Beach-area bike path gets facelift

$5.5M plan will shore up eroding riverbank

Bicycle Paths

4·6·04

By DAN WHITE
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Runners, walkers and bicyclists have learned to hate the ugly path between the Laurel Street Extension and Third Street.

Narrow and treacherous, it channels bicyclists into traffic on Third Street, then forces them to negotiate busy Riverside Avenue. The path also runs along unstable ground that threatens to wash into the San Lorenzo River during a major storm.

Now the city and the federal government are teaming to shore up this weak spot along the San Lorenzo River levee and increase bike access at the same time. On Monday, while 40 people stood by, a group of state, federal and local dignitaries broke ground on the $5.5 million project that will forge one of the last missing links on a paved path that circles the levee while shoring up a section of the riverbed.

Path

Builders will install a 900-foot wall along an unstable section of riverbank between the Riverside Avenue and Laurel Street bridges. The wall will also enable the construction of an upgraded bike path along the levee. According to planners, the project should begin later this month and wrap up in November.

The money will come from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, bond money, the California Coastal Conservancy and the city.

Some consider the project to be the last major step in a massive San Lorenzo River levee upgrade, which has spanned two decades and cost an estimated $60 million, with the cooperation of the city and the Army Corps.

A succession of city councils, with the backing of Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, have supported the project. Farr likened the upgraded levee, with landscaping and native plants, to Central Park in New York City, with its emphasis on public access and aesthetics.

But the wheels turned slowly for this latest addition to the levee.

"This section of riverbank washed out in 1982, just to give you an idea of how long it took, even with the political will to do this," Mayor Scott Kennedy told the crowd at the groundbreaking.

Without the repair, it would only be a matter of time before a flood took out that section of riverbank, said Donna Meyers of the Santa Cruz City Manager's Office.

But Carlos Garza, who serves on the city's Transportation Commission, said the project has a secondary benefit — creating continuous bike access from downtown to the beach area.

The narrow path offers little maneuvering room. On Monday, just after the groundbreaking, a bicyclist with a baby carrier had to think fast to avoid crashing into two other mothers, both strolling the walkway with baby carriages.

The path that now exists at the far end of Laurel Street Extension is little more than a strip of gravel with concrete barricades on one side and an ivy-choked fence on the other.

It is now 6 feet wide, but will be smoothed out and widened 4 feet. According to the Army Corps, a wall that will extend out into the riverbank will enable builders to fashion a bike/walkway that runs parallel to Third Street then ducks under the Riverside Avenue bridge instead of requiring bicyclists to negotiate a major traffic intersection.

The project will fill a major missing piece of pedestrian/bike trail, though city officials have more levee access projects on their wish list; there is another "missing piece" on the other side of the levee, near the Soquel Avenue bridge, and there is also talk of a bike-way/walkway spanning the river close to Highway 1.

The Laurel Street project also spiffs up an area where police occasionally respond to complaints of drug sales. Santa Cruz Police Lt. Lee Sepulveda said the project could open up "that area, making it more inviting, with people going through there. Criminals don't like to hang out (in well-traveled areas.)"

A cyclist heads toward downtown from Beach Hill along the Laurel Street Extension bike path, which is being rebuilt for $5.5 million.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Contact Dan White at dwhite@santacruzsentinel.com.