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Trails through Arana Gulch are well-traveled in the afternoon.

ARANA GULCH

State coastal panel staff recommends project

Greenbelt
Opponents intend to speak against paved paths

By J.M. BROWN

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SANTA CRUZ — A state Coastal Commission planner on Thursday recommended the agency's board approve the Arana Gulch Master Plan, including controversial paved trails through the 68-acre greenbelt, when it meets in two weeks.

"That is good news," Santa Cruz Public Works Director Mark Dettle said. "We hope we can move forward."

Susan Craig, the coastal planner who drafted the report, recom-

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CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION HEARING

WHAT: Arana Gulch Master Plan

WHEN: 9 a.m. March 11

WHERE: Board of Supervisors Chamber, 701 Ocean St., Room 525, Santa Cruz

mended approving the long-stalled project with several conditions including managing the endangered Santa Cruz tarplant habitat, avoiding seasonal wetlands, improving public access and addressing lighting.

SEE ARANA GULCH ON A2

SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL



Jean Brocklebank, Vince Cheap and Mike Lewis oppose the proposed Arana Gulch paved bike path. Brocklebank says the present dirt trails can be maintained with little effort.

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ARANA GULCH

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She said she believed the project would serve pedestrians, bicyclists and disabled residents while not significantly disturbing the environmentally sensitive habitat, which has been the key concern of opponents. A U.S. Fish and Wildlife study determined the paths would cover only 0.4 acres of the tarplant's 65-acre habitat inside the greenbelt and could benefit the federally protected tarplant.

"With all the restoration and mitigation measures, we feel it will have a positive impact on the tarplant," Craig said. "There is the environmental sensitivity, but you also have public access goals, as well. You have to look at both of those and come to the best conclusion."

Of the 900-plus letters received by the commission regarding the project, 90 percent favored the project and 10 percent were opposed, Craig said. The public will have further opportunity to weigh in when the 15-member commission votes on the project during its 9 a.m. session March 11 at the Board of Supervisors chamber, 701 Ocean St., Room 525.

Final designs and a funding plan are still pending for the project, which has been estimated to cost about \$4 million. The final cost won't be known

COASTAL COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION

The full text of the Coastal Commission staff recommendation for the Arana Gulch Master Plan is at <http://documents.coastal.ca.gov/reports/2010/3/Th7a-3-2010.pdf>.

until the project is put out to bid.

The commission's vote is the last major hurdle to ending a 15-year battle with opponents. The 8-foot-wide trails and two bridges called for in the plan will connect Broadway and Brommer Street, a transportation improvement that defined the city's push for the project until recent years, when environmental restoration also became a key objective.

Opponents who sued to stop the 0.6 miles of paved paths lost in Superior Court and on the appellate level, after which the state Supreme Court declined to hear a further challenge.

"While we are still opposed to paving critical habitat of the endangered tarplant, we are encouraged by the extensive conditions of approval of the staff recommendation," said Jean Brocklebank, a spokeswoman for Friends of Arana Gulch. "We still

intend to speak in absolute opposition to the Broadway-Brommer transportation project at the hearing."

Councilwoman Katherine Beiers, who was opposed to the city's initial plans to put a road through Arana Gulch, said she believes the bike trails later approved by the council strike a balance between improving public access and protecting the tarplant, which began to decline in the 1980s when grazing on the former dairy site ended.

"I do have total respect for people who have done their very best to keep it just open," said Beiers, a competitive runner who traverses Arana Gulch once a week. "They are friends, and I respect them. But I really think it's going to work out fine."

Paul Schoellhamer, a Pajaro Valley resident and former congressional aide for environmental policy, applauded what he said was Craig's recognition that the project "would be great for the environment and for access to and along the coast." He said a "staff recommendation this strong is a very significant thing."

Also at the commission's three-day meeting, which will mark the first in Santa Cruz in the last 25 years, the panel will hear UC Santa Cruz's proposal to offer docent-led tours to Younger Lagoon Reserve and adjacent beach area and create a five-year plan to monitor plant life.