

'We've been waiting a long time to do this. It's nice to get the funding piece together to make it happen.'

RYAN COONERTY, Santa Cruz city councilman



Hikers traipse through Arana Gulch on Friday afternoon. The county Regional Transportation Commission has recommended a \$1.1 million grant to build a bike path through the greenbelt. DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

\$1.1 million could help pay for Arana Gulch path

Transportation leaders will consider funding Eastside thoroughfare

Greenbelt

By GENEVIEVE BOOKWALTER

gbookwalter@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — In another boost for the city's plan to pave a bike path across open space east of town, county transportation officials have recommended a \$1.1 million grant to help pay for the \$4 million project.

The final decision will be made at a public hearing Thursday by members of the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, which hands out state and federal dollars that come into the county for transportation projects.

"We've been waiting a long time to do this. It's nice to get the funding piece together to make it happen," said Santa Cruz City Councilman Ryan Coonerty, a longtime supporter of the path that would connect Broadway and Brommer Street on the city's Eastside. If granted, the money would put the city more than halfway to the \$4 million needed, with the rest expected mainly from federal transportation funds.

But opponents of the project, who sued soon after city leaders approved it in 2006, vow to keep fighting.

"The project as it stands is a big threat to the tarplant," said Vince Cheap with the Santa Cruz chapter of the California Native Plant Society. The Santa Cruz tarplant, which grows in Arana Gulch, was federally listed as threatened in 2000.

At issue is money given every two years to the county from various state and federal funds to spend on transportation projects. Typically, the transportation commission receives about \$10 million every other year to spend on Highway 1 expansion, bike lanes, road improvements and other projects.

Because of the state's ongoing economic crisis, the money coming in this year is just over 10 percent of the typical total — \$1.1 million. And those dollars are marked for pedestrian and bicycle projects only, said commission spokeswoman Karena Pushnik.

The Arana Gulch bike path floated to the top of the list for local funding, Pushnik said, because all of the planning is done and work can begin once the project is approved by the state Coastal Commission. That decision is expected early this year.

If the transportation commission allocates the money Thursday, it would put the city more than halfway toward paying for the path.

The Arana Gulch bike path has been in the works for more than 15 years. It would include a paved thoroughfare and bridge for cyclists and pedestrians through open space that the city bought in 1994. It would connect Broadway to Brommer Street and is backed by cyclists seeking an alternative to Soquel Drive to get across town. Many residents with disabilities also support the path.

But plans have been steeped in controversy. Opponents sued to stop it soon after it earned council approval in 2006, and the lawsuit and subsequent appeals stretched for three years. The California Native Plant Society and Friends of Arana Gulch appealed the case all the way to the California Supreme Court, arguing the path would harm the tarplant and the city's environmental analysis was incomplete.

Every court ruling favored the city, leaving opponents to pin their last hope on the Coastal Commission to nix the plan.