

Arana Gulch proposal lives

Bicycle Paths
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Opponents of a proposed Arana Gulch bikeway thought the plan was killed two years ago.

SANTA CRUZ

They were dead wrong.

Two years after voting to halt project plans, the City Council tonight is set to decide whether to accept the now-complete environmental impact report for the so-called Brommer-Broadway bike plan.

City staffers say this is just one step in a long approval process, but there appears to be strong council support for the path. The plan includes paved or crushed-rock paths with one or two bike bridges in the 63-acre gulch that overlooks the harbor.

Some foes were shocked to hear of the project's growing momentum.

"I'm very upset to learn this is again being considered," Cally Haber said in an e-mail to the council. "I thought the issue had been put to rest."

But the council make-up has changed since the 2001 vote to kill the proposal. Opponents Christopher Krohn and Keith Sugar chose not to seek re-election last year, and were replaced on the council by Mike Rotkin and Cynthia Mathews, both of whom have spoken in favor of the project.

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Cycling advocate Micah Posner, meanwhile, said he hopes suggested changes to the plan will broaden its appeal to environmentalists. Replacing the asphalt paving with crushed limestone, narrower bridges and a "scaled down" approach to lessen impact to the gulch are among the changes.

The project would provide an east-west cycling and pedestrian corridor, connecting Brommer Street with Broadway, linking the Eastside and downtown.

The gulch, while hardly pristine, is the Eastside's largest remaining stretch of open space and is a popular spot for sunset watching, strolling and dog walking. It already has a dirt path that gets muddy in hard rain.

The prospect of any development there threw a wedge into ecology-minded circles three years ago, with opponents speaking about the fate of rare tar plants, and bicycling advocates stressing the need for a safe cycling area. Supporters said potential impacts were being hugely exaggerated.

While the debate has cooled, the city still gets e-mails and letters praising and dismissing the project.

About a dozen people have complained in recent weeks about the revived plan, telling the council the project was already rejected, carves up an undeveloped area, would bring too many people to the gulch, and would be "redundant" since the city has approved bike lanes on Soquel Avenue.

Logueville H. Price III of Morrissey Boulevard said traffic and bridges would compromise "the isolation, tranquillity and expansiveness on this special knoll."

But Piet Canin, program director of Bike to Work, called the project an "overall environmental gain" that would provide a safe alternative to car-heavy cross-town commutes. He said the city could ensure only slight impacts to the gulch by working closely with the state Coastal Commission and the Department of Fish and Game.

Though some assumed the city killed the plan in 2001, the truth is more complex.

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The council voted not to proceed with the bike path on a 4-3 vote, deeming it too intensive.

But, in a legislative quirk, the same council voted three months later to direct city staff to complete the environmental impact report for the project. Council members feared the city might lose the \$330,000 in state money set aside to pay for the environmental report if they pulled the plug on the partially completed study. There was also some sentiment that finishing the report would ensure Santa Cruz wouldn't lose \$1.6 million in other state transportation funds, even if the city opted for a different bike plan.

The funding for the project remains secure, said county Regional Transportation Executive Director Linda Wilshusen.

Ron Marquez, city public works director, said staff has recommended some changes to the plan.

Instead of one path, the project could be split into two 4-foot-wide paths through the meadow, he said. He said the bridge — possibly two — would be 10 feet, not 12 feet, wide. The proposed length of the bridge, 360 feet, and a possible second bridge at 130 feet, have not changed. Low-level lighting is now being suggested instead of taller street lights.

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