

Birch Bay Drive project moving ahead

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By Ian Ferguson

The Birch Bay Drive and Pedestrian Facility project is back on track to begin construction in late fall of 2016.

The \$11.5 million county project is an effort to rebuild 1.5 miles of Birch Bay Drive with a berm and natural beach profile for better pedestrian access and better flood protection. The project fell 14 months behind schedule after contract negotiations with the original design firm broke down in spring 2014.

Middleton said smooth coordination with the new design firm, Environmental Science Associates based in Seattle, is part of what has allowed the project to make up for lost time.

“There’s been a lot of good communication between the public works staff, the design engineers and the permitting agencies,” Middleton said. “The permitting agents have come out to meet us on site, which saves a lot of time.”

Middleton presented a project update to Whatcom County councilmembers April 28. Approximately 30 percent of the overall design of the project is complete. Public works is in the process of seeking permits and acquiring right of ways (ROWs) needed for construction.

“Permitting and ROW acquisition might slow us up, but right now we’re confident we can begin construction in late fall of 2016,” Middleton said.

During his update, Middleton introduced a committee of Birch Bay residents interested in undergrounding utilities along Birch Bay Drive. The committee is sanctioned by the Birch Bay Chamber of Commerce, Middleton said.

“At the last public meeting, the number one concern we heard from community members was undergrounding the utilities,” Middleton said.

Burying electric, phone and other utility cables underground was once a priority for the road project, but due to high costs, a lack of funding and logistical obstacles it was removed from the scope of work. Early in project planning, the county sought funding to underground utilities during the road construction but their loan application was denied.

“The companies that own the utilities are not obligated to help pay for burying them. We tried to twist their arm legally, but it’s not going to happen,” Middleton said.

An estimate from the original design team for the berm project put the cost of undergrounding utilities at \$25 to \$30 million, far more than the cost of the berm project itself. Councilmember Rud Browne said he was, “floored” by that figure, and Middleton agreed that the amount seemed high to him. He recommended the council work with the Birch Bay undergrounding committee to form a local improvement district (LID) and hire a consultant to investigate costs, strategies and a best route forward. The LID would also be able to levy funds specifically for undergrounding utilities.

“That way they can save up money so that when the Birch Bay Water and Sewer District (BBWSD) replaces the sewer and water lines along Birch Bay Drive, they may be able to do it all in one package,” Middleton said.

Dan Eisses, assistant general manager for BBWSD, said in a phone interview the water and sewer lines along Birch Bay Drive were installed in the mid-70s with a 50–100 year material lifespan. Population growth could necessitate their replacement at any time, making it virtually impossible to estimate when the lines would need to be replaced.

The next public meeting for the Birch Bay Drive and Pedestrian Facility project is scheduled for June 6 at the Birch Bay Bible Community Church, 4460 Bay Road, Birch Bay. The time of the meeting has not been set yet.