

Plan for scenic bike path hits bumps

Citizen April 10/17
NPS

PARKS CANADA

LAURA KANE

VANCOUVER • Parks Canada often promotes the Icefields Parkway between Jasper and Banff as “one of the most scenic drives in the world,” but a plan to build a bike path along the route has hit its fair share of bumps in the road.

Documents suggest Parks Canada has been rushing ahead with the project after receiving federal money in 2016 with a two-year expiry date.

Months before public consultations began, officials discussed when shovels could hit the ground and looked ahead to a “kickoff” event that would celebrate the start of construction.

“The agency has lost its transparency and its respect for public engagement,” said Alison Woodley, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society national parks program director, who added the project should have never gotten off the ground.

“They’ve got this massive influx of money and now the money is driving the project instead of due public process.”

Last year’s federal budget contained \$66 million to develop a 107-kilometre bike trail from the Jasper townsite to the Columbia Icefields along the parkway. The trail, with a total budget of \$86 million, could eventually extend all the way to Banff.

Cyclists currently hug a narrow shoulder along the highway. Parks Canada is proposing a separate, paved route buffered from the busy road by 10 to 20 metres of trees, but environmental groups say it will damage sensitive caribou and grizzly bear habitat.

Public consultations began in January. Environment minister Catherine McKenna is expected to make a final decision based on the results of public feedback and a yet-to-be-completed detailed impact analysis, also known as an environmental assessment.

However, documents obtained under Access to Information legislation by researcher Ken Rubin and provided to The Canadian Press suggest that Parks Canada staff have been proceeding for months as if the project is a done deal.

In a draft communications plan prepared in August 2016, staff wrote up a timetable for media events that included an event to mark the start of construction, “when Phase 1 of the project is shovel ready,” at an undetermined date in 2017. The timetable also includes a ribbon cutting to open Phase 1 — the Jasper to Columbia Icefields portion — at an undetermined date.

“There’s a big push to start spending in these first two years as (budget 2016) funding is not available to be carried forward to the third year,” say August meeting minutes.

Parks Canada spokeswoman Audrey Champagne said in a statement that public consultation and engagement are key priorities. The proposed trail is currently in the conceptual phase and no final decisions have been made, she said.

The Canadian Press