

SANCTUARY SCENIC TRAIL

RTC avoids fight over trail plan

Task force to look at
South County segment

Trails
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WATSONVILLE — Despite objections of bicycle advocates, county transportation officials Thursday set in motion a process that could relocate one the longest and most expensive segments of the planned Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail.

Regional Transportation Commission planners want to run the four-mile, \$20 million segment from Manresa State Beach to the city of Watsonville along the Branch Rail Line, through sweeps of strawberry fields and along Harkins Slough. But local farmers worry that an influx of trail users would disrupt

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operations, with trespassers causing crop losses and fumigation and harvest activities forcing closures of the trail for long stretches.

"They can't be conducting business and doing their farming if they have bikes (and) children, all of this, coming through at certain times," said Teresa Knox of local farm Struve Ranch. "They can't be planting and farming according to their needs."

Backed by the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, farmers impacted by the plan threatened a lawsuit, though they said Thursday that was off the table. With construction on the segment not imminent — the RTC has prioritized other parts of the \$126 million trail — the commission voted 9-2 Thursday to form a task force to resolve the conflict.

But local cycling advocates aren't happy with one potential solution —

moving the segment onto West Beach Street and San Andreas Road. They point out the Sanctuary Trail aims to separate bikes, walkers and wheelchairs from automotive traffic, not put them next to it.

"Forcing people onto a high-speed road with big farm trucks, compared to a safe bike path, is not acceptable," said Barrett Vitol, an Aptos High School teacher.

Comments poured in to the RTC about the issue, the vast majority opposing any alternative route. Some were concerned the Farm Bureau would pack the task force and make the outcome certain, though Commissioner John Leopold added requirements that the bicycle and disabled communities be represented.

"I'd rather focus on building the trail than be caught up in a legal fight, at this point," Leopold said.

Eminent domain is not an issue — the RTC owns the land on which it hopes to provide a trail, though local farmers have easements to assure

their operations, particularly those with property straddling the existing rail line. Most commissioners wanted to duck a fight over a project still years in the future, but commissioners Dennis Norton and Daniel Dodge wanted to stand their ground.

"There is no reasonable alternative," Norton said. "You have a bike (route) that is being used now that we know is dangerous."

There is also lingering concern that the RTC is setting a precedent that would make it easier to change pieces of the widely praised plan based on local opposition. Known as Segment 17, the Manresa-Harkins Slough piece makes up more than 12 percent of the Sanctuary Trail's 32-mile backbone.

"It concerns me that someone could threaten a lawsuit and the RTC immediately responds by giving the option of changing the plan," said David Wright, chair of Friends of the Rail and Trail.

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