



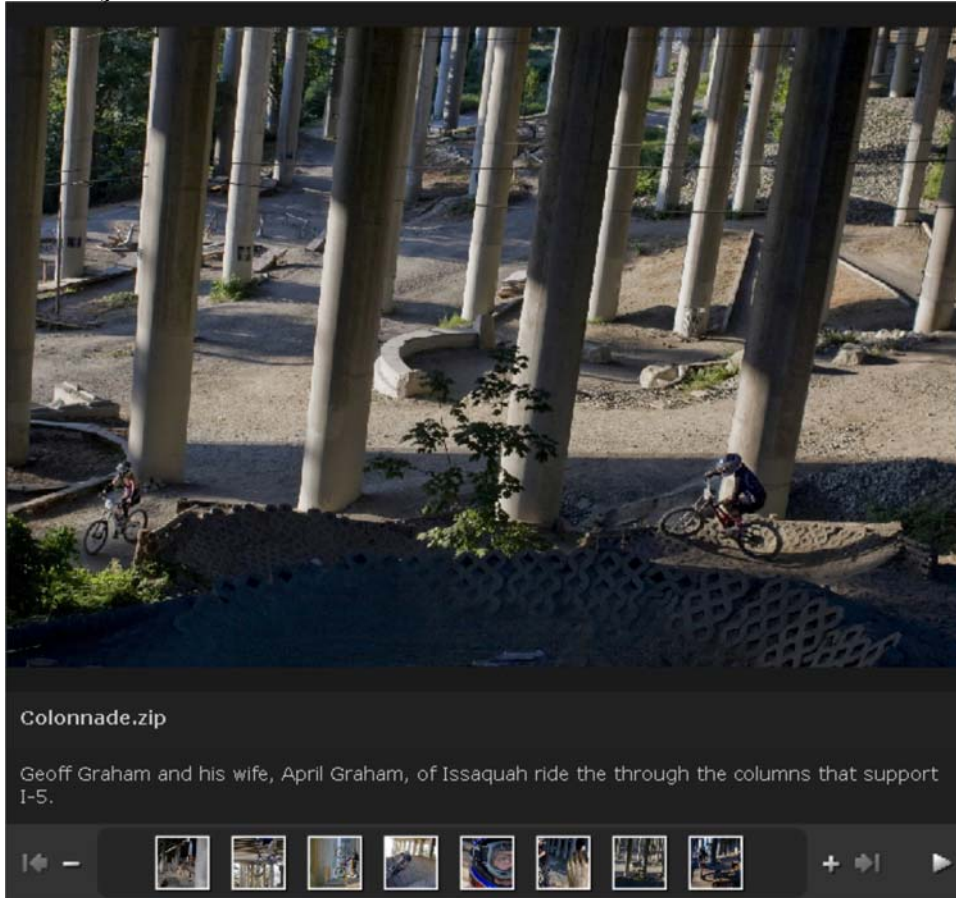
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Everything Oregon

Mountain bikers rock under Seattle freeway on I-5 Colonnade

By Terry Richard, The Oregonian

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Photos by Jamie Francis, The Oregonian

Even after a two-month West Coast bike tour from Mexico to Canada, Ben Donnelly was bug-eyed when he got a look at Seattle's I-5 Colonnade, billed as the world's first urban mountain bike park of its type.

"This is nothing but awesome, really cool," said the 24-year-old rider from Asheville, N.C., the mountain playground of the southern Appalachians. "The Pacific Northwest knows how to build mountain bike trails. And I thought Asheville was a mountain bike mecca."

After making his observation, he dropped into a steep rock chute, wheeled his bike over a teeter-totter and across a ladder bridge.

Even someone who doesn't ride would likely be impressed by Colonnade, tucked as it is into an area once frequented by heroin junkies beneath 16 lanes of freeway at the north end of downtown Seattle.

Mountain bikers and city park managers see it as such a success that Portland is looking at how to develop similar mountain bike skill parks in unused lands near freeways.

"It was really a nasty place when we started building," said Justin Vander Pol, a 35-year-old Seattle bicycling advocate who began work on the project in 2002. "We picked up boxes and boxes of needles. It was not a safe place to be."

Colonnade opened in 2005 after three years of collaboration by the city parks department, the Eastlake neighborhood and a bicycle advocacy group (now called the Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance).

It was completed three years later when most every inch of the 7.5-acre park was built out.

Colonnade has become the place to ride in the city, especially in winter because of its sheltered location beneath the freeway. The park's reputation has spread by word of mouth and through the mountain bike press around the globe.

Mountain bikers from Oregon, traveling Interstate 5 north for some big mountain riding at Whistler, B.C., shouldn't miss having a look at Colonnade, named after the series of tall concrete columns that support the elevated freeway as it crosses lower Capitol Hill. The bike park was largely funded by grants and private donations, with thousands of hours of volunteer labor provided by cyclists. The city furnished legal cover and planning, then chipped in for a few picnic tables, an off-leash area for dogs and a staircase.

The staircase was important because it rallied the neighborhood around the project. Eastlake's hillside houses had been cut off from the east shore of Lake Union since the freeway was built in the 1960s. The smallest neighborhood in Seattle, also in dire need of a park, now has one of the city's signature recreational features.

And what features it has.

Though the park is said to accommodate novices, it most definitely is a place for serious riders. The jumps and drops are made from surplus rock, concrete and trees provided by the city. Riding with helmets and a bevy of protective gear is the only sane way to go.

As an example of the technical nature of the riding, Colonnade's pump track is a small trail system where riders use their arms to pump up and down on the handlebars to build up speed through terrain features without pedaling.

Much of the land that the park's features have been built into hasn't been watered since the freeway was built, so anything not solid is a dusty powder.

The park crams about 1.5 miles of trail into its confined space, but it's what riders do on the trails that counts.

They drop down chutes on their bikes and fly across chasms. They cross a ladder bridge that rocks like a roller coaster. They gingerly twist through the tight and curvy Limestone Loop.

All on their lunch hour, or on their commute, for some.

"It's four blocks from my work," said David Cole, a 32-year-old graphics designer who lives on Capitol Hill. "It's a great place to spend a couple hours of my day, doing 20 to 30 jumps. It's the perfect place for anyone into hucking and jumping."

Colonnade has become quite a place for spectators, too, especially for bikers who can only dream of having the skills to ride there.

Is Portland next?

Recreation parks near freeways or beneath bridges are not unique. The Burnside Skatepark, beneath the east end of the Burnside Bridge, has been a fixture for two decades in Portland. Same with the McKinley Skate Park in Corvallis, beneath the U.S. 20 bypass.

Mountain bike parks require more space than skate parks. When Seattle showed it could be done by building Colonnade, it got Oregonians thinking. Portland is moving ahead with its study, but an idea for one in Eugene/Springfield has been abandoned.

Gateway Green: This proposed mountain bike park is in a 35-acre no-man's land, where interstates 84 and 205 cross paths in northeast Portland's Gateway district. Called Gateway Green, this is an official Oregon Solutions Project

I-5 Colonnade

Address: 1600
Lakeview Blvd. E.,
Seattle

Directions: When traveling north on Interstate 5, take the Lakeview Boulevard exit at the north end of downtown. Park immediately on the street (probably the easiest free parking spot you'll find near downtown Seattle). The bike park is on the left, under the freeway.

Upkeep: The park is cared for by the **city parks department** and the **Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance**.

designated by the governor.

A number of affected parties -- transportation officials, park planners, bicycle advocates -- meet regularly to address planning, access, parking, security, neighborhood impact and more. A working blueprint should be issued next summer. Details: gatewaygreenpdx.org

Eugene Mountain Bike Park: The new I-5 bridge across the Willamette River in Eugene/Springfield, due for 2012 completion, sounded like a good cover for a mountain bike park, similar to Colonnade. But the Oregon Department of Transportation and Lane County Mountain Bike Association abandoned the idea after realizing it would require significant wetlands mitigation and renegotiation of a lease with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

-- **Terry Richard**

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