

# ARANA GULCH PLAN FACES ANOTHER DELAY



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

A cyclist pedals along the existing dirt path through Arana Gulch on Thursday.

## Coastal Commission staff wants more time to study city's changes

*Greenbelt*  
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SANTA CRUZ — The California Coastal Commission will not hear the city's revised proposal for Arana Gulch next month as planned because the panel's staff is still analyzing numerous changes, officials said Thursday.

Susan Craig, a coastal planner based in the agency's Santa Cruz office, said more time is need to evaluate potential impacts of the proposal submitted by the city in recent weeks, which outlines an altered multi-use trail system

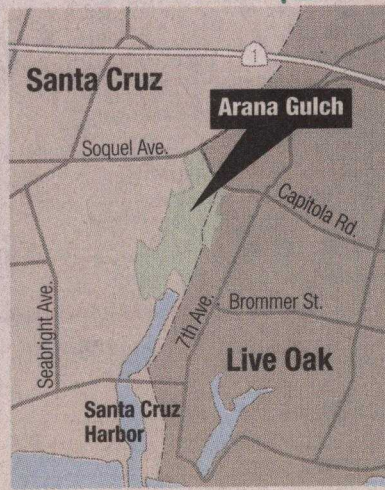
for the 68-acre greenbelt.

After raising concerns about alternative trail alignments during an initial hearing in March, commissioners were slated to rehear the city's application for a coastal permit Aug. 11 in San Luis Obispo, but now are unlikely to consider it again for several months. In order to meet a state deadline, commissioners would have to act on the application by their October meeting or allow Santa Cruz to withdraw its plans and immediately resubmit them in order to reset the state's clock.

Michael Ferry, an associate planner for the city, said staff would meet in coming days about how to proceed. Moving ahead with an October hearing in San Diego would mean fewer local people could address the commission in person, but a resubmitted application could potentially be heard in December, when the meeting is much closer in San Francisco.

In March, after touring Arana Gulch, commissioners, including Santa Cruz County Supervisor Mark Stone, asked

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ANTHONY L. SOLIS/SENTINEL

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the city to study the California Native Plant Society's idea to realign trails away from the major native tarplant habitat zones. Several commissioners disagreed with their own staff's recommendation to pass the city's plan in March, with some saying that transportation objectives — not tarplant restoration — seemed to be driving the project.

The project's \$2.7 million in federal and local funding is mostly tied to transportation initiatives. The proposed trails would provide an east-west connection for bicyclists by linking Broadway to Brommer Street, and city planners say the transportation money is critical for establishing

a tarplant restoration program.

But the plant society and Friends of Arana Gulch have long argued that the entire greenbelt, a sprawling grassland that sits above the Santa Cruz harbor, represents tarplant habitat and that any paving will further destroy its seed bank. They want to see the city create a restoration program independent of the 8-foot-wide bike paths and allow the low-impact pedestrian and dog-walking access on dirt trails to continue.

The city met with plant society members to map out the group's recommendations and walked commission staff, as well as members of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game, through a comparison of both plans.

The city determined the plant society's plan, which includes creating an elevated, boardwalk-style path rather than porous concrete or asphalt sought by the city, would cause greater harm to the overall coastal prairie habitat. The city says the plant group's plan doubles the size of the construction zone, leads to more tree removal and requires retaining walls and guard rails to cope with steeper grades.

Craig, the coastal planner, said she will largely agree with the city in her forthcoming staff report, saying she has concerns about the impacts of the plant society's plans on drainage, prairie disruption and other significant factors.

Vince Cheap, a spokesman for the plant society, wrote in an e-mail that, "CNPS still

believes that an alternative path through Arana Gulch that preserves the plant achieves the city's goal of providing a bike path is feasible."

The city has nonetheless made a number of changes to its own plan. Among them:

- Realignment of the paved trails so they no longer bisect historic tarplant areas and now avoid seasonal wetlands;

- An increased area for grazing, which helps the tarplant thrive;

- All unauthorized trails will be removed;

- A pavilion area will be added to the Agnes Street entrance to Arana Gulch to provide resting areas and an interpretive display.

"It's an excellent effort," Ferry said. "We've shown them enough technical information that they can make an informed decision."