

SANTA CRUZ

Planned Sanctuary Trail shows county's ambition

Trails
Walking, biking paths a long way from completion

By Jason Hoppin
Santa Cruz Sentinel

SANTA CRUZ — The first thing to know about the trail is it has a long road ahead.

In 2013 county transportation officials finished off the blueprint for a 50-mile network of walking and biking trails called the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail. It is almost staggeringly ambitious for a county where big projects don't come along often — an early price pegs the cost at \$126 million — and it could take decades to complete.

But the plan was almost universally lauded when released in October. Using the 32-mile Branch Rail Line as a backbone, the trail will take users from the vistas of the North Coast to the strawberry fields of South County, all while keeping them safely tucked off the county's buzzing roadways.

"I think it's beautiful. Somebody ... said it was one of the best of its kind, which is saying a lot. One of the consultants working on this said it was the highlight of their career," said Cory Caletti, a senior transportation planner with the Regional Transportation Commission. "You have the separation, you have the coastal access. Those two things are a spectacular combination."

The RTC finished off 2013 by approving \$5.3 million to kick-start three segments of the line, including a long section through Santa Cruz's Westside that should be heavily traveled. It is meant as early proof the line would be popular.

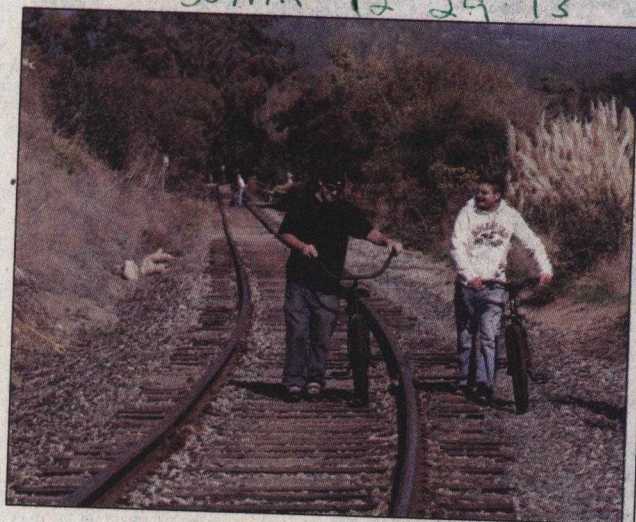
"In order to get the required funding, which is going to take a long time, the trail is going to have to have

successes, said Leo Jed, a member of the RTC's bicycle committee. "Once you have a history of successes, I think the funding will flow easier."

The plan was designed by San Luis Obispo-based RRM Designs. When completed, the trail will cross more than two dozen new bridges, including over the San Lorenzo River near the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk to a new structure along a beachside canyon near La Selva Beach.

The trail hasn't been universally lauded. Some South County farmers are concerned whether trail users would impact their operations, while others wonder why the RTC doesn't refund the state money used to buy the Branch Rail Line and rip out the tracks, likely saving money on the trail plan in the long run.

And despite the funding now in place, construction on the line isn't likely to begin in 2014. Both Santa Cruz and Watsonville must approve permits, hold public hearings and do environmental reviews, even though the RTC commissioned a master environmental impact report.



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The Branch Rail Line will be the backbone of a planned network of walking and biking trails.

But Caletti said there is plenty of progress to make. Over the next year, the RTC hopes to begin stitching together partnerships to help put together the money needed to pay for the project. By the end of the 2014 — and hopefully sooner — businesses, nonprofits and ordinary people should have a way to donate money toward completion of the trail.

Ultimately, the goal is to add a man-made asset to local recreational opportunities in a county that has typically relied on its natural wonders.

Backers also hope the trail makes people healthier and happier by getting them out of their cars and onto the trail.

"I think that the No. 1 barrier to people riding bikes and walking more is safety, and there's nothing like separated facilities to get people out and about," Caletti said.

Jed said he is sure the benefits will come.

"More people will get on bicycles. They will feel safer — the environment, the views will be fantastic over many parts of the trail," Jed said.