

Bridge opens, links counties

By TERESA JIMENEZ
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Bicyclists, farmers and South County residents have a safer and less congested link between Monterey and Santa Cruz counties now that the Thurwatcher-McGowan Bridge has been rebuilt.

Representatives from Monterey and Santa Cruz counties cut the official ribbon Wednesday, opening the Thurwatcher-McGowan bridge up to the public.

The bridge is one of three places where the Pajaro River can be crossed, allowing access between the two counties. The Pajaro Bridge at Main Street and Highway 1 are the only other crossing points.

About 100 people came to celebrate the bridge's completion, including county supervisors, farmers, Farm Bureau representatives and residents interested in history.

The ribbon-cutting was followed by a parade of tractors that bystanders said were "testing out" the bridge.

The bridge is located on Thurwatcher Road off West Beach Street, and is 470 feet long and 30 feet wide.

Before the bridge was condemned seven years ago, farmers on both sides used it to reach their land across the river.

Santa Cruz and Monterey counties each chipped in \$230,000 for the \$2 million project, and construction was completed on time and within budget.

Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau President Kirk Schmidt said the bridge is the only one that provides bicycle lanes. The link is part of the state-wide Pacific Coast bicycle route.

Cyclists have been crossing the river at the busy Pajaro and Highway 1 bridges, Schmidt said.

"This shows what communication can do," said Monterey County Supervisor Judy Pennycook.

County Supervisor Robley Levy agreed.

"This took six months in building and 10 years in planning and financing. Bridges are symbolic," Levy said of the joint venture.

Now that the Thurwatcher-McGowan Bridge is complete, Pennycook and Supervisor Ray Belgard are discussing a possible improvement of Murphy Crossing Road to provide an additional access across the Pajaro River.

The 11-mile-long road usually floods during the rainy season, and remains closed to traffic for several months, Belgard said.

Belgard said there have been several informal meetings, and both counties are considering chipping in a third of the cost for improvements.

"Maybe we can get Caltrans funding since it links state roads," Belgard said. Murphy Crossing Road is off Highway 129. "The project is a long way away, but it's worth exploring."

According to Caltrans, 2,700 vehicles a day cross through Murphy Crossing Road.