

Rail trail project takes final shape

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Once completed, 50 miles of trails will span county

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SANTA CRUZ — The county's top transportation agency has put the finishing touches on a final blueprint for a cross-county trail that will be equal parts tourist attraction, outdoor gym and commuter lane.

Years in the making, the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail is a 30-mile, meandering spine through urban neighborhoods, wetlands and coastal bluffs. It is aligned along the Branch Rail Line, with spurs that digress often into neighborhoods, or to the beach.

"This is a major milestone. We've been working on this for quite a few years. It's a visionary project," said Cory Caletti, a Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission planner, who praised Rep. Sam Farr's leadership on the project. "We're just proud of the document. So much public input went into this, and we just responded to so many recommendations."

It will likely be years, if not decades, before the \$127 million trail is com-

plete. But the breadth of the project's ambition, as well as some of the excitement surrounding it, is hard to overstate.

Santa Cruz County's unique topography dictates numerous new crossings, and the plan foresees 26 new bridges, all but one of them dedicated solely to walkers, bicyclists and wheelchair-bound users. The outlier is a new railroad bridge over Capitola Village, which would have a trail segment fixed alongside.

While that cost is subject to change, it does represent a jump from an earlier \$88 million estimate. Caletti said the final version of the plan includes feedback from local governments on prices, updates based on what are likely to be expensive water crossings and construction management fees.

"We did that so that we could have a complete estimate," Caletti said. "The more detailed you get the more the estimates change and are revised over time."

A variety of federal, state and local funds will be tapped, and the construction sequence hasn't been determined. The project is broken into 20 different segments, giving the RTC the flexibility to pursue pieces of the trail at a time, as

opportunities arise.

A series of public meetings on the plan, with input focused on connecting the trail to neighborhoods, and safety when the trail abuts the railroad line.

When spurs are added, the total network include 50 miles of trails — enough to stretch from San Jose to Sausalito.

The trail was always seen as one advantage of the RTC's \$14.2 million purchase of the Branch Rail Line, which provides critical right-of-way. While a tight squeeze in spots, at its narrowest the trail is 8-feet wide, with 2-foot buffers on either side.

"It's really meant to provide adequate space for a very diversified population of users," Caletti said.

The RTC is likely to adopt the plan at its Nov. 7 meeting. An updated Environmental Impact Review should be released later this month, though that isn't likely to be the final word on what can be expensive environmental vetting.

"The extent of environmental review will have to be determined segment by segment," Caletti said.

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