

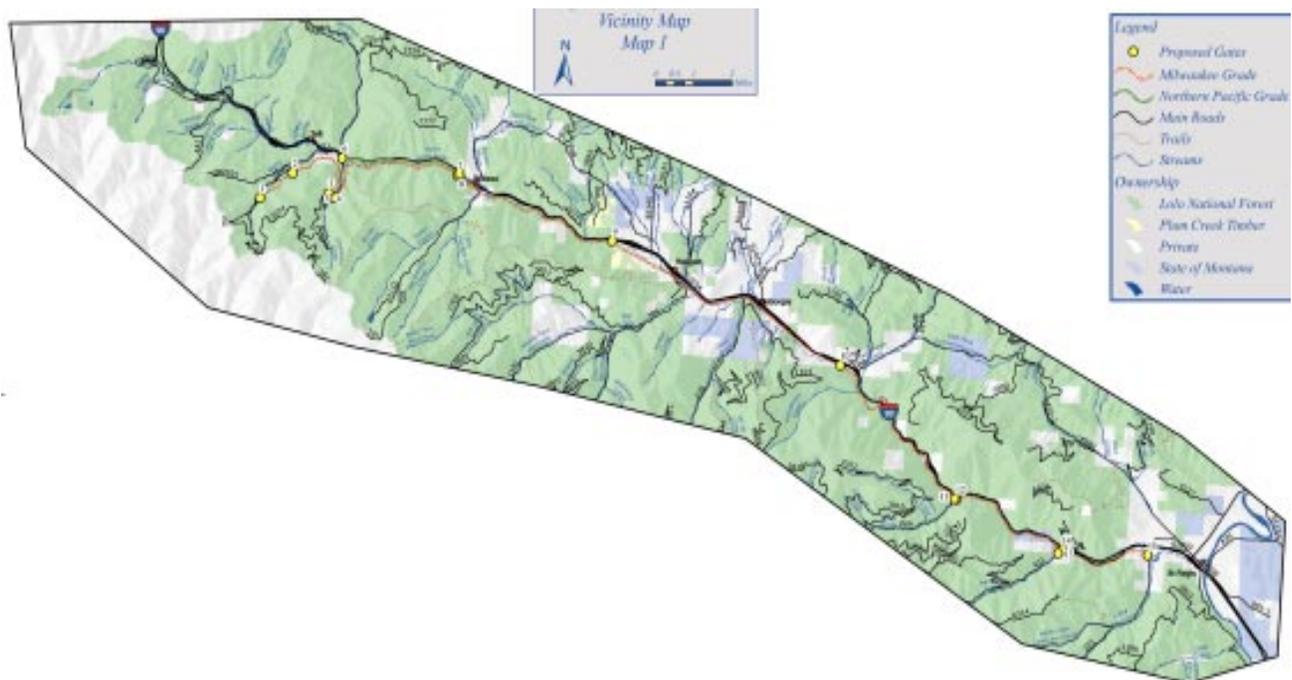
Another rails-to-trails option

By **GORDON RAGO** Staff writer | Posted: Thursday, April 18, 2013 11:04 am

The Route of the Olympian, a rail trail that will stretch from Taft to St. Regis in the west end of Mineral County, Montana, is getting closer to an opening date.

The new route would connect with the Route of the Hiawatha in Taft, providing those riders the opportunity to continue approximately 35.1 miles on two abandoned railroad grades to St. Regis.

“One aspect of the Route of the Olympian that is different from the Hiawatha is that there will be several different trailheads and entry points off of I-90,” said Tawnya Brummett, a District Ranger in Superior, Mont., for the USDA Forest Service.



The Route of the Olympian generally runs parallel to Interstate 90.

The route will consist of two abandoned railroads — the Milwaukee Road rail line and the Northern Pacific railroad, both of which run parallel to each other between the towns of Taft and St. Regis.

The current status of the Route of the Olympian project is that analysis and all planning milestones have been completed, according to the USDA Forest Service website. The Forest Service had to consider environmental impacts and deal with private property issues related to the trail as it runs west to St. Regis.

The Milwaukee railroad abandoned its Pacific branch in 1980. Afterwards, some of the land became private property, while some of it went to the U.S. Forest Service. It wasn't until 2007 that the Lolo National Forest purchased 13 private land parcels to accomplish the goal of connecting the Hiawatha with a new rail trail.

The Northern Pacific railroad or 'Nor-Pac' was abandoned in the early 1900s, but most of those roads were lost during flooding in the 1930s. The current plan of the Route of the Olympian includes just four miles on the Nor-Pac, while there will be 31.1 miles of trail on the Milwaukee railroad.

Much of the work the Forest Service has completed so far has been listening to public input in order to generate a new route that fulfills the needs of both non-motorized and motorized users. Some of the public input requested only non-motorized use, while some people want the route to remain as it is now with both motorized and non-motorized users.

In response to these differing opinions, the Forest Service has developed the new route to be a multiple use rail trail route that at different times of the year will have varying types of access for non-motorized and motorized users.

"We've gotten a lot of public interest because the Route of the Hiawatha has been such an economic plus for that area," Brummett said. "Our long term goal for the Route of the Olympian is to separate motorized and non-motorized users."

Now that all analysis is complete, the Forest Service is an appeal period, meaning the public can appeal the project if they find issue with its implementation. This appeal process ends on April 29, according to Brummett.

After this period, the Forest Service can move on to implementation and begin packing down gravel on the trail for use.

"Through our partnerships with local clubs and funding we receive, we will be able to get some tasks accomplished," Brummett said.