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# Walkable Washington

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## WALKABLE WASHINGTON

Transformation towards walkability is taking place all over the state of Washington. From urban, suburban and small town initiatives, the program showcases the effects of a renewed focus on creating great places for people to walk. The case studies are exceptional projects and programs showcasing how cities, counties, school districts, and community organizations throughout the state are making it safer, easier, and more inviting for people to walk.

## WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

We promote walkable communities and empower people throughout Washington to connect to the world by foot.

## CASE STUDY

### ANACORTES-GUEMES TRAIL PROJECT ANACORTES, WA

**DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE:** The partially completed Guemes Channel Trail is on an old rail bed that hugs the north coast of Fidalgo Island. Eventually, the trail will connect the Washington State San Juan Ferry Terminal and the west side of the island to downtown Anacortes, linking to the Tommy Thompson Trestle Trail along the east shoreline and crossing Fidalgo Bay.

The trail offers the only safe route for pedestrians and bikers to get to the downtown area from the State Ferry Terminal. It parallels State Route 20 Spur, a narrow, two-lane highway without sidewalks and with narrow and inconsistent shoulders. Right of way issues have prevented shoulder widening.

The Guemes Channel Trail has long been proposed as a safe alternative off the main road for non-motorized travel to the Ferry Terminal and the west end of town. Non-motorized travel appeals to local and visiting ferry passengers who can avoid automobile wait times (often 4 hours or more in peak season) at the ferry by using their feet or their bike.

In 2009, an arson fire on the Tommy Thompson Trail trestle on the east side of the island destroyed 300 feet of the trestle. The community raised \$380,000 to have the trail repaired within one year. This awareness and enthusiasm for the Tommy Thompson Trail helped fuel the development of the Guemes Channel Trail as a high priority. People in the community became passionate about "Completing the Dream", creating a complete shoreline trail system, linking

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the Guemes Channel Trail, the downtown area, and the Tommy Thompson Trail.

To date, 1.1 miles of the Guemes trail from Edwards Way to Lovric's Marina has been constructed. It is a 12 foot-wide asphalt walkway over an old rail-bed that accommodates multi-modes of human-powered transportation – pedestrians, dog-walkers, strollers, bicycles, and inline skates. The trail is flat and twists along the Guemes Channel, offering spectacular views of the water, islands and mountains.

One portion of the Guemes Channel Trail yet to be completed, from the Marina to downtown Anacortes, lies on privately owned rail bed parcels overgrown with blackberry bushes. Right-of-way easements need to be obtained from property owners, requiring more funds to complete the trail.

The trail system is an extremely popular project in the community of Anacortes, gaining widespread support from the city council and the mayor, local residents, visitors, and people from all over. Displays about the project are held at venues such as farmers markets and street fairs, and the Anacortes Parks Foundation advocates the project through social media. Although adjacent property owner resistance to the trail project was first expected, this was rare, as everyone has been very supportive and have given the project their blessings. Fundraising efforts by the Anacortes Parks Foundation is underway for the completion of the project.

**PROGRAM TIME-FRAME:** The Guemes Channel Trail has been in the community's non-motorized vision for years, with its first planning stages in the mid-1990's. In 2006 and 2012, the City of Anacortes included the Guemes Trail in its comprehensive plan. The Port of Anacortes has also included this link as a part of its comprehensive plan for the Ferry Terminal. The 1.1 miles of the Guemes Trail was completed in May of 2015.

The three final segments of the Guemes Channel Trail are now being designed. Funding for construction and right of way was passed in the state transportation budget with revenue to be collected in out years, projected to be collected around 2026. Efforts continue to shorten this funding time-frame.

**COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT:** The local community and even people from outside of the community are very enthusiastic about the completion of the Guemes Channel Trail. The Anacortes Parks Foundation often receives emails from people who really would like this trail completed, asking how they can help, or how to make it happen faster. For example, volunteer work parties sweep leaves off the trail or water the shoreline plants. Also, the Guemes Trail Project has become the highest priority for the mayor and city council.

**COST AND FUNDING:** It will take approximately \$4.5 million to complete the three remaining segments of the trail. Existing segments were

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completed for \$1 million in state and local funds. Major funding for the easement and construction of the trail comes from the Washington State Transportation budget administered by WSDOT. The State of Washington is interested in funding the Guemes Channel Trail as State Highway 20 Spur is heavily travelled, narrow and hard to expand, and poorly accommodates pedestrians and bikers, so the development of the off-grade trail improves the highway system. Also, upon completion, the Guemes Channel Trail will become a significant and scenic addition to US Bike Route 10 that now stretches from Anacortes/Sidney BC to the Montana Border and will eventually link to Bar Harbor, Maine.

The City of Anacortes lends staff support, and additional funding for 'sticky' properties that need to be purchased especially in cases where easement cannot be easily obtained. For example, one property currently under consideration for purchase is an old cannery on a 2000-foot section of the trail. The City has obtained survey rights, and if negotiations are concluded successfully, may pay up to \$1.3 million for the property.

Private residents enthusiastically support the Guemes Trail Project. The Anacortes Parks Foundation, a 501c non-profit organization, has raised \$400,000 so far to help with the project.

**CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS:** Timing to complete the Guemes Channel Trail is a challenge. Funding for the project is earmarked by the State but at a low tier. The \$4.5 million it takes to complete the trail won't come to fruition

until enough gas tax is collected, in ten years at current rates. However, the community of Anacortes would like to get the Guemes Trail completed sooner, and are promoting it in the hopes of speeding up the funding process. Some initial resistance to development included liability concerns from trail-adjacent property owners about pedestrians climbing onto their private banks as the trail is at the bottom of a 40-foot bank. In working with the City, privacy gates and signage were installed by the banks, and they also worked with the residents to help solve drainage issues to help stabilize the bank. Another concern was unwillingness of property owners to release right-of-ways. Mayor Gere of Anacortes is currently meeting with residents about how the City and property owners can work together.

**INNOVATIONS:** Besides the focus on the trail for human use, attention is also paid to preserving the marine habitat by retaining and replanting shore-side bushes and trees and submerged downed trees for fish fry migration. Local tribes helped advise on shoreline environmental preservation along the trail, and advised on shade tree remediation. Additional tree planting on behalf of other local projects is encouraged and donated trees include one of Susie's Forest trees (commemorating Susie, the non-motorized transportation advocate).

The tree preservation affected the rail-trail positively by adding swoops and curves, beautifying the trail. The natural amenities of the mountains, islands, water, and winding trail present spectacular views, including Mount

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Baker and the Sisters to the east and the San Juan and Skagit Islands framing passing ferry and boat traffic to the north and west.

**BENEFITS AND RESULTS:** Health benefits to locals and visitors are made possible with the opportunity to bike, skate, or walk on the Guemes Channel Trail and in the future to expand that physical transportation by linking to downtown destinations. The regional physical activity coalition promotes the Guemes Channel and Tommy Thompson Trails on the Skagit County Walking Map.

Safety is a huge benefit. The Guemes Channel Trail provides a safe walkway away from but parallel to the busy and narrow two-lane traffic on Highway 20. On any given day, one can run into dog walkers or families with bikes and strollers.

The Audubon Society and other bird watchers, photographers and naturalists enjoy using the trail for both the flora and fauna. The unobstructed views and light protected nature of the shoreline trail have produced photos of the northern lights for a lucky few.

## **PROGRAM CONTACT:**

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Gary Robinson  
Guemes Channel Trail Committee  
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City of Anacortes

## **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:**

Complete the Dream – Guemes Trail Channel  
<http://www.guemeschanneltrail.com/>

Guemes Trail Channel - Facebook  
<https://www.facebook.com/guemeschanneltrail/>

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