

PAVING THE WAY

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Arana Gulch path \$1.1M closer to reality

County transportation board grants cash to help build long-debated bicycle and pedestrian path

By GENEVIEVE BOOKWALTER

gbookwalter@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — Sixteen years after city leaders purchased open space east of town with hopes of building a path across it, they just need another \$1.5 million and approval from the state's Coastal Commission before construction can begin.

That figure comes after the county's Regional Transportation Commission on Thursday unani-

mously approved giving \$1.1 million to the \$4 million project to pave a path across Arana Gulch. Construction could start later this year.

"It is an extraordinarily cost-effective transportation project," said Pajaro Valley resident Paul Schoellhamer, one of a number of audience members who spoke in favor of awarding the money. "It's not the biggest project in the world by a wide margin, but it is perfect on every point."

The Arana Gulch bike path would include a concrete thoroughfare and bridge for cyclists and pedestrians through open space that the city bought in 1994. It would connect Broadway to

SEE PATH ON B16



Afternoon hikers stroll through Arana Gulch recently. City leaders got a \$1.1 million boost Thursday to build a bike trail through the open space.

DAN COYRO/
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PATH

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Brommer Street and is backed by many cyclists seeking an alternative to Soquel Drive to get across town. Many seniors and county residents with disabilities also support the path.

But plans have been steeped in controversy. Opponents sued to stop it soon after it earned Santa Cruz City Council approval in 2006, and the lawsuit and subsequent appeals stretched for three years. The California Native Plant Society and Friends of Arana Gulch appealed the case all the way to the California Supreme Court, arguing the path

would harm the tarplant and that the city's environmental analysis was incomplete.

Every court ruling has favored the city, which leaves opponents to pin their last hope on the Coastal Commission to nix the plan.

But those who oppose the project because of environmental concerns — and have lost a lawsuit and all court appeals to stop it — kept fighting at the morning meeting.

Santa Cruz resident Kyle Wade encouraged commission members to find another project to pay for, saying he regularly picks up trash in Arana Gulch and additional pedestrians and cyclists would leave even more.

The path could encour-

The money comes from a pot of state and federal funds.

age drug dealers and users to congregate in Arana Gulch, Wade said, similar to what Santa Cruz is constantly fighting in Pogonip, the open space adjacent to UCSC.

"You'll see the future of Arana Gulch," Wade said.

But commissioners weren't swayed, and gave their approval with little comment.

The money comes from a pot of state and federal funds given every two years to the county to spend on transportation projects. Typically the transportation commis-

sion receives about \$10 million to spend on Highway 1 expansion, bike lanes, road improvements and other projects.

Because of the state's ongoing economic woes, the money coming in this year was just over 10 percent of the typical total, or \$1.1 million. Those dollars were marked for pedestrian and bicycle projects only.

The Arana Gulch path floated to the top of the list for local funding because all planning work is done and work can begin once Coastal Commission approval is granted, staff said.

The remaining dollars needed to build the path are expected to come from a state grant and local funding, Schneider said.