

Arana Gulch Bridge and Walkways Approved Amid Environmental Objections

by Michael Thomas

✓ Santa Cruz County Superior Court Judge Paul Burdick cleared the way in November for parts of Arana Gulch to be improved. New bike paths and a 330-foot suspension bridge may soon link Live Oak and the city of Santa Cruz. The Santa Cruz City Council approved a Master Plan for the 67.7-acre greenbelt property on July 11.

The Plan includes a half-mile of new trails, a new entrance to the property from Frederick Street and a bridge providing a bicycle link between Broadway and Brommer streets.

The planned improvements will vastly increase public access. Currently, there are only dirt trails and the property is used lightly. The land is owned by the city, most of it purchased in 1994 for a sale price of \$3.4 million.

Prior to the city's purchase, hundreds of housing units had been proposed for the land. Initially, the city considered extensive improvements, including a soccer field, parking, restrooms and a potential school site.

Those plans have been much reduced since the site was determined to be critical habitat for the Santa Cruz tarplant, an endangered species. Still, the Plan faces criticism from neighbors and others concerned about the environmental impacts.

"It's one of those rare places in Santa Cruz that is undisturbed, that affords a sweet and meditative place to relax," said Neil Conner, who lives nearby on South Park Way.

Conner is a member the Sierra Club and Friends of Arana Gulch, both of which oppose the project.

He believes that the existing problem of transients illegally camping on the property will increase once new trails draw attention to the land.

Susan Harris of the city's Parks and Recreation Department drew up the Master Plan. She disagrees.

"We actually have found that having more of the public and trail users come to the greenbelt helps to keep an eye on the park and deal with that problem," Harris said.

A Ride Apart from Traffic

Even among bicyclists, there is a minority who oppose the project. Don Fong, who lives on Santa Cruz's Westside, is one.

"I would far prefer that the money be spent on other bike projects, particularly Soquel Avenue," Fong said.

But most bicyclists are enthusiastic about the new thoroughfare.

"Right now you don't really go there unless you live right next to it," said Micah Posner of the cycling advocacy group People Power. "The primary purpose of city greenbelt should be to teach people how to interact with it in a positive manner."

He expects that the bicycle crossing will encourage hundreds of new bicycle trips every day, particularly among those who are intimidated by road-ways traffic.

Project opponent Jean Brocklebank believes that other bicycle improvements slated for nearby streets will make the project unnecessary. In the coming months, the city will install bike routes on Soquel Avenue. State funding has recently been secured for retrofits to the Murray Street bridge that will include bike lanes.

"It's not as though there isn't an easy way for bicyclists to get across town already," Brocklebank said.

Even the city's own Parks and Recreation Commission voted to reject the plan. At a June 26 meeting, the Commission recommended that the city develop a plan that does not include the bridge.

However, Branciforte resident Ed Silveira believes that project opponents have seized upon the endangered species issue as a way of preserving the greenbelt for use mostly by neighbors of the property.

"They should make it a park where people can use it and enjoy it," he said.

Though in favor of a bikeway, Silveira is also a enthusiast of early local history, and he suspects there may be the remains of an adobe home on the land.

"We feel they should do some ground penetration [to test for structural remains] before they start digging in there," Silveira said.

He suspects that rose bushes on the land are as old as 160 years and once decorated the homes of the Rodriguez or Arana adobes.

To minimize a recognized impact to the endangered tarplant, city planners narrowed the bikeway from 12 feet to 8 feet wide, eliminated a second small bridge and designed the remaining one as a suspension bridge so that fewer footings will be needed.

Coastal Commission Must Approve

So far, approximately \$1.6 million in state and federal funding has been secured for the project. City officials say it will take about six months to annex eight acres of county territory that fall within the Master Plan area. Following that, the California Coastal Commission must also approve of the plan.

The Plan also requires the blessing of the US Fish and Wildlife service, and Harris says that consultations with Fish and Wildlife have already begun. The California Department of Fish and Game must also approve.

Opponents of the bikeway hope one of those agencies will see their side of the issue. ■