees, and manipulate the natural materials to create your TTF. The second way is to add natural features to the landscape. The use of rocks and logs can create drop-offs, rock gardens, boulder rides, log pyramids and log rides. And the third method is to add man-made structures. Ladder bridges, wooden ramps and teeter-totters are prime examples of TTFs that can be easily built and added as a challenge to the trail.

Riders can choose different levels of obstacles to attempt, based on their level of skill and comfort. As a rider builds confidence, they can choose a more difficult level of TTF. Developing and practicing skills in a contained area allows riders to then venture out on real single track mountain bike trails and down hill free riding trails.

Put many TTFs together and you have a Bicycle Skills Development Trail. Add a parking area, restroom, gathering spot and any other amenities your riders may want, and you have a Bicycle Skills Park!