

Teanaway residents: New guard rails an accident waiting to happen

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TEANAWAY – On Thursday, July 16, Kittitas County Public Works Director **Mark Cook** and County Commissioner **Gary Berndt** held a question and answer forum at the Swauk-Teanaway Grange to address concerns about the guardrails installed with the repaving of Teanaway Road, a project funded with \$5M state lawmakers allocated the county for tax revenues lost after the state purchased 55,000-acres in the Teanaway to establish Washington's first Community Forest.

Both Berndt and Cook agreed with residents that in places the guardrails were not far enough off the shoulder and created the feeling of being "squeezed," especially when larger recreational and agricultural vehicles are coming from the opposite direction.

They also agreed some of the guardrails would create problems for snowplows come winter and that

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...they are working on solutions with county road maintenance officials.

However, at the risk of losing the county's authority to manage its own state-funded construction projects the guardrails – and there are more to be installed, Cook said – must remain in place to fulfill state safety regulations.

Said Cook, "We can't just remove them at this point. If we do we risk losing the state-granted authority to manage our own construction projects. By doing so we save upwards of 20% in administrative costs. Losing that authority would not be good fiscal management.

"On another note, we're working with the contractor to have them dig up and repave about two miles of the road. Our expert opinion is that those two miles do not meet state standards."

Reaction to the answers provided by Berndt and Cook covered the spectrum. At one end **Kelli Conner** speaking for an organized

group of neighbors said she wouldn't have anything to do with the guardrails for a number of reasons and that they should be removed. She said if they were not she and the group would sue the county for a stay on the project.

At the other end of the spectrum were residents such as **Barb Hamel** who said she understood the importance of maintaining the county's authority to manage its own projects.

"We just have to trust that Berndt and Cook will take care of the problem. They're in a bind, too."

Several residents complained the project was ramrodded and that not much thought was put into guardrail configuration.

Cook, a new hire who came into the project late, explained the configuration he inherited was, as required, engineered to state specifications in preparation for a projected increase in traffic volume as the Community Forest develops. He said the project seems ramrodded because

the \$5M had to be spent by June 31, the end of the biennium, or the dollars would go away for good.

"I believe mistakes were made but we had to keep moving quickly. State construction funds don't come easy and although I was hired after this project was well underway, I would have elected to take the dollars, get the work done and deal with the issues later, which I promise you we're going to do."

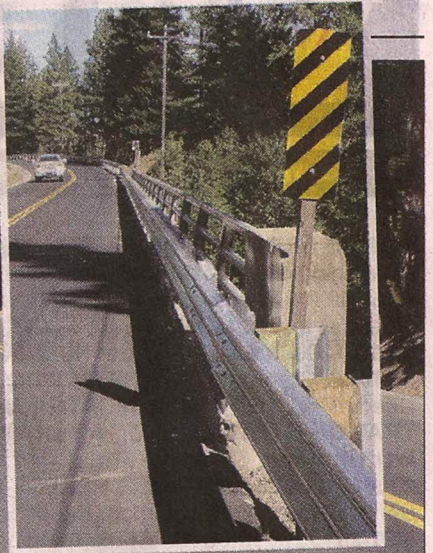
Residents weigh in

Outtakes from comments made at the forum appear here below with additional comments taken via phone interviews.

Resident **Bill Randall**: "The guardrails create a public safety issue. They're a hazard in that they force traffic toward the center of the road. The speed limit is 50mph which makes matters worse."

Resident **Sharon Almborg**: "It can be scary. When I'm towing my horse trailer and I meet big trucks I put my brakes on because I feel the squeeze."

Kittitas County engineer **Doug D'Hondt**: "To move some of the guardrails fur-

AL NEWS

EXAMPLES OF WHAT Teanaway residents are concerned about: Higher guardrails not set back far enough along Teanaway Road, and the guardrail across the North Fork Bridge that doesn't give any leeway to bicycle and foot traffic.

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ther back from the road would require widening the shoulder with expensive retaining walls or condemning land where steep banks would have to be sloped with fill. That's a tough choice even after we widened the road in some places."

Berndt: "Why didn't we spend the \$5M on Teanaway campgrounds? We're not going to put money into a state asset. Those dollars were marked to develop county assets."

Cook: "Why did we put the guardrail on the bridge over the Teanaway River at the North Fork? Because the old bridge rail was non-compliant. We had to.

"And as for guardrail spacers in general? (Spacers are what keep the rails away from their anchoring posts.) The guardrail we used is higher and state standards require we use a wider spacer. We chose the higher rails to prepare for future overlays of the Teanaway Road. Overlays in the next 20 years will raise the level of the road and shorten the

guardrails. Going with shorter guardrails would have impacted that investment strategy. "Why didn't we use jersey barriers instead of guardrails? Jersey's wouldn't have worked, even after we widened the road by two feet."

More info

Since the meeting Cook has learned a few things about the issues he promised to research for residents.

"I had said we would take the state on a tour of the road and ask for exceptions to guardrail regulations, but when we attempted to schedule the tour the state came back and said they weren't interested. Why? Because the project isn't funded with federal dollars. That's the answer I got, but we're not giving up.

"The county engineer and I will revisit the road and assess it for breaks in the guardrails for cattle and wildlife. We've contacted Fish & Wildlife and they'll work with us to identify migratory paths

and movements.

"We'll also look into the cost of replacing the shiny rails with something that looks weathered and we'll continue the discussion about removing the guardrail completely."

Next meeting

Cook said he would schedule another meeting for residents.

"In the meeting we'll have issues defined and consequences for addressing them. This is about the risks involved. I think they should be well defined for residents before we move forward any further.

"I also want to have a discussion about the county's six-year transportation plan and whether or not we should include a plan to build turnouts along Teanaway Road. I want to bring this up because if residents don't want them, we won't plan for them."

Cook said the next meeting would be advertised as soon as his office could confirm a date and place.