

Trail plan now an ambitious reality

RTC vote comes over objections
from Watsonville farmers

By JASON HOPPIN

jhoppin@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — With cities already lining up to turn designs into reality, Santa Cruz County transportation officials on Thursday gave final approval to an ambitious 50-mile, \$126.7 million countywide network of trails.

With a 9-3 vote, the Regional Transportation Commission adopted the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail Network Master Plan, a long-discussed trail system that uses the Branch Rail Line as backbone to carry people across coastal bluffs, over river gorges and through strawberry fields.

"It has been referred to by many as a crown jewel of an active transportation system," said Cory Caletti, a planner who helped spearhead the effort with Oakland-based Rincon Consultants.

Broken into 20 segments and expected to take years to complete, the plan provides local governments and the RTC a blueprint for the future. The trail primarily follows the 31-mile Branch Rail line, but includes miles of spurs that venture off into neighborhoods or toward the shore.

The price tag also include 26 new bridges, from a future multimillion-dollar La Selva Beach span now in the planning stages to a new crossing over the San Lorenzo River, near the Beach Boardwalk.

TRAIL

Continued from A1

It also will connect with a sister trail in Monterey County, giving cyclists and pedestrians an off-street thoroughfare that runs from north of Davenport to Lover's Point.

But a small group of South County farmers lobbied for a four-mile Watsonville segment to be removed from the plan. The commission declined to do so, but approved language meant to address the agricultural industry's concerns.

In a letter to the commission, farmers cited California's landmark environmental law, the California Environmental Quality Act, in raising several objections. They included potential trespassing and food contamination from pets, but also whether the trail would disrupt fumigation and pesticide-spraying operations and make some farmland unusable.

"There could be a whole world of hurt or problems," said Struve Farms' Teresa Knox, who has hired a lawyer and suggested the plan could end up in court, citing controversies in other counties.

Some farmers even want a 200-foot buffer between the trail and farms, a county restriction on development near farms but one not in place near rural county roads. The move likely would force a realignment of the trail.

"The reality is those buffers will be needed, and if they're not incorporated into the plan, it will be on the burden of the landowners to incorporate them," Watsonville farmer Steven Dobler said.

But most commissioners said those concerns could be addressed at a later date. North Coast farmers — perhaps more used to having people crisscross their land — also raised concerns about the plan, but did not lodge a formal protest.

"This is not a new subject,"

transportation Commissioner Dennis Norton said. "We have a defined pathway that's been discussed for 13 years."

Officials with the Washington-based Rails-to-Trails Conservancy said it is not uncommon for farmers to raise concerns about trails — including pesticide issues — but that they can be easily addressed.

"Out here in the Midwest I don't know of any trail that does anything other than put signs up" warning users, said Eric Oberg, manager of trail development at the Conservancy's Midwest office, where farms are abundant. "It's about all they do."

Local farmers said soil fumigation, common on strawberry fields, could force the trail to close. But Oberg said that's not a deal-breaker either: Hunting seasons bring short closures, an option that seems to work.

"There's precedent for that," Oberg said. "There's trails that do manage for temporary closures."

State law already indem-

nifies landowners adjacent to the trail from liability, and concerns that pet excrement will contaminate food doesn't take into account that wildlife already does the same thing, trail supporters said.

Paul Schoellhamer, a cycling advocate who owns a small farm in South County, said there is still time to perfect the Watsonville segment, which likely won't be built in the immediate future.

"It will be a great way for a lot of people to appreciate the open spaces of our county, including the open spaces provided by agriculture," Schoellhamer said. "Don't slow up the entire the entire trail for a problem that may or may not exist on one segment."

Caletti, the RTC planner, said her agency already has received seven applications from local governments hoping to build part of the trail.

Follow Sentinel reporter Jason Hoppin at [Twitter.com/scnewsdude](https://twitter.com/scnewsdude)

ON THE NET:

To view the master plan of the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail from the Regional Transportation Commission, visit <http://goo.gl/C901YN>

