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Head Out

[With Melissa DeVaughn]

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OK, I know the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail is the most popular path in all of Anchorage.

But I admit I rarely use it anymore. For a road-bike rider, it is not the best training grounds because higher speeds aren't safe around so many other users. I stick to long, open roads with wide shoulders or meandering back roads with little traffic.

But back when I lived in the city proper, the 11-mile Coastal Trail was one of my favorite running locations. My husband and I also took leisurely rides on our mountain bikes or skied on its groomed base. We shared this beautiful pathway with dog walkers, families with strollers, in-line skaters and runners.

So imagine my surprise when, on a whim last weekend, I decided to veer my training ride onto the Coastal Trail, riding from Chugiak to Point Woronzof for a change of scenery.

Here is what I saw: potholes, longitudinal cracks reaching crevasse-like proportions, what appeared to be a small sinkhole and an entire section of trail sloughed off onto the bank.

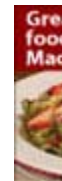
For those who use this gem of a trail system on a daily basis, the degradation has likely seemed gradual, nothing worth noting. But for me, it was shocking. What happened to that smooth, meandering pathway I remembered that encouraged users to look out at the view? I spent my time white-knuckled and tense, scanning the ground to avoid crashing into the chasms that litter this once-smooth surface.

I know many people will think worrying about something as additive as a recreational trail is wasted energy. There are more pressing issues, you'll say. We need safe roads for vehicle traffic first. I agree. Some of our roads are equally dangerous. Take a bike to such places as the back side of Potter Marsh or along Eagle River Road to enjoy, firsthand, the adventure that is road riding. There are places on these sections of road that are downright hazardous.



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Scenic rides now include unsightly sinkholes
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Still, there is something just wrong about a citified, groomed bike path that is more obstacle course than recreational trail. As I approached a section of trail beyond Westchester Lagoon, where a ballfield butts against the greenbelt, a family of four children and a father negotiated a torn-up section of path on tiny-wheeled scooters. As I got closer, the smallest of the children, a dark-haired boy about 6 years old, crashed right off into the weeds on the side of the trail as he tried to go over a particularly large bump. When I reached him, I slowed down to see if he was OK.

He was, but I was infuriated. What will it take to repave this trail? Not only is it one of Anchorage's best assets -- how many tourists use this path to take in views of the city during post-meal walks? -- it's a matter of public safety. And how can the city justify touting this as a bike path when only the fattest of tires can handle the abuse?

The municipality, to its credit, is doing everything it can to rectify the problems. Despite a cut made by Gov. Palin to an item in the capital budget that would have addressed the problems, the municipality is forging ahead.

Monique Anderson, parks superintendent for the municipality, said users should start to see improvements on the trail beginning next year. After the parks bond passed in the last election, and after some reorganization within the maintenance department shifted resources back to parks, there is now some manpower and money to put toward improvements.

"We hope to start making a difference," she said. "We know that most of our park users are trail users, and we've been woefully neglect in keeping our main usership happy."

Another bonus is a private donor who is working through the Anchorage Park Foundation to finance part of the upgrades to trail improvements.

"As we start to make improvements and people see that we have capacity to do that kind of thing, I get calls from donors who want to help," said Beth Nordlund with the Park Foundation. It's a cumulative effect, she added.

For now, though, be prepared for a bumpy ride. The Coastal Trail clearly needs to be improved before other trail projects are launched. Maintenance and resurfacing should be high on the municipality's list so we can brag about our great trail system for years to come.

?• Play outdoor columnist Melissa DeVaughn can be reached at adn.com/contact/mdevaughn or call 257-4482.

Coastal Trail erosion: Have your say

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