

Network of trails is opposed

trails *9-21-93*
Some landowners object
to use of private property

By MAY WONG
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SANTA CRUZ — Opposition to a proposed county-wide trails system is growing among property owners who fear lost privacy, vandalism and reduced property values.

"We're not against trails. We just want them to leave the private property owners alone," said Butch Huff, who lives off Swanton Road on land owned by the McCrary family.

Huff is a member of Citizens for Responsible Land Use, a group formed a month ago to monitor the proposal. Under the plan, county government would take over some private land to establish a web of trails linking parks in Santa Cruz, Monterey, Santa Clara and San Mateo counties.

The proposal stems from a 1972 plan that a 26-member citizen's advisory committee has been revising during the past two years. The modified plan, which lays out policies on maintenance, enforcement and land acquisition, will serve as a blueprint for implementing the trails network.

Committee members say the system, which they realize will take decades to complete, will give the public better access to parks and open more options to hikers, bicyclists, and equestrians.

"We want to preserve open spaces and link them to provide recreational activity in a safe way so people could travel and not worry about car traffic to enjoy the beauty of Santa Cruz," said John Akeman, park planner for the county.

The trails advisory committee meets at 7:30 p.m. today to consider the revised plan at Harvey West Park in Santa Cruz.

Public workshops — yet to be scheduled — will be later this fall, before the county Board of Supervisors votes on the plan.

A map of the proposed trails is incomplete and will be unavailable to the public for at least two more weeks, Akeman said.

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Trail network opposition

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Until then, Akeman says, it is unclear which and how many property owners will be affected.

"We're trying to utilize existing public corridors or private parcels that already have dedications to minimize the number of landowners affected," he said.

But some property owners, already upset they weren't told that a map is being drawn, they don't want any public takeover of private lands.

"There's a limit to where the public has access to," Huff said. "Somewhere, you have to draw a line."

A petition circulated by Citizens for Responsible Land Use to hundreds of landowners countywide asks the Board of Supervisors to reject taking easements as a condition of building or development approval — a practice that government agencies statewide, including this county, have used in the past.

The practice, called "exaction," would be one of the last options the county would use for the trails plan, Akeman said. The other option committee members say they hope to avoid is the power of eminent domain, which allows government to take property in the name of public good, he said.

The committee says property owners can

benefit from reduced taxes if they dedicate a portion of their land, said Colleen Monahan, committee chairwoman.

Monahan, who lives in Bonny Doon and owns property with a private trail into Fall Creek State Park, says she would love to dedicate part of her property to the county. Then the problem of liability in connection with people who use the trail would be the county's, she said.

Monahan says the public uses many trails on private land, with or without permission.

The trails system "would provide the public with an avenue to get them to where they want to go instead of trespassing," she said. "These are important accesses for people. If we look at it from that perspective, then maybe we could find some common ground."

Opponents to the trails argue a public easement running through their property will bring illegal activity into their back yards and take away their rights to privacy.

"It's quite different having your friends coming through than the public swarming through," said Robert Briggs, whose wife is part of the Hoover family which sold 2,000 acres of their land to become park of Big Basin State Park two decades ago.

"We're not stingy with our property, we just don't want anybody to forget whose it is," Briggs said.