

The O'Keefe Rail Trail is going places

By the Friends of the Bendigo-Kilmore Rail Trail

Yes, the 20 year old O'Keefe Rail Trail is getting a second lease of life...finally. With the support of communities, interest groups, trail users, and governments, the Friends of the Bendigo-Kilmore Rail Trail group are passionate about assisting the O'Keefe Rail Trail on its new journey of improvement.

With major funding from the former State Government's Regional Development Victoria, plus matching funding from the City of Greater Bendigo being announced in mid 2010, this \$3.2M extension upgrade of the existing O'Keefe trail will now connect Heathcote to Bendigo.

While there are physical signs that progress occurring at present, much planning is happening in the background. With the City of Greater Bendigo responsible for managing this project, the Friends of the Bendigo-Kilmore Rail Trail community group have been working closely to assist Council achieve a user friendly outcome.

Recent trail news and developments

- *New trail bridges*. The installation of six new trail bridges, which replaced the gaps caused by the removal of the original timber bridges when the railway line was dismantled, has now been completed between Bendigo and Axedale. Constructed from hot dipped galvanised steel structures with timber decking, these bridges are a great improvement on the previous bypass routes around these trail 'gaps'. Ironically the installation work had major delays due to the wet period last year, after 10+ years of drought!
- *Axecreek Swing Bridge Replacement*. For the original trail build, the gap due to the 1970's removal of the original railway bridge over the Axecreek waterway needed to be bridged. The outcome then was a swing bridge design, which was completed in 1993. This swing bridge does not now meet the needs of multiple trail user configurations (cycle trailers, recumbent cycles, horse riders, wheelchairs/wheeled mobility etc), plus its access difficulties from the higher level trail alignment. The Friends group made a submission earlier in 2011 to the City of Greater Bendigo Council requesting a review of this aging structure. This submission was successful, with a decision being made to replace the bridge with a high level fixed pedestrian/cycle type bridge. This new bridge will be the longest on the trail to date, at a span of 91 metres

long, yet the building of two longer bridges will be required for the trail extension to Heathcote. The tender process for this new Axecreek bridge is currently in progress and the outcome should be known shortly.

- *Trail Reconstruction and Resurfacing.* With approximately 20 years of use and weathering affects, the O'Keefe trail was suffering significantly. Minimal reactive maintenance had been the norm and this was clearly shown to be inadequate by today's standards. The City of Greater Bendigo Council as managers of the trail was approached, with the view of having specific maintenance budget allocation made for this trail. With an understanding of the situation, Council at its mid-year review made a reallocation of \$100,000 for the O'Keefe trail maintenance. Urgent priorities were identified by the Friends group, in conjunction with the Council, and work commenced immediately. The most significant works resulted in the complete reconstruction of a section trail from Bobs Street to Rohs Road (East Bendigo). This involved reformation, drainage upgrades and a new surface applied, with works being completed by June 2011. The result is outstanding, and now provides a safe section trail for all users.
- *Route Planning.* Trail route planning by City of Greater Bendigo Council is progressing for the trail extension project from Axedale to Heathcote. Due to changes in land use and ownership of the original railway corridor, this has presented challenges for the planning of trail's extension. Recent planning has focussed on the townships of Axedale and Heathcote's urban areas, and community consultation for the draft route will follow soon. It is still expected that the total distance of the trail, when this extension project is completed, will be approximately 50 kms overall. With future involvement of the Mitchell Shire, the community's vision to extend the trail onwards to Kilmore and Heathcote Junction/Wallan is hoped to be realised. The making of this vision a reality would provide a trail of approximately 100 kms, a link with the Melbourne-Swan Hill rail service and the Melbourne-Wodonga rail service, definitely a complete story!
- *Historic mile posts.* The original 19th century railway lines were installed with concrete distance markers or mile posts, not only did they indicate the 'down' line distance from Melbourne, yet they assisted engine drivers with their speed and trip planning. In most cases when railway lines were closed and the assets sold off, those posts were also removed. So Friends of the Bendigo-Kilmore Rail Trail member Ken Hanson had the idea to replicate these historic concrete posts for the O'Keefe Rail Trail. With the assistance of local businesses and other members, Ken manufactured replica concrete mile posts for when the O'Keefe trail will be extended to Heathcote. With the permission of Council, these white painted with black number posts have been progressively installed along the trail for the current Axedale to Bendigo section. The final replica 100 mile post (the original line was 100 miles, 74 chains & 34 links from

Melbourne to the junction with the now Melbourne-Swan Hill line) can now be seen near the Roh's Road (East Bendigo) crossing with the O'Keefe trail. This post is a fitting tribute to a unique idea.

- *Pyalong Timber Railway Bridges*. Two significant ex-railway timber bridges at Pyalong have survived for over a century, yet are now under serious threat of loss. The Mollison Creek bridge and the Hanfords Creek bridge were built in 1889 and 1890. The question is, are these bridges able to be saved and why? The Pyalong Restoration Group plus the Friends of the Bendigo-Kilmore Rail Trail community groups have had their eyes firmly fixed on these two remaining bridges at Pyalong, which were once part of the former Wallan-Sandhurst (Bendigo) railway line. Surviving for over 120 years, these heritage listed timber structures are still admired by many for the skill of those who designed, built and maintained them.

Interstate and international tourists are noted as coming to Pyalong to see the Mollison Creek bridge, which stands some 40+ metres above the creek bed. As the major tourist icon attraction for Pyalong and district, together with the Hanfords Creek bridge it was envisaged that they could play an important role in the vision to build a major rail trail from Kilmore East/Heathcote Junction to Bendigo.

Funding from the Victorian State government in 2010, through the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) enabled a full engineering assessment on the condition of these two bridges to take place. The recent release of this engineering report confirmed the very worst case scenario of a number of possible outcomes. Bottom line is that both bridges cannot be saved in their present form by just replacing failed piles and timber elements, both would have to be completely rebuilt to retain their original iconic design, plus they are now a safety hazard to the public. This is bad news, very bad news which unfortunately is the result from 60+ years of government and community neglect.

The way forward is uncertain, with one current thought to construct reduced scale replicas across both waterways for walkers and cyclists. Both community groups are now looking for ways to both retain the tourism aspects of these iconic bridges as well as create a rail trail through this area, and would appreciate any input from interested individuals or groups. Of course to do nothing is like the 'head in the sand' approach, and the wider community will in the end be the biggest losers!

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