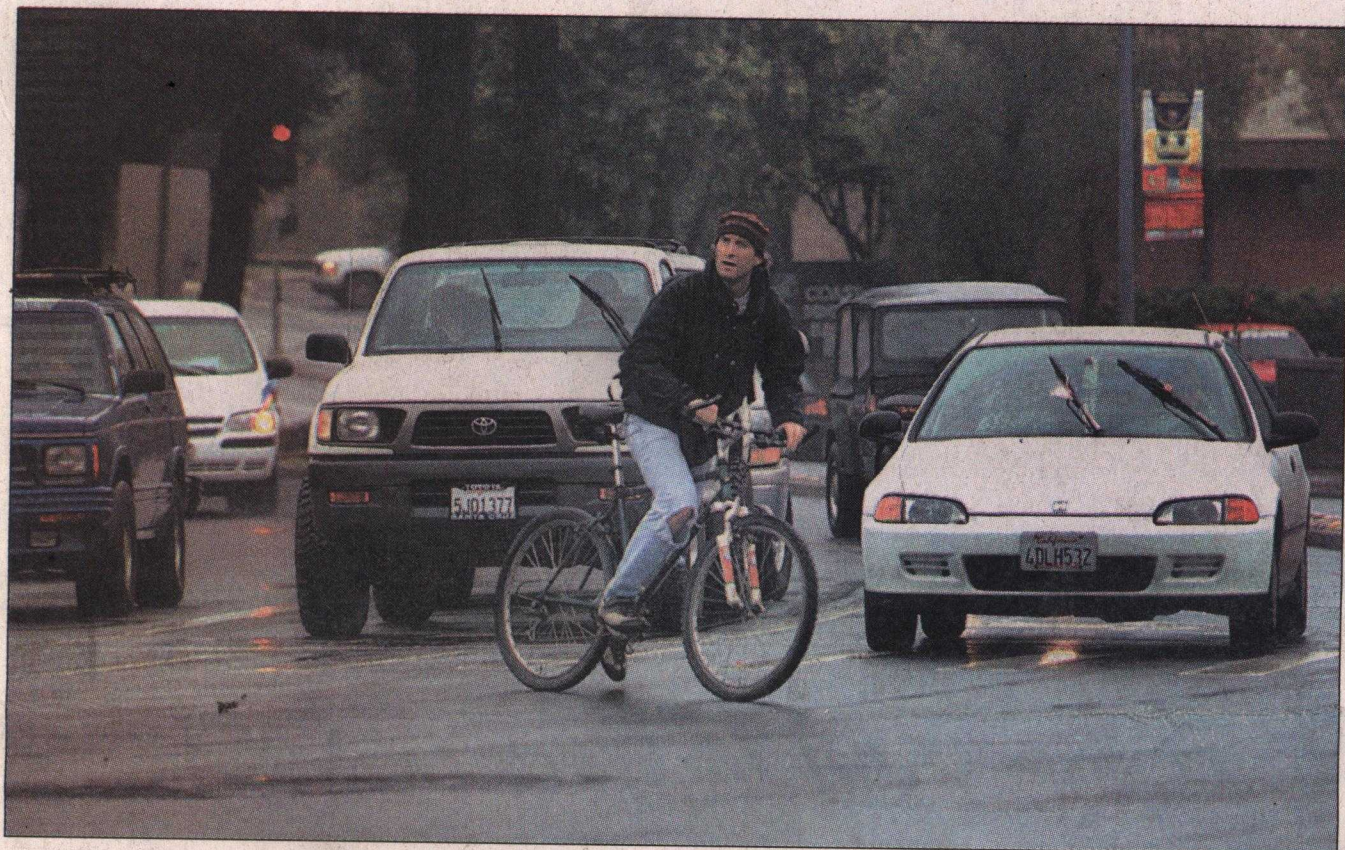


Might ^{of} the Bike

Santa Cruz transit proposal ignores auto commuter; critics call plan unrealistic



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Under Santa Cruz's proposed transportation plan, cyclists may find it easier to get around.

Transportation
By HEATHER BOERNER
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SANTA CRUZ

If nothing changes in the next 20 years, city residents can expect to fight 935 more cars on local roads. And they can expect to spend almost twice as much time sitting in traffic.

How do city officials suggest we fight this bleak future?

They think we should be more like Santa Cruz resident Dana Blumrosen.

Blumrosen owns a car, but most days it sits in the driveway of her Westside home. A mental health client specialist with Santa Cruz County, Blumrosen outfitted herself with the necessary gear for biking and switched from driving her car to school every day to riding her street/mountain bike hybrid to work about six years ago. She started commuting by bike exclusively three years ago.

She loves it, and she knows, as city leaders profess in a proposed \$500,000 transportation policy, that biking is the right thing to do not only for her but for the city and its traffic problems.

Blumrosen, though, isn't convinced everyone can do what she does. And she, like others, isn't sure a citywide policy based on getting people out of their cars is realistic.

"Riding a bike is a privilege, and it's made possible for me by having a great boss, a flexible work schedule, living on the Westside and being able to work in town," she said.

The city's Master Transportation Study, a template that will guide transportation policy for the next 20 years and potentially millions of dollars worth of transportation decisions, offers a number of suggestions for drawing people out of their cars.

Among the suggestions:

■ Building sidewalks, bike lanes and bike corridors; for instance, adding bike lanes to Soquel Avenue.

■ Adding traffic-calming devices to entire neighborhoods instead of on a street-by-street basis.

■ Forming partnerships with the private sector to offer incentives to get people out of their cars and help pay for alternative

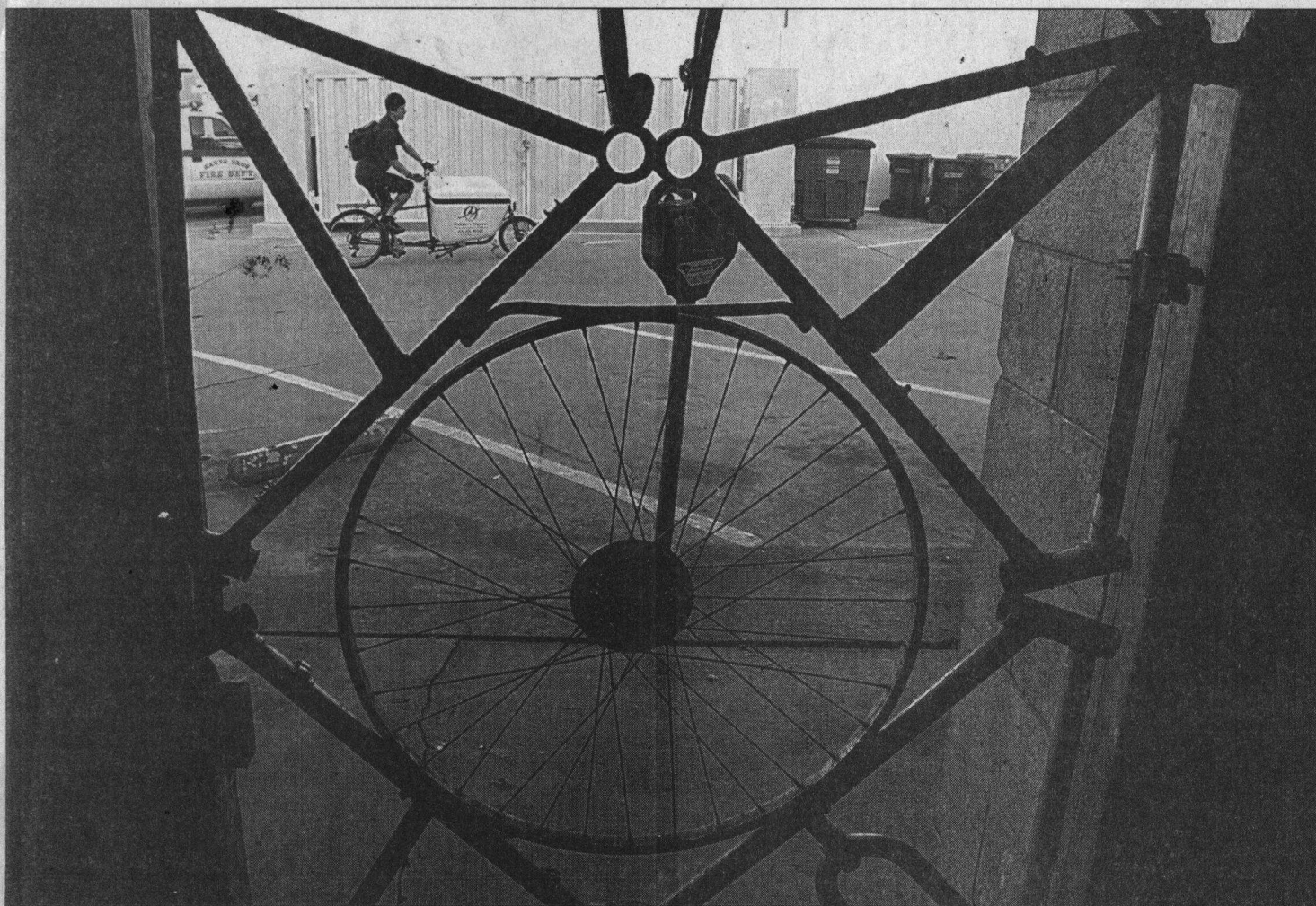
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Ready to ride?

Biking requires an investment in equipment that can range from top-of-the-line gear to garage-sale finds. The city's proposed transportation plan calls for more residents to invest in biking. Following are typical costs for a bicycle and basic commuter gear.



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JoAnn Kolonick/Sentinel graphic



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Bike messenger Rick Graves rides past The Hub after making a delivery in downtown Santa Cruz.

Bikes

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transportation options.

■ Using the Union Pacific rail line for a rail trail, essentially creating a highway for bikes and pedestrians.

■ Creating bus rapid transit to make the bus system faster and more reliable.

What the Master Transportation Study does not call for is new roads or road-widening to address the expected increase in cars.

It also doesn't address what to do with traffic if UC Santa Cruz grows beyond 15,000 students before 2020, and it doesn't address the traffic impact already created by the university, such as the gridlock along High and Bay streets.

While Blumrosen admires the city's push to get more people on bikes and buses, she is not alone in wondering how the proposal would take effect.

"There's a big gap between what people philosophically aspire toward and their actual behavior," said John Aird, a Westside resident who supports the much-discussed idea of building an additional entry point to UC Santa Cruz through the Pogonip Open Space Preserve.

"The proof of this (gap) is the 15,000 people or cars that go up and down from the university every day," he said.

Putting the plan in action

The Master Transportation Study, funded jointly by the city and UCSC, is based on the theory that if you give people reasonable alternatives to cars, they'll take them.

And it's based on another theory: That we can't build our way out

of the transportation crisis.

"I guess how realistic the plan is depends on whether you believe what the report says, ... that we can't grow out of congestion," said Santa Cruz Councilwoman Emily Reilly, a member of the Master Transportation Study Steering Committee.

Sustainable transportation advocates say widening roads and turning more space over to cars will only attract more cars. Eventually, they say, you'll have the same bumper-to-bumper traffic you started with. The only real way to cut congestion is to get people out of cars, they contend.

Elizabeth A. Deakin, director of the University of California Transportation Center at UC Berkeley, said what the Santa Cruz plan is really talking about is smart growth, the buzz word that means mixed development on major roads, a vibrant bus and alternative transit system.

"Santa Cruz could say 'We're not going to grow one more person,' and that wouldn't work, because people would just double up (in houses)," she said. "And if Santa Cruz said, 'We'll grow slowly,' towns around them aren't saying that so it wouldn't work. What the plan is talking about is being smart about how it grows and how transportation changes."

She pointed to Berkeley as a town where a program like the one proposed in Santa Cruz has worked to get people out of their cars.

In Santa Cruz, some of what the city has already done has worked to this end, too, according to local sustainable transportation advocates.

Micah Posner, head of People Power, a Santa Cruz-based bike advocacy group, said the number of bike riders in the city is estimated to be up to 8,000, compared

to 5,000 four years ago.

The Master Transportation Study suggests the city can increase the number of cyclists to 11 percent of the public, increase walkers by 4 percent, increase bus ridership by 4 percent and decrease car ridership by 13 percent.

"I think it could happen, because it's been happening," Posner said. "More people are riding and cycling in Santa Cruz, and if we have a land-use plan that controls autos and creates more space for other ways for people to get around, they'll use it."

Posner says that the city's proposed policy is "not a congestion-relief plan."

"Its aim is to increase mobility for people, all kinds of mobility, and make it easier for people to ride their bikes and walk," he said.

The proposal's primary author, Oakland-based Fukuji Planning & Design, has prepared transportation plans for other alternative transportation-minded cities including Portland, Ore. and Palo Alto.

A key finding in the firm's Santa Cruz report is that the vast majority of trips taken every day are within the city limits — almost half — and that means, according to people like Posner, people could easily walk more than they do now.

"The human body was absolutely made to walk a few miles," he said. "This city is 5 miles across. People can walk to the hardware store to get a wrench and walk back. They don't have to choose to get in a car."

Roadblocks to the plan

Even if you agree with the idea that the city must find another way to solve its problems than widening roads, the plan has flaws,

say its critics.

First, it doesn't address the traffic caused by the university. More than 14,000 students currently attend UCSC, and the number of students that will attend in 2020 hasn't been decided, but it could be more than the 15,000 the plan assumes.

Westside residents have already reopened the alternative access debate — that is, whether to build a road or some thoroughfare through the Pogonip. People on both sides of the issue have started petitions to take before the City Council.

Second, the plan's short-term solution to the current traffic problem is "bus rapid transit," a type of transit that gives buses priority on the road, making them run faster and more efficiently and making them more appealing to commuters.

Mike Rotten, a city councilman who sits on the board of the Metropolitan Transit District calls that proposal "impossible in the short-term."

The district reduced service this year and increased fares, in addition to laying off some staff, to fill a \$2.4 million budget shortfall. And now the district is contending with another budget shortfall of close to \$1 million.

There's no money to create bus rapid transit now, Rotkin said.

Finally, there's the problem that not everyone's schedule lends itself to alternative transportation. Many simply need their cars to get to work.

Gary McCourt is one such commuter. A Westside resident, McCourt used to ride his bike to work at the Main Post Office on Front Street every day. But when his position was shifted to Morrissey Boulevard and to a night shift, he found that the bike was not practical.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

The number of cars on Santa Cruz roads is expected to rise by almost 1,000 in the next 20 years.

"I tried pushing my riding into the bad weather last year and was rewarded with a cold/flu that lasted for weeks," he said. "Riding and walking is not a good alternative for a lot of people as a way to get to work. Myself, I still plan on using my bike as much as I can."

That's all the city is asking for, says city Bicycle Pedestrian Coordinator Cheryl Schmitt.

"One of the things I notice when people talk about transportation is they tend to want to separate themselves into camps — the 'bike people' and the 'car people' and the 'bus people,'" she said. "What the MTS is all about — and this can be the success story of the MTS if people get it — is about making daily choices in transportation."

Schmitt said people can ride their bike one day and drive their car the next, depending on the day's activities.

Longtime Westside resident David Glenn and his wife do this sort of decision-making some of the time. But Glenn thinks it's unrealistic for city leaders to expect people to do this.

"In a way, it is heartless and ignorantly blind to force people through these attempts at social engineering to alter their lives and daily logistics in such a way as to fulfill some public servant's utopian dream."

The City Council will consider accepting the Master Transportation Study at its 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. sessions Tuesday, held at the City Council Chamber, 809 Church St. Public comment will be limited to three minutes per person.

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