

SANTA CRUZ GREENBELT

Coastal Commission: Study Arana Gulch alternatives

Panel delays vote on plan to pave trails in 68-acre open space



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

The California Coastal Commissioners toured Arana Gulch on Thursday along with local officials and interested parties demonstrating for their sides.

COMMISSIONERS INDICATE PROPOSAL DOESN'T DO ENOUGH TO PROTECT ENDANGERED TARPLANT

Greenbelt
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SANTA CRUZ — After losing two court rulings in as many years, opponents of the city's plan to pave dual paths through Arana Gulch won a reprieve from the California Coastal Commission on Thursday.

The panel called for a deeper look at a substitute proposal that would avoid the endangered tarplant habitat while still providing access to cyclists and the disabled.

After hearing four hours of public testimony about the Arana Gulch Master Plan, Commissioner Mark Stone, a Santa Cruz County supervisor, made the motion to continue the matter, saying, "We would like to give this project another shot and look to see if there is a way to satisfy the commission."

Stone and a majority of other

commissioners had indicated they would defy their own staff and vote against a proposal they saw as a transportation project dressed up as a conservation plan. They said the California Coastal Act would only permit paths to bisect the 68-acre greenbelt if they were "resource dependent," meaning critical to the education and appreciation of an environmentally sensitive habitat.

The turning point in Thursday's hearing, which was part of commission's first meetings in Santa Cruz in 25 years, came when the agency's ecologist, John Dixon, said he would back the project if only because a lack of human intervention would spell doom for the tarplant. The city's proposal includes a habitat management plan that would fence in sensitive areas and monitor the tarplant's response to the paved paths, but



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

A small group of demonstrators lobbied for their cause as Coastal Commissioners toured Arana Gulch Thursday.

SEE OPEN SPACE ON A9



ROBINSON KUNTZ/SENTINEL

Micah Posner of People Power speaks in favor of the proposed trail system at Arana Gulch during the California Coastal Commission hearing on Thursday.

OPEN SPACE

Continued from A1

it also would feature two bridges connecting Broadway with Brommer Street through the heart of the gulch.

Commissioners, who walked on the site's dirt paths Thursday morning, instructed Dixon and the agency's internal planners to work with the city to study alternative paths around Arana Gulch, as recommended by the California Native Plant Society. No deadline was set.

The various plans have split environmental camps and avid cyclists who disagree over how to promote an alternative east-west transportation route and safeguard the tarplant.

"This is good," Vince Cheap, a plant society leader, said of the delay. "It will be interesting to see how it will turn out."

The group, along with the Friends of Arana Gulch, sued in 2007 to stop the paving. A state appellate court upheld a Santa Cruz judge's ruling favoring the city, and the California Supreme Court declined to hear a challenge.

Proponents of the project, which dates back to 1994 when the city bought the former dairy site, had hoped the commission would finally put the long-stalled plans into motion. Juliana Rebagliati, the city's planning director, said the county Regional Transportation Commission — the chief funder of the \$4.2 million plan — has already said an alternative path won't create a safe and accessible corridor connecting Santa Cruz to Live Oak.

Rebagliati said she was "obviously disappointed" and suspected the alternative plan would only raise new concerns, including proximity to other sensitive plant life.

Commissioner Mary Shallenberger of San Francisco said that was a risk worth taking because she was prepared to vote against the paving. She said the agency's staff who endorsed the plan "clearly had it wrong."

QUOTES FROM THE CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION HEARING

PRO

■ Elizabeth Schilling, executive director of the Live Oak Family Resource Center, said the paved paths would address social and economic justice issues by helping low-income people who walk, bike or take public transportation from Mid-County to work downtown or at UC Santa Cruz. "It's a well thought-out plan for the sake of the sustainability community. It's a chance for the Coastal Commission to act on global warming."

■ County planner Susan Harris said paving would encourage more residents to use the trails, which in turn would reduce crime. "More eyes on the trails make open spaces safe for everyone." She also said the plan protects 90 percent of the greenbelt from public access and ends the practice of eroding the ground through dirt paths. "This removes all unauthorized trails," she said.

■ Councilwoman Cynthia Mathews said the Arana Gulch Master Plan "represents years and years of effort and cooperation with the community." She said it includes a "rigorous program to manage the tarplant, wetland and riparian areas. Fifteen years is a long time and now is the time to bring it to conclusion."

CON

■ Former Mayor Sally DiGirolamo, who lives on a street next to Arana Gulch, urged the commission to block the plan. "The more people, the more damage there is going to be. I can see nothing good coming from putting in paths. Do what is right not what is popular."

■ Jean Brocklebank, spokeswoman for Friends of Arana Gulch, said there is a good reason why the project has been delayed 15 years. "If it was a good project, it would have been done a long time ago. Something must be wrong with it."

■ Steve McCabe, an endangered plant specialist who worked at the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum, said the paved path is being promoted as "the hybrid car of trails." He said it's more like the "Humvee of trails — the passengers feel cool but they are not helping the environment. If we can't protect endangered plants in Santa Cruz, where do they have a chance?"

"Save it. Don't Pave It."

Commissioner Richard Bloom of Santa Monica supported the project, saying bicycle access "is a really important issue we need to address."

Takashi Yogi, a member of the 500-member cycling advocacy group People Power, said the plan provides a safe route that protects habitat.

"We can preserve the tarplant not by leaving it alone but by aggressively protecting it," he said.

Several members of the Sierra Club's Santa Cruz chapter favored the paths, saying they would help visitors safely traverse the area. But other members disagreed, including Patri-

cia Matejcek, a founder of Friends of Arana Gulch, who said environmentalists shouldn't support a transportation project "decorated" to look like an interpretive trail system.

"Putting lipstick on a pig doesn't make it a supermodel," she said.

Peter Heylin, who chairs the county's Commission on Disabilities, said the alternative path would not be as usable for people under the federal American Disabilities Act.

"I am a lunatic environmentalist, and I am sort of embarrassed that our brother and sister organizations would call using the ADA issue a 'trojan horse,'" Heylin said.

plant life.

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Some commissioners were swayed by Gray Hayes, a tarplant expert, who said, "The whole area must be considered to have the tarplant." He said the tarplant seed would not meander well around paved paths.

Commissioner Sara Wan of Malibu agreed, saying well-intentioned transportation initiatives can't come at the expense of a federally protected plant. "The only way to save a species on the verge of extinction is to save its habitat," she said.

For an issue that has sparked intense debate, Thursday's discourse was notably civil. There were only a couple of catcalls from the sign-toting audience, where supporters wore green T-shirts featuring a bicycle and the phrase "Coastal Access." Opponents, who have said creating more access for the disabled was a "ruse," wore bumper stickers on the back of their shirts that read

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