

New line on track in Mosier

County gives green light to project



An eastbound Union Pacific freight train rolls past the old Mosier Fruit Growers building. UP proposes to build two sets of tracks through this area rather than the existing single mainline as seen here. A total of just over four miles of new track would be put into place if the railroad's extension project goes forward. On Sept. 26, the Wasco County Planning Commission voted 5-2 to approve the project, with numerous conditions. Photo by [Jesse Burkhardt](#).

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#Wasco County has given a green light to Union Pacific Railroad's expansion plans for the Mosier area.

#On Sept. 26, the county planning commission voted 5-2 to approve the railroad's "Mosier Double Track Extension" project, although there are multiple conditions attached to the approval.

#"Through the National Scenic Area Act and our local Scenic Area ordinance, Wasco County has the authority to regulate the development and changes in use proposed by Union Pacific, outside of the Mosier Urban Area," explained Wasco County Planning Director Angie Brewer.

#The UP proposal calls for extending an existing 1.35-mile long railroad siding at Mosier to the east and west, creating a total of 4.02 additional miles of second mainline track through the area. This

would allow trains to keep moving rather than, as is often the case now, being required to stop on the existing siding in Mosier and wait for other trains to go by.

#Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area and Wasco County rules allow railroads to make infrastructure enhancements. Railroad projects are considered a permitted use, but are subject to review and conditional use provisions.

#UP officials said they were pleased with the commission's vote.

#“We are optimistic that they see our project as an opportunity to increase fluidity and efficiency where train traffic is severely bottlenecked,” said Justin Jacobs, director of corporate relations for Union Pacific, on Wednesday. “Our project aims to reduce the number of idling trains in Mosier, The Dalles, Hood River and other gorge communities while mitigating train traffic delays to more efficiently transport the goods American families and businesses use daily.”

#Opponents of the proposal were swift to condemn the planning commission's vote, however. Portland-based Friends of the Columbia Gorge, an environmental advocacy organization, released a statement claiming that the planning commission “ignored concerns raised by elected officials, Mosier residents, tribes and county staff.” The Friends statement pointed to a June 3 derailment of an oil train in Mosier, where several derailed cars caught fire and burned.

#“It is appalling to have a rail expansion approved on the very site where an oil train disaster just happened,” said Kevin Gorman, executive director of Friends of the Columbia Gorge. “The approval of this permit ignores the concerns raised by local elected officials, gorge residents and our members. This project puts Mosier and the entire scenic area at further, unnecessary risk.”

#Friends of the Columbia Gorge has warned that there could be a major increase in the number of trains — including oil trains — passing through the gorge if the new track is built.

#Railroad officials have stated that the expansion project will not have a direct impact on the number of trains or commodities hauled, but rather is geared toward making the flow of existing traffic more efficient and fluid.

#The double-tracking is planned to begin in the existing railroad corridor just east of the Wasco County line and end roughly three miles east of Mosier.

#Brewer explained that members of the planning department's staff are working to revise the record to reflect alterations in the final conditions for approval.

#Once the document is completed and released to the public, there will be a 15-day appeal period.

#“The appeal of this decision would be to the board of commissioners,” Brewer said. “The railroad cannot begin its work until the appeal period has been exhausted.”

#She added that it's possible multiple appeals could come in once the final conditions are posted for the public.

#“It will be interesting to see what appeals we get,” she said.

#Four conditions were deleted in the final package approved Monday evening by the planning commission, including a requirement that coal cars be covered; that UP stay within its existing range of 20 to 30 trains per day; requiring UP to adhere to all FRA safety standards; and prohibiting the proposed development from increasing the net volume of rail traffic, including number, length, or speed of individual trains.

#“Ultimately, the planning commission voted to remove conditions of approval that were either already covered by existing federal regulations or were considered to be unduly difficult to enforce with existing staff and programs,” Brewer explained.

#In its final decision, a total of 44 conditions were attached to the commission's approval of the project. Among the key conditions:

#• All grading, excavation and vegetation removal must be the minimum necessary for construction.

#• UP must provide regular training to gorge fire departments regarding combatting a railroad-related fire incident

#• Two safe crossings must be built for treaty tribe members to access the Columbia River

#• Oregon white oak trees removed for the project must be mitigated at an 8:1 ratio

#• UP shall work with the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Indian Reservation to analyze the impacts of trains on tribal fishing.

#Jacobs added that UP understands the safety concerns being raised and the company is actively working to address them.

#“For many years, we have consistently and proactively communicated about the siding project to Mosier residents, as well as to state, local and tribal entities,” he explained. “We plan to continue working with the community to understand its concerns and address them moving forward.”