

State to rule today on Arana Gulch plan

Coastal panel considers two paths, two bridges in 68-acre greenbelt

Greenbelt

By J.M. BROWN

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SANTA CRUZ — The California Coastal Commission today will settle a prolonged battle over the future of Arana Gulch, a 68-acre greenbelt that is home to the federally protected Santa Cruz tarplant.

For 15 years the city's contentious plan to pave two bicycle and pedestrian paths through the heart of the environmentally sensitive gulch has pitted the need for alternative transportation routes against protection of the tarplant's habitat.

The 15-member state commission, in its first Santa Cruz meet-

SEE ARANA ON A2



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Opponents of the Arana Gulch path plan — Jean Brocklebank, Vince Cheap and Mike Lewis — say the present dirt trails can be maintained with little effort.



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The city of Santa Cruz wants to pave two bike trails through the 68-acre Arana Gulch greenbelt.

ARANA

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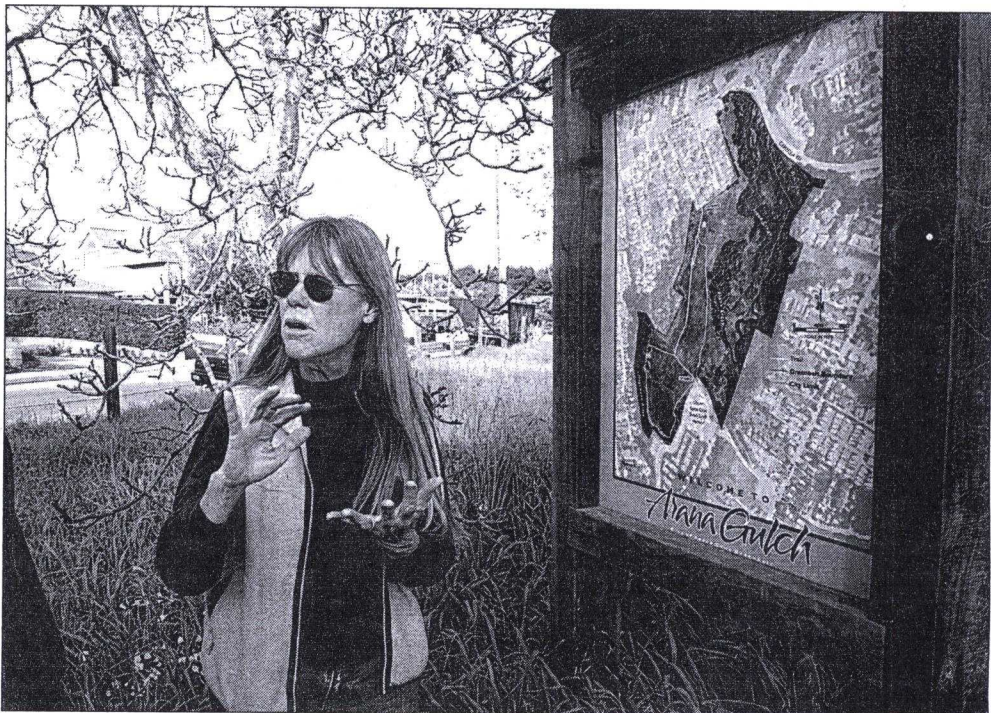
ing in 25 years, will decide the fate of the \$4.2 million project, which includes bridges over Hagemann Creek and the north end of the harbor, thus connecting Broadway and Brommer Street.

Ninety percent of the 900-plus letters received by the commission favor the project, according to staff. But as concerns linger about how the city will fund the project and manage a habitat maintenance plan, the public will have another opportunity to speak at today's 9 a.m. hearing.

Advocates, including the Regional Transportation Commission, the Santa Cruz Port District Commission and the Coastal Commission's staff planners, argue the 0.6-mile of paths would provide a sorely needed shortcut around busy streets connecting Santa Cruz to Mid-County.

"Our community's efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by promoting alternative transportation would be greatly aided by this project," wrote George Dondero, executive director of the RTC. "This project also provides universal access by enabling all people, including young, old and disabled persons ... to travel safely to destinations served by our public streets and pathway systems."

The plan, which on Wednesday won a late endorsement from Ecology Action of Santa Cruz, has been reworked over the years to include a habitat plan and interpretive trail system that avoids the highest concentration of the endangered tarplant. U.S. Fish and Wildlife argues that the tarplant, which



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Jean Brocklebank is a spokeswoman for Friends of Arana Gulch, the main foe of a paved bike path through the Eastside greenbelt.

IF YOU GO

CALIFORNIA
COASTAL
COMMISSION
HEARING

WHAT: Final decision on Arana Gulch Master Plan expected

WHEN: 9 a.m. today

WHERE: Board of Supervisors chamber, Room 525, County Government Center, 701 Ocean St., Santa Cruz

declined decades ago from lack of grazing, could benefit from the project.

Opponents who have lost court battles to stop the 8-foot-wide paths argue that even smaller-scale paving — the plans once called for 12-foot paths — threatens the habitat.

"If you cover up soil, it doesn't matter how pretty it is, it's gone," said Jean

Brocklebank, a spokeswoman for Friends of Arana Gulch.

The group and the California Native Plant Society, now also backed by the national Center for Biodiversity, say the project violates state law because the city rejected alternatives — including an unpaved trail system — found to have fewer impacts.

"The city created a false choice between bicycle transportation and preserving endangered species," said Vince Cheap of the plant society.

Ecology Action's executive director, Virginia Johnson, disagreed, saying, "An official and maintained path would reduce erosion and damage from walkers, cyclists and dog walkers who use multiple random dirt paths that cross the greenbelt."

Ecology Action hopes the paths will reduce bike accidents on Soquel Avenue and

Soquel Drive but said the city must identify funding for habitat maintenance.

The city has \$2.7 million in RTC and other funds, and has applied for a \$1 million state grant. The city also is expected to sell excess rights of way acquired when the plan was still a road project.

"With a coastal permit and a final design in place, the remaining funds should not be an issue," said Chris Schneider, the city's assistant director of public works. He said the slow economy could also bring lower construction bids.

The city bought the former dairy in 1994 after scrapping plans to build an expressway. Debate roiled the city for years over the proposed bike path, with opponents filing a lawsuit in 2007. An appellate court upheld a judge's ruling for the city, and the state Supreme Court declined to hear a challenge.