

Symbolic trail vote almost a stumbling block

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County adopts
\$126 million plan
unanimously

By Jason Hoppin

jhoppin@santacruzsentinel.com
@scnewsdude on Twitter

SANTA CRUZ » In a clear step forward that comes with signs of potential trouble down the road, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday adopted the 50-mile Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail plan.

The unanimous vote was largely symbolic, and was sought as a statement of unity and shared purpose for the \$126

million plan, which uses the county's Branch Rail Line as a backbone but also sends cyclists and pedestrians off into neighborhoods and to the coast. But in a shock to some, county staff voiced concerns over aspects of the idea.

"There's clearly significant public support for the creation of this trail," Supervisor John Leopold said, adding that issues could be addressed at a later date. "It might be one of the few projects in Santa Cruz County where there's a great deal of consensus, and the question is how quickly we can build it?"

Running from the North Coast to South County and one day enabling people to take a

trail from Waddell Creek to Pacific Grove, the plan is one of the most ambitious planning documents in county history. It is likely to take decades to complete, and the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, the agency behind the plan, is seeking official backing from the county and the cities of Santa Cruz, Capitola and Watsonville — all places through which the trail runs.

But already, some agricultural landowners have fretted about what the trail means for their operations. And despite widespread official and community support, county staff raised concerns about who would

maintain the trail, who would pay for it, and even the fact that it is in the coastal "viewshed" — which, until now, had been a selling point, and seems to ignore that the trail follows a rail line in place since 1876.

Public Works Director John Presleigh said he has concerns about issues such as who's responsible for clearing trail hazards or homeless encampments along the line, and said the county's construction estimates are higher than the RTC's.

"It's not something we can't do. It's just how do we budget it, how do we plan it out?" Presleigh said.

The bicycle advocacy group

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People Power sent out alerts an alert that the county was raising objections. In addition, Santa Cruz City Councilmember Micah Posner, a vocal bicycling advocate, testified at Tuesday's meeting that staff objections sent the wrong message that perhaps the line could not get built.

"That's not acceptable to the community. It doesn't mesh with the really long, intense (environmental impact report) process that the RTC has done," Posner said, saying the time to "equivocate or express vague commitments" had passed.

The RTC has green-

lighted segments of the line in Santa Cruz and Watsonville. The county also bid for a segment between Seventh Avenue and 17th Avenue behind Twin Lakes, though it said it would cost more than what the RTC estimated. Winning bids were in line with RTC estimates.

Backers, including on the Board of Supervisors, passed no judgment on the validity of county staffer concerns, but said they could address specific concerns when construction on pieces of the line come back for consideration. The RTC divided the plan into 20 segments, some of which are broken down into smaller pieces, setting up a piecemeal, long-term approach to completion.