

Folks rally to promote the great outdoors



The West Side Trail, just outside of Tuolumne, is not exactly a tourist attraction, though it could be. Instead, it is a beloved stretch frequented by residents on foot, bicycles and horses. I've been walking the trail for more than 20 years. My friend Linda and I used to meet there to walk a couple of miles every Saturday morning. When my son boarded his horse at nearby Slide Mountain Ranch, the trail became a favorite riding place. For several years, a big contingency of my family met at the trailhead on Mira Monte and Buchanan roads to ride bicycles before Thanksgiving dinner. Everyone from mountain biking teens to kids on trikes headed out with the moms pushing strollers behind. We weren't the only ones on the trail, not on Thanksgiving nor any other time because as

I said, this is a well-loved, oft-visited place.

According to Pam Conners, retired Forest Service historian, this recreational trail with its outstanding views of the Tuolumne River Canyon is a historic nugget. The trail was recently deemed eligible for National Historical Preservation because the setting has changed little since the West Side Logging Co. constructed the narrow-gauge railway that eventually became the trail. This status along with a bunch of other converging factors led to a project that will culminate on Saturday, National Public Lands Day.

To begin at the end: On National Public Lands Day, which celebrates its 20th anniversary, volunteers across the country build and maintain trails, remove trash and invasive plants and plant native trees and shrubs on public lands – that is, land held in trust for the American people by the federal government. This year, one of these Public Land Day events will be in Tuolumne County at the West Side Trail.

Most public lands are managed by agencies like the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which hosts Saturday's event. According to James Barnes of the Mother Lode Field Office, volunteers are invited to help crews install interpretive kiosks and signs along the West Side Trail between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m.

Which brings us back to the beginning of this story, which entails the ways and



National Public Lands Day

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WHEN: 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Saturday

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WHERE: West Side Trail, intersection of Buchanan and Mira Monte roads, Tuolumne

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COST: Free, reserve by calling James Barnes at



means by which the kiosks and signs came to be. The story and breadth of players are by no means simple, but I'm going to do my best to give you a concise summary because I think the scope of the project epitomizes something fundamental about the trail. This is a community space, owned, treasured and stewarded by many.

So here's what happened. The Federal Highway Administration decided it was going to do some straightening on Buchanan Road,

which descends into the North Fork of the Tuolumne River Canyon below the West Side Trail. Because the work required cuts and fills that would impact land eligible for National Historic Preservation, a formal mitigation was initiated. That means the administration has to do something to reduce the impact on the trail. In order to come up with a mitigation plan, the administration began to work with all of the stakeholders, which, as it turned out, was quite a few: the Tuolumne Band of

Me-Wuk Indians, BLM, the Stanislaus National Forest, Tuolumne Transportation Council and Tuolumne County Parks and Recreation. Whew!

Focusing on the historic nature of the trail, the stakeholders came up with an idea that assuaged more than diminished the impact of the road work: an interpretive trail. They brought in the Three Forest Interpretation Association as project managers, which in turn brought in the design team of Pam Conners and Kath Christensen, a graphic artist and instructor in the computer science program at Columbia College. With the permission of the project managers, Christensen also enlisted the assistance of student interns to work on the project.

I'm naming all of these names because I find it thrilling that this is such a huge collaborative, community-based venture. With all these entities voicing ideas and opinions, it took a while to shape the design, but they came up with a marvelous idea. According to Conners, once they determined a theme – "Working on the Railroad" – they knew they wanted the interpretive signs to tell stories about the people who worked on the railway. So

rather than illustrate and name a native plant or a railroad coupling, the design team worked on creating short narratives on each sign designed to educate and inform trail users about its history.

"Locals come again and again to the trail," said Conners, "and we thought that repeat visits offer more time for people to read about the history of the trail."

The two kiosks and five signs, which are currently being fabricated of tempered steel in Salt Lake City, will be installed on Public Lands Day with the help of volunteers, which further extends the community nature of the entire project. If you frequent the West Side Trail and would like to get your thumbprint on this enhancement – not to mention get a first look at the signs – you need to RSVP by calling James Barnes, the BLM project coordinator, at (916) 941-3140. Bring a bag lunch and wear a long-sleeved shirt and long pants. Water and gloves are provided. And please leave the pets at home.

I purposely omitted a description of the unique signs, designed by Conners, Christensen and the Columbia College students, because words can't convey the creative manner in which they tell the story of this treasured expanse of river canyon. But I will tell you two things: First, the stories enhance the significance and solace of the trail, offered by the big sky and commanding views of the river below and the canyon walls, adorned with deer brush, mahogany and yerba santa. Second, the initial sign has "fire" as a theme, which feels like poignant signage for the start of this trail, given recent history.

Mural in a Day project

WHEN: 7:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

WHERE: Sonora Farmers Market, Stewart Street, Sonora

COST: Free

MORE INFO: mural-in-a-day-sonora.org

make a date to step out on the trail in the next few months. And if you'd like a peek at reproductions of the signs, they will be on display at the Columbia College Rotunda beginning Oct. 7.

And while I'm at it, let me point to another community-based, volunteer artistic effort in Tuolumne County on Saturday and Sunday. A team of painters will work on the first Mural in a Day at the north end of the parking lot where the Sonora Farmers Market takes place. ("Tuolumne Talk" featured this story in the May 7, 2013, issue of Sierra Lodestar.) So, if in the aftermath of the Rim Fire you need a way to express your love for Tuolumne County, take note of these two uncommon opportunities.

Send your Tuolumne County events information to Patricia Harrelson at pharrelson@sierralodestar.com and

October 6th & 10th, 2013

EACH MIND MATTERS:

Rural Reflections on Community Mental Health