



# Cycle of Controversy

Proposed Arana Gulch bike route divides two-wheeled commuters



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Cyclist Rainer Stegmann rides through Arana Gulch, where bike path foes have posted protest signs.

*Bicycle Parks*

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## SANTA CRUZ

**F**OR MORE THAN 30 years, planners have envisioned ways to connect the dots between Brommer Street and Broadway, creating the most direct east-west link between the city and Mid-County.

And for most of those years, that link through Arana Gulch has been mired in mis-

fires and controversy.

It's no different today, when the original, 1960s-era plan for a four-lane road has been pared to a 12-foot-wide paved bicycle/pedestrian path designed to make life easier for commuters using human power instead of horsepower.

Surprisingly enough, the bicycle community now is split on the plan.

Some embrace the path as a long-needed alternative to the more dangerous routes on

Soquel Avenue and across the Murray Street bridge. Others believe it is an ugly swath through a pristine piece of greenbelt that should be protected from such incursions.

"Broadway has a good bike path. Brommer has a good bike path. But without connecting them it's like a car without gas," said Ron Goodman of People Power at a city Transportation Commission meeting in March.

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# Bike path

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"Soquel Avenue is a dangerous place ... but there is no alternative. This can provide an alternative."

But longtime bicycle activist Don Fong disagreed, stating, "This is one time I'm almost ashamed to be a bicyclist."

He said it made no sense to build a bike path that could threaten the endangered habitats that make up portions of Arana Gulch.

Fong suggested that the best alternative would be to run a new bike/pedestrian path from Brommer to Frederick Street Park and up Frederick Street to Broadway.

That would bypass much of the greenbelt land, but critics charge it also would create such an indirect route that it would discourage bicycle commuters from using it. It also would require a steep ramp or stairs up to the park area that would be difficult to traverse.

In addition, said critics, such a route could mean that parking would have to be removed from at least one side of Frederick Street between the park and Broadway to make room for bicycle lanes.

Ironically, bicyclists roundly applauded the City Council in 1992 when it voted to designate the long-discussed Broadway-Brommer connection for bicyclists and pedestrians only.

In the wake of that decision, a mandatory environmental analysis was conducted on various possible bike routes through the Eastside greenbelt.

Among the most supported options in the study is a route bisecting Arana Gulch, as well as one through Frederick Street Park.

The city has more than \$1.4 million in the bank from federal and state sources to pay for the bike/pedestrian path. The costs of the alternatives range from about \$1.5 million to more than \$5 million for a two-bridge route that officials concede simply is too expensive to be a viable choice.

All the options are among those evaluated in the recently completed environmental review document that currently is in the hands of Caltrans officials.

The public-review process is on hold because Caltrans has indicated it will require a series of format changes in the document before it can be approved. Once that is completed, city staff expects to reopen the public-comment period before conducting another series of hearings. The final review will be conducted by the City Council, which will decide what path to take.

work on the various routes finished, the controversy bug once again has bitten the project and its supporters.

Not only is the bicycle community split between those supporting a direct route and those worried about environmental degradation, others believe that a master plan for all of Arana Gulch should be completed before a decision is made on the bike path.

That plan would map out how best to use the entire Arana Gulch greenbelt land — which the city bought in 1994 for \$3.4 million — but not only hasn't it been started, the council has yet to find the money to fund it.

A petition sent to City Hall last month was signed by numerous residents who asked the council not to complete the project at this time because a more thorough analysis is needed.

"We are extremely concerned that there is currently no definitive master plan for this last remaining unique and precious open

space within the east Santa Cruz/Mid-County area," said the petition. "The Arana Gulch open space is currently one of the only free, wild and natural places supporting rare and endangered species of flora and fauna left in this area of Santa Cruz."

But Councilman Scott Kennedy rebutted the notion that a master plan is required before continuing with the bike path. He pointed out that the city bought the right-of-way to a route some 20 years before it purchased the entire greenbelt parcel.

"There really is no legal, technical or statutory requirement for us to define the Broadway-Brommer bike path as part of the wider master plan," said Kennedy, whose opinion was supported by City Attorney John Barisone in a council meeting last week.

## Bike lanes on Soquel

Many suggest that a viable alternative to cutting through Arana Gulch would be to put bike lanes on Soquel Avenue. Such a plan has been widely discussed by the council, and panned by Eastside business owners who worry that they would lose on-street parking.

The council has agreed to a trial restriping project on Soquel Ave-

nue between Branciforte and Seabright avenues, but that plan won't be tested until after the Soquel Avenue bridge rehabilitation is completed. And that's not expected to happen until late 1998.

The test will involve reducing Soquel in that area to two lanes, with a single two-way turn lane in the middle. That would make room for bike lanes on each side of the road.

Larry Erwin, director of the city's Public Works Department, said a successful test would slow down traffic in that area, provide bike riders with a safe path and possibly open the door to wider sidewalks.

The test is not designed, however, to determine if such a striping pattern would be successful throughout the length of Soquel Avenue on the Eastside, he said.

Aptos bicyclist Don Weiss has suggested that a more accurate measure of the patterns of bicycling commuters would show that most would use Soquel Avenue if it were safe. Any path through Arana Gulch, he said, mostly would serve recreational bicyclists.

Much of the state and federal money earmarked for the Arana Gulch project is available because it is described as a link primarily

for bicycling commuters, not recreational users.

Among the commuters who support the link through Arana Gulch is Micah Posner of Pedaler's Express, a human-powered delivery cooperative.

"If riding a bicycle was closer to the speed of driving across town, more people could 'afford' to replace their own cars with their own bicycles, and we could go about happily fulfilling the city's General Plan goals for reducing automobile traffic," said Posner in a letter to the council.

He said the more direct path through Arana Gulch would be the best alternative because it would be the fastest. The connection through Arana Gulch also would be safer, he said, because there would be no cars around.

But such a project has many detractors, and they aren't limited to environmentalists and people who want Arana Gulch to remain pristine and protected.

Members of the Santa Cruz Port District's board of directors recently told council members that "the entire potential connection of the bikeway is problematic for the port district's operation."

The port district must be involved in the discussions because

most of the routes being studied run through a portion of the Small Craft Harbor at the northern edge of the district.

In a letter to Mayor Cynthia Mathews from Chairman William Geisreiter, the commission said connecting Broadway with Brommer may speed bicyclists along their way, but it would "conflict with the harbor operation where we have a number of recreational pursuits taking place at a more methodical rate of speed."

City officials suggest that extensive talks have been conducted with port district officials, and that the newly elected commission members simply need to be "brought up to speed" on the project's goals.

But Geisreiter made it clear the commission has serious concerns.

"One only needs to look at what exists now as bicycles come off the Broadway access road into the harbor at high rates of speed," he said. "The existing situation is frightening. We think the future may be totally unmanageable."

*Members of the harbor commission are expected to discuss the issues with the city's Transportation Commission at 7 p.m. Wednesday in the council chamber at City Hall, 809 Center St.*



can be approved. Once that is completed, city staff expects to reopen the public-comment period before conducting another series of hearings. The final review will be conducted by the City Council, which will decide what path to take.

## **A crucial link**

Among the staunchest opponents of building the bike path through the heart of the greenbelt property is Friends of Arana Gulch, a group largely made up of Eastside residents.

Spokeswoman Patricia Matejcek said the more direct route would "tear the heart out of the last remaining open greenbelt space" available to Eastside and Mid-County residents.

But in late April, the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission announced that it supported the more direct routes, rejecting those near Frederick Street Park. The commission also is considering providing some funding for the project.

"The proposed path would provide a crucial link between Santa Cruz and Mid-County origins and destinations," wrote the commission's executive director, Linda Wilshusen. "The commission also encourages the council to design the Broadway-Brommer bicycle/pedestrian path in a way that would minimize the environmental impacts of the projects, and proceed with construction of the project in an expeditious manner."

"Expeditious manner" and "Broadway-Brommer" are phrases that have not gone together for more than 30 years.

Starting in 1965 with passage of a bond measure, the plan devised by city and county officials was to build a four-lane road through Arana Gulch to ease growing traffic problems on Soquel Avenue.

The connection initially was expected to be completed in 1970, but right-of-way issues, design debates, coastal protection concerns, and, later, community sentiment delayed it year after year.

In the early 1970s, the city bought up all the Arana Gulch parcels that were in its portion of the proposed road's path. But the delays continued.

Then, in 1975, the City Council took state money earmarked for the stagnated project and used it to complete the more popular West Cliff Drive bike path.

A year later, the council canceled its contract with the county to extend the road.

In the early 1980s, the move to slow growth and protect greenbelt areas caught fire, further dimming the likelihood that a road ever would cross Arana Gulch.

Finally, in 1992, the City Council decided to put the whole issue formally to rest, voting to kill the road plan and study possible routes for a bicycle/pedestrian path through the greenbelt area.

Bicyclists, who long had risked their lives to use congested Murray Street or Soquel Avenue to get across town, applauded the decision. Eight alternative paths were developed, and environmental work on each was completed.

## **Bicyclists split**

Flash forward to 1997.

With the initial environmental