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Obituaries

Saturday, July 24, 2004 · Last updated 11:55 a.m. PT

West Wire: Lengthy new bike trail reinvigorates Harrison, Idaho

By NICHOLAS K. GERANIOS
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

HARRISON, Idaho -- This isolated town used to be a literal backwater on the shore of spectacular Lake Coeur d'Alene.

But the opening of a paved, 72-mile trail that runs from the Rocky Mountain town of Mullan down to Plummer, Idaho, has the world biking and hiking through Harrison.

The Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes is providing the type of new economic spark that many decayed Western towns only dream about.

"The town slogan used to be `50 years unhampered by progress," said Harrison businessman John Kolbe, who set up two bicycle rental shops in the area. "Now business is up all over town."

The trail began as the Union Pacific Railroad, laid in 1888 to service the mining and timber industries. Heavily polluted mine waste was used for the original rail bed.

By the time trains stopped rolling through in 1991, much of the mineral wealth had been carried out of the region, leaving soil contaminated with heavy metals such as lead, cadmium and arsenic.

Working with the federal and state governments and the Coeur d'Alene Indian tribe, a plan was conceived to cover the

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rail bed with an asphalt cap, which would trap the contaminants. The work cost the railroad more than \$48 million, and the outdoor public is the big winner.



The eastern terminus is in Mullan, which is near Lookout Pass on the Idaho-Montana border. The trail runs along the Coeur d'Alene River through the Silver Valley towns of Wallace and Kellogg, past the Cataldo Mission state park and then along a chain of small lakes before the river flows into the lake at Harrison.

From there, the trail cuts south along the lake shore for six miles, crosses the rebuilt Chatcolet Bridge railroad span across the lake and moves into the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation before ending at Plummer.

"The trail's awesome," said Shari Weeks, 45, of Colville, who was biking a 16-mile portion on a recent weekday with Laurie Anderson, 51, and Michelle Koehn, 19. "There was a breeze off the water, we saw blue heron and marmots and turtles."

The Trail of the Coeur d'Alenes is the latest addition to an area that has become a magnet for people seeking family-friendly outdoor activities.

The region also has the venerable Centennial Trail, which runs some 60 miles along the Spokane River between Spokane, Wash., and Coeur d'Alene. More spectacular is the Route of the Hiawatha, a 15-mile-long paved rail trail that passes through 10 tunnels and across seven trestles. That trail also begins near Lookout Pass.

But Harrison is the place most transformed by a trail. The town of 260 people for decades has been little more than a pit stop for boaters seeking gas, a bathroom and something to drink. It is 30 miles south of Interstate 90 on a winding, narrow road. The short main street was largely vacant, and lakeview homes could be bought for \$50,000.

On a recent Wednesday afternoon, The Creamery ice cream shop had 22 people waiting in line for refreshments. Three restaurants are newly opened in town, and boats are triple parked at the expanded marina on weekends.

Kolbe and his wife moved to Harrison a few years ago and struggled to make a living until they heard about efforts to create the trail. Kolbe

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thought Harrison's scenery would be popular with cyclists, so they opened Pedal Pushers in Harrison.

This year they opened a second location farther south along the trail.

Harrison is a classic example of a new economy emerging from the ashes of the natural resource economy, said Kolbe, a former forester.

"The age of exploitative industries is gone," Kolbe said. "Mining and agriculture are taking a back seat to tourism."

A century ago, Harrison had several thousand residents engaged in mining and logging. The trail has many reminders of the toxic legacy of the area's mining past, including signs that warn users to "Wash hands and face before eating" and "Remove dirt from clothes, toys, pets, shoes and equipment before leaving the area."

Most of the trail is flat or has a grade of no more than 2 percent, reflecting its origins as a rail bed. Its signature feature is a swing bridge that opened to the public in April.

The 3,128-foot steel bridge was installed in 1921 across Lake Chatcolet and the mouth of the St. Joe River. A tender would swing a 224-foot portion of the bridge open for boat passage and close it for trains to cross.

The bridge was locked open when trains stopped running.

As part of a \$5.5 million renovation, the bridge was closed again and raised 36 feet to allow for boats heading up the river. It now provides one of the most spectacular views of the ride.

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