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Transcript

Speaker 1

It's time for the Outspoken Cyclist, your weekly conversation about bicycles, cyclists, trails, travel, advocacy, the bike industry, and much, much more. You can subscribe to our weekly podcast at outspokencyclist.com or through your favorite podcasting app to listen anytime. Now here's your host, Diane Jenks.

Speaker 2

Hello and welcome to The Outspoken Cyclist. I'm your host, Diane Jenks. Thanks for tuning in today. So I've had this conversation archived for a long time, and in re-listening to it while editing today, I thought, it's pretty interesting that we're at this strange place with the announcement last week of so much money being rescinded from bike and ped infrastructure to the amazing 50-year project that completed the Poudre River Trail in Larimer County, Colorado. So I queued it up for edit, and it truly highlights what might be an exemplary project. My guest is Zach Wiebe. He is the planning and resource manager of Larimer County in Colorado. The Poudre River Trail sounds like the perfect ride for someone who wants the scenery of Colorado coupled with great amenities along the way without climbing the Rockies. And with most long trails, this one covers plus or minus 45 miles. The first mile was laid in 1978, and here we are, almost 50 years later, as Memorial Day weekend saw the final connection to complete it. It's really clear that the commitment to completing this trail took a lot of cooperation among the counties, the communities it crosses, and the state. And the way the counties were able to look to their citizens for funding to complete the trail is a lesson other states might want to look at for themselves. Hi, Zach. Welcome to the Outspoken Cyclist. Thanks for joining me on the show today. How are you?

Speaker 3

I'm well. Thanks for having me.

Speaker 2

It's my pleasure. Where are you? Let's tell my listeners.

Speaker 3

Sure. I'm in Fort Collins, Colorado.

Speaker 2

This is an ongoing series that I'm doing for my show about really cool trails. And you have one that just opened. I mean, when I actually first contacted you, it wasn't even open yet, but it has since opened.

Speaker 3

That's right. The majority of the trail has been open, but it was finally connected completely across its full vision. It opened the Friday before Memorial Day, the 22nd.

Speaker 2

That's cool. Well, let's talk a little bit about the county you're in, Larimer County. Where is it? Obviously, it's near Fort Collins. It's in Fort Collins somewhere is in there. And what kinds of... things it offers. When I got on the website, I was shocked at the number of trails that are listed there.

Speaker 3

Sure. Larimer County sits in the very northern, central Colorado. In fact, the northern border is the state of Wyoming. It's Fort Collins is the largest city within the county, which is about an hour due north of Denver. It's a really unique county, the western border is the Continental Divide. And so right in the middle of the county, it kind of straddles, you know, where the mountains meet the plains, which in Colorado is where most of our population lives. It's known as the Front Range. So Colorado Springs, Denver, Fort Collins, all kind of sit right at that intersection. And so in Larimer County, You know, west of, you know, where the mountains begin is largely public land. The headwaters of the Putah River itself are west of Fort Collins. And then, you know, where we are on kind of the flatter plains portion, it's a little, you know, milder climate, great access to the mountains, but not exactly in them.

Speaker 2

What's the altitude?

Speaker 3

Yeah, we sit right about a little over 5,000 feet. I mean, you probably know Denver as the mile high city, which is 5280, and we're at a pretty comparable altitude.

Speaker 2

Yeah.

Speaker 3

But it ranges all the way from, you know, over 13,000, close to 14,000 feet. And then, you know, of course, lower as it goes east.

Speaker 2

Yeah. I don't breathe well at those altitudes. I think we're at 80 feet above sea level here in Northeast Ohio. So it's sort of like we're flat.

Speaker 3

Well, that's why the Olympic Training Center is in Colorado, like you mentioned.

Speaker 2

Sure. It makes perfect sense, actually. So let's talk about the Poudre River Trail. It looks like a really cool trail, and I can't remember how I came across it because it wasn't completed, but it's taken 40 years. to actually get it to go from point A to point B. And I am so familiar with those kinds of time things because we just had a towpath trail that got finished after almost the same amount of time, maybe 40, maybe 36. So I get it. Tell me about the trail, where it starts, where it ends, what the length is, all the cool things about it.

Speaker 3

Sure. And it's actually been closer to 50 years, as it as it turns out, of the first mile being built in 1978. At that time, you know, the the full vision of the trail that connects all of our communities wasn't even really written down yet. But what ultimately became the Poudre Trail began then. So the full trail as it is now, I'll kind of start west to east, but it starts kind of northwest of Fort Collins in a small community called Bellevue. Bellevue? It starts at a, and it's very close to another town called La Porte. Those are both small towns, like I said, northwest of Fort Collins. And it begins at a trailhead, kind of a little nondescript trailhead, actually at a state wildlife area. and runs more or less along the Pooter River for about 45 miles. So after, you know, its beginnings on the on the West End goes through Fort Collins, goes under a major Interstate, which is I-25 here, which kind of runs north and south along the Front Range. That was, you know, no small feat, of course, to get past the interstate where it goes through the town of Timnath, then Windsor, and then all the way out, you know, into the county to the east of us, Weld County, and currently ends, it goes through Greeley, kind of ends on the east side of the city of Greeley, which is the, you know, the larger city in Weld County.

Speaker 2

Let me reintroduce you and then I want to get some more like nitty gritty details about the trail. We're speaking with Zach Wiebe. He is the director of Natural Resources for Larimer County. So this is not your only trail. You have purview over a lot of going on in this area. I guess a question I didn't ask you is how large is Larimer County?

Speaker 3

Yeah, that's a that's a great question. it's a fairly large County I I want to say around 3,600 square miles last I I checked um.

Speaker 2

That's a big County.

Speaker 3

It's pretty big for by Colorado standards it's it's not you know I would say it's average it's fairly large for the for the Front Range and then just to you know you mentioned the the trails in in the county and overall, I mean, trails, I probably don't have to explain to you are extremely valued resource in the West and Colorado especially. And in Larimer County, we have over a thousand miles when you can include all the federal land to the West and then all of the public land management agencies, which here that we have a lot of public support. So we have city, county, state, lands. So even, you know, even in our system, the count Larimer County system, we have about 100 miles, but that that only comprises about 10% of the trails throughout the county.

Speaker 2

So I want to get back to the Pooter Trail and and then I want to ask you some questions about what might be happening. I'm hopefully not happening to some of your trails if government wants to get involved. So the Pooter Trail, is it? Is it paved?

Speaker 3

It is the we we kind of manage you know two types of trails the majority are natural surface um but the pudor Trail um is paved it's almost entirely 10 foot wide concrete Trail with a a two foot crusher finds Trail next to it um there are places short sections where it's asphalt or even a couple where it's actually adjacent to a county road. But probably 98% of it is 10 foot wide concrete.

Speaker 2

Wow. That's a hell of a lot of concrete.

Speaker 3

Yeah. And a lot of a lot of effort and cost and partnerships.

Speaker 2

When people were were looking at when planners were looking at putting this trail together and deciding on concrete. What were they hoping in terms of long term and maintenance?

Speaker 3

Yeah, well, the that's a great question because that's something that, you know, we often under underestimate at the outset is is long term maintenance costs and. It really depends a little bit on the community. The city of Fort Collins, for example, has a really large. I think they're over 40 miles of. paved trail just like this, you know, that connects all parts of the community. And so they have a really well established and robust maintenance program. Same for, you know, the city of Loveland to the south. For us,

we, the role that Larimer County often plays is kind of coordinating and funding and planning really how we can connect our communities. But for the most part, the communities themselves do the long term maintenance. The evolution of the Pooter Trail has been really interesting. And there's it's been built or planned and accomplished very differently on the in Larimer County versus Weld County. And for you and your listeners, there's a there's a fairly recent history report from a student out of CSU, which is in Fort Collins, Colorado State University, that the looks at the history of the Pooter Trail and kind of describes those different approaches. So in Larimer County, we enjoy a dedicated sales tax, you know, that our citizens initiated in the 90s. And so that's largely what funded the trail construction and maintenance on our side. But on the Weld County side, it was a little bit more of a grassroots nonprofit approach and some co-funded efforts between two of the cities and the county there. And the Weld County portion actually got built earlier. It's been complete for quite some time. I don't recall the year, but so when I described all the route earlier, most of it's been intact except for just one mile that we just recently finished.

Speaker 2

So are there amenities along the way? Because I want to lead up to how communities benefit by having trails like this going through that.

Speaker 3

Absolutely.

Speaker 2

And then there is a financial plus as opposed to some people think, oh, it's a financial minus. So yeah, what's along this trail that people would find interesting and would want to, you know, like actually take a vacation and let's go to Fort Collins.

Speaker 3

Yeah, yeah, a lot. There's there's a lot of amenities and and you're exactly right. We, you know, we try to share the message that trails like this, you know, improve property values and make developments, you know, attractive. And and so now to that end, there are, you know, again, kind of moving west to east most of the way through Fort Collins. The trail runs through a significant amount of natural areas, like protected open space type areas that has other natural surface trails, day use amenities, things like that, picnic tables, stuff, places to just enjoy and access the river. And then that's pretty much the case throughout the whole corridor. There are places where, especially east of I-25, where it's a little bit more residential areas, But at the same time, it connects to community parks, you know, a little bit more of the kind of playground green space type parks. But all all of us who manage different parts of the trail really can I consider it a a backbone of connections to all of our communities and so spurring off of the trail. Our access points to different neighborhoods, schools, libraries, businesses, you know, commercial areas. So it's a it's kind of a connection point for all of our communities.

Speaker 2

Have you seen an increase in? People using these trails as they are completed, I mean, as opposed to, all right, let's get in the car and go drive somewhere else. Are they actually, I mean, are you seeing more and more people? Do you keep a count on these trails?

Speaker 3

We do have counts, counters, you know, at different places. And to answer your question, we do believe so. Yes, we see an increase, especially We hope or or kind of infer from some of the counts that people also use the trail for commuting purposes, especially, you know, once it, you know, crossed I-25, that was a major barrier, especially on a bike. There were places to do it, but but not as safely. And so, yeah, we have some pretty good data that suggests commuting just based on, you know. peak times being sort of eight, nine in the morning and, you know, five o'clock-ish at night to support that. Yeah.

Speaker 2

Is it fairly flat, rolling, hilly?

Speaker 3

It's pretty flat generally. You know, all of, all the trail is built, you know, to be compliant with ADA specifications. And so, you know, once it's, you know, east of the mountains, it's pretty, it's relatively flat, yes.

Speaker 2

So here comes the e-bike question.

Speaker 3

Sure.

Speaker 2

Do you have rules about e-bikes on the trail and on all your trails?

Speaker 3

Yes, we do. And each most entities are fairly consistent. There's a little bit of variation in our regulations, but Larimer County allows class one and two e-bikes on our paved trails. but not on our natural surface trails and there are a handful of exceptions um for the most part that's what our communities also do the Fort Collins and has that same regulation some communities you know haven't put regulations on e-bikes in in place um so it's a little bit variable but that's that's probably the you know the most consistent Rules about e-bikes.

Speaker 2

Are you having any issues with e-motos yet?

Speaker 3

We're starting to see them for sure. We we, you know, our Colorado legislation addresses e-bikes and e-scooters. But there's a there's a broad range, as you likely know, of, you know, electric based vehicles and that operate at various speeds and And so, yeah, we're it's it hasn't become too problematic, but we're definitely seeing an increase.

Speaker 2

So it is a huge problem. And I think that we're going to have to do something about regulation about these e-motos that really aren't bicycles at all. So, yeah.

Speaker 3

Yeah, exactly. And we do have, you know, we do allow e-bikes as other powered mobility devices on our natural surface trails. But that that's the extent.

Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah.

Speaker 3

And that's that's based on a lot of, you know, we've solicited community feedback on on the issue and and on all that we do. And, you know, the last time we had a questionnaire or a survey about e-bikes, we about 65% of our of the respondents were opposed to e-bikes on natural surface trails.

Speaker 2

Oh, that's a good number. I like that.

Speaker 3

Well, that's a that's a few years old now. And we also have learned through another study at one of our open spaces that there's a correlation between familiarity of e-bikes and support that, you know, I think when we did our initial studies, gosh, right around Probably about six years ago, we did a study on one of our open spaces, and we found that correlation. And we also found, as you probably won't be surprised, there was a lot of misunderstanding about e-bikes, noise, and trail damage, and things like that. And so I think as more people become familiar, we might see a shift in support.

Speaker 2

The last thing I want to talk about is the possibility that some of your trails, not necessarily the Pooter Trail, the Pooter River Trail, but some of your trails may be

impacted by government coming in and saying, we either want to drill or frack or do some things like that. Are you seeing any of that? And if so, is there community pushback about it?

Speaker 3

So that's a great question, especially in Weld County. It has one of the, you know, highest oil and gas production areas in the state of Colorado. But and there has been, you know, some focus and legislation around that in recent years. And it's controversial, as you know. So there is some community outcry, but it so far hasn't really been a threat to our trail systems. There are a handful of open spaces that even though they're, you know, the surface is conserved, the mineral rights may be severed on a given property. And so there could be a potential threat there. But since most of these regional trails exist largely inside communities, if not city limits, the threat of fracking or oil and gas development hasn't proven problematic so far.

Speaker 2

How about funding? Has any funding been cut for the trail systems that you were counting on? Any shovel ready stuff that never happened or even stuff that was just about to get started?

Speaker 3

For trails, no. For some other projects, yes. And I'm glad you asked about funding because That's been obviously a critical component of getting these trails done. And in Colorado, I already mentioned the sales tax that we have in Larimer County. And we also get a lot of trail funding through LWCF, which is, you know, federal, that's Land and Water Conservation Fund, which comes to the state and our state uses that money for trails. And so, and then we also enjoy funding through lottery proceeds, which a lot of states have lotteries, but the state of Colorado, I believe, is unique in that it uses that funding for open space and land conservation. I love that idea. And things like that. Yeah.

Speaker 2

I love it.

Speaker 3

And they administer it in a few different ways, one of which is a competitive grant program that funds a lot of these efforts. And then, you know, each, each in any incorporated area in the whole state of Colorado just gets direct funding through what's called the Conservation Trust Fund that's directly from lottery proceeds.

Speaker 2

That is so cool because our lottery stuff here, allegedly, and I guess it does, goes to education.

Speaker 3

Education, yeah, that's pretty common.

Speaker 2

Then we have the casinos and the gambling taxes and all of that. And I'm like, okay, I love this idea. Let's put it into the trail systems, which are starting to come along here in Northeast Ohio. You know, I may or may not live to see them be completed, but we'll see. Well, this has just been Fascinating. And I really like the idea of this trail. So it's the Poudre River Trail. It's in Larimer and Weld counties in Colorado. We've been speaking with Zach Wiebe. He is the resource natural resources director. And tell my listeners how they can find out more about not just this trail, but about the whole trail system in your county.

Speaker 3

Sure. And just to clarify, I'm not the director of the department. Just I wouldn't want to claim that. Well, maybe you should be. I could. That's fine. You can edit that however you'd like.

Speaker 2

All righty. What is your title then?

Speaker 3

My title is the Planning and Natural Resources Manager. So pretty-- Ah, manager, planning, okay.

Speaker 2

Is your background in planning?

Speaker 3

It's actually more in natural resources.

Speaker 2

Nice.

Speaker 3

Yeah, I went to Colorado State to study exactly that. Natural Resources Management is the name of my degree.

Speaker 2

Nice. Yeah, I don't think you did that degree program in places like Cleveland, Ohio.

Speaker 3

Yeah, well, and CSU is kind of is one of the, you know, colleges known for that field of study. So yeah, we kind of churn out There's.

Speaker 2

Another program that CSU does that I was speaking with a professor there, and I don't remember what the program is right off the top of my head, but I'm thinking, yeah, that's another one that only seems to be happening where you guys are.

Speaker 3

Yeah, it could be. Was it was a veterinary sciences? That's the one we've.

Speaker 2

Had to do with planning, urban planning and transportation, and no, although veterinary science, I do know, isn't there a woman named, is it McCullough? Who's a professor there? I have a bunch of her books because I'm always training a dog somehow. Anyway, yeah, let's tell listeners how they can find out more. And I'll let you get back. It's A Friday. You can take out. How about taking the next two couple days off?

Speaker 3

Yeah, I will do that. Yes, and we're headed headed up to the mountains. So there's a few few places to look for more information. You know, there's the there's a website, you know, the Larimer County hosts a website with information about the Poudre Trail and the trails that we manage. There's a another entity, the one I mentioned in Weld County, that is a great resource for information on the trail. And. One another really great, relatively new resource that's actually managed by the state is called Cotrex. So it's an it's an interactive website with every trail in the entire state.

Speaker 2

And is it COTRAX?

Speaker 3

TREX. Cotrex, the Colorado Trail Explorer.

Speaker 2

Oh, cool. Is it a is it a.gov or a?

Speaker 3

That's a good question. A quick Google would would get you there, but it's. It's a it's a really a great resource and has kind of it's been adopted by a lot of agencies like mine and we that that's what we now use to update trail conditions and put in suggested routes and and things like that.

Speaker 2

Well, we're gonna find out Colorado Trail Explorer Cotrex. It is. There you go. Go figure, right? Well, I really appreciate you taking time on a Friday afternoon to talk with me. And I'm really excited about letting my listeners know about this trail. I'm not going to be in Colorado anytime soon, but it does sound like a really pretty trail. And we ride a tandem. We would have fun on a flat trail.

Speaker 3

Well, feel free to reach out if you ever do visit.

Speaker 2

Thank you so much and have a wonderful, wonderful summer.

Speaker 3

You do the same.

Speaker 2

My thanks to Zach for a most interesting and enlightening conversation. Colorado seems to embrace trails and trail access in a big way. What trails like this can do to unite communities and bring economic benefits as well as recreational pleasure to so many is so worth the effort. My thanks to you for listening. I hope you enjoyed the conversation. We have links to all the counties that Zach talked about and Kotrex, as well as photos and a written transcript of the show at outspokencyclist.com. You can always follow us on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, and my Substack. Subscribe for up-to-date episodes and posts about a variety of topics too. You can also let your voice be heard as the reauthorization of the transportation bill is coming up. Contact your representatives. You can find an easy to navigate link to their offices at bikeleague.org. Our series about bike safety begins next week with my conversation with Rachel Maney, the managing director of Bike Law. In addition to the funding that has been withdrawn from biking and walking projects, there are many issues that Rachel helps to unpack about bikes and cars, crashes in the law, and much more. I hope you're having a great summer, although we are experiencing some dicey weather right now with thick smoke and high humidity from the many fires that are burning around the country. So please stay safe, stay well, and when the air is clean, go for a ride. Bye-bye.

Speaker 1

Thanks for joining us today on The Outspoken Cyclist with Diane Jenks. We welcome your thoughts and contributions on our Facebook page. or visit outspokencyclist.com to leave a comment on any episode. We will be back next week with new guests, topics, conversations, and news in the world of cycling. Subscribe to the show in your favorite podcast app and you'll never miss an episode. The Outspoken Cyclist is a copyrighted production of DBL Promotions with the assistance of WJCU-FM Cleveland, a service of

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