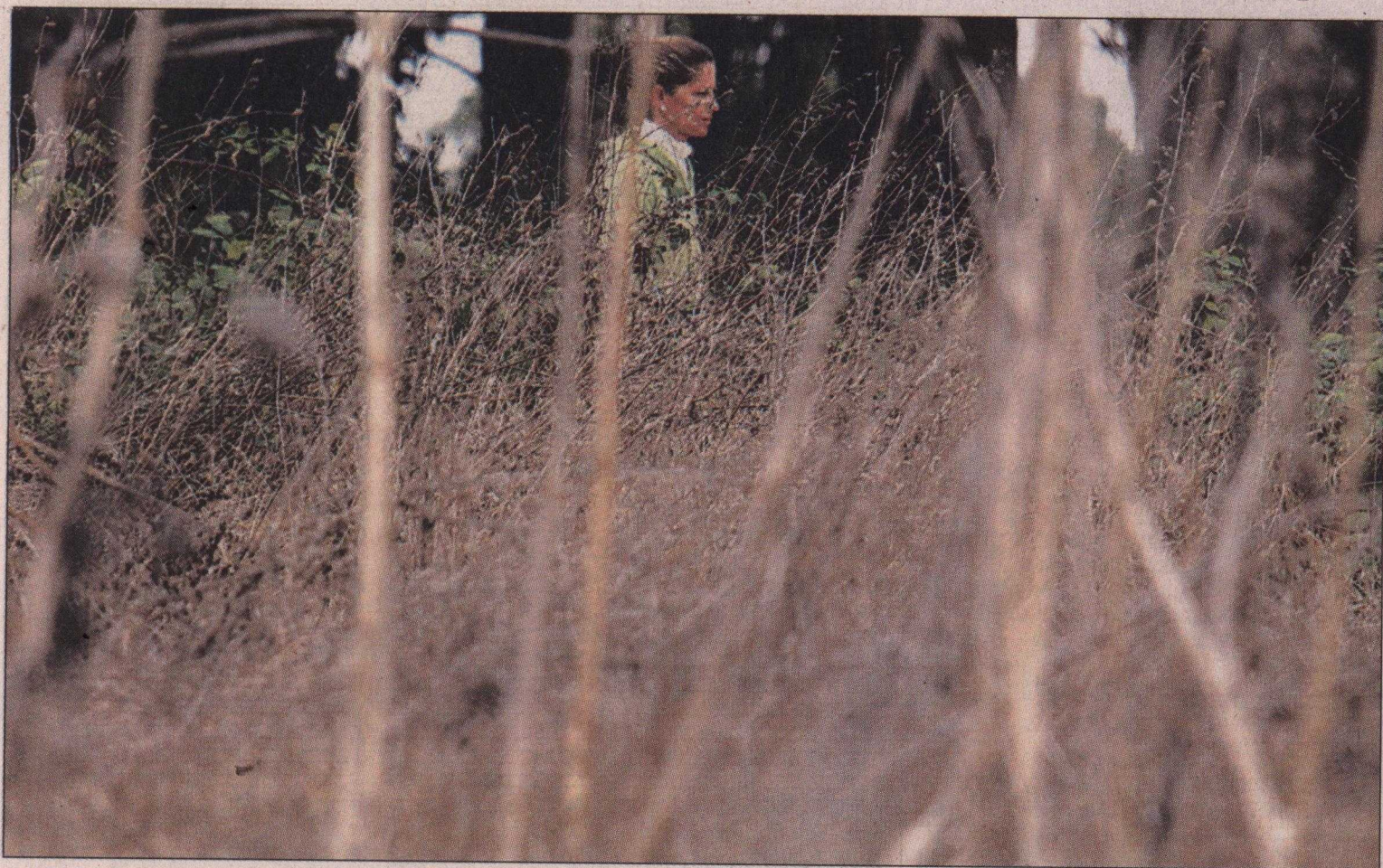


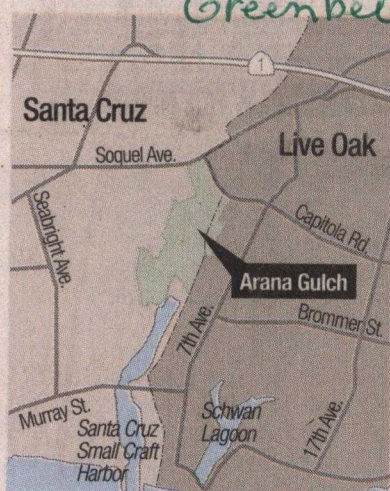
# Arana Gulch plan rejected

City ponders next move as Coastal Commission votes down long-sought paved paths



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

A dog walker makes her way along a path in Arana Gulch on Thursday. The Coastal Commission rejected city plans for paved paths through the greenbelt.



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By KURTIS ALEXANDER

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OCEANSIDE — The city of Santa Cruz will not get its wish of opening up the largely untamed and little-traveled Arana Gulch to bicyclists and other visitors.

Capping years of debate, the California Coastal Commission on Thursday rejected a plan for a network of trails and visitor accommodations at the 68-acre greenbelt, leaving the meadows and forest just above the Santa Cruz harbor a mostly wild and undiscovered destination.

The commission criticized the plan, whose centerpiece was a

paved bicycle path connecting the community of Live Oak with the city, for being more focused on transportation and less on preserving the area's natural landscape.

"This is supposed to be about protection," said Sara Wan, one of the commissioners who voted to deny the city the go-ahead. "This is really part of a much larger transportation project ... designed to create a shortcut through the park for commuting purposes."

The Coastal Commission's vote on the plan was a close 5 to 5, meaning it did not get the majority approval needed. Commissioner Mark Stone, the only representative from Santa Cruz County,

backed the plan.

A mix of shock and disappointment characterized the reactions of proponents and city planners. Many had made the 430-mile trek to the Santa Diego County hearing expecting a different outcome.

"We'll be meeting to figure out what to do next," said Juliana Rebagliati, Santa Cruz city planning director, before she boarded a plane to return home.

The city offered up the Arana Gulch plan as a blueprint for managing the property, which it bought in 1994 to expand the amount of open space in the city. In deciding

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## TRAIL

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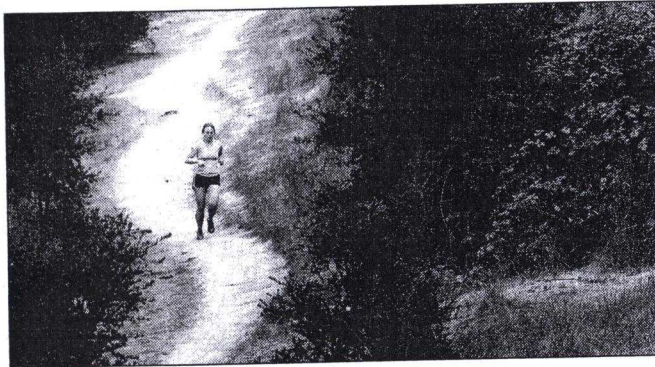
what to do with the land, planners sought to appease both bicyclists and community groups wanting paved trails and conservationists wanting little or no disruption.

The snag that proved insurmountable for the city was the endangered Santa Cruz tarplant. The plant, with its daisy-like, yellow flowers and a scent that some compare to Christmas trees, is found in few places besides Arana Gulch. Even there, its numbers have dropped significantly.

The bloc of coastal commissioners that opposed the city's plan made clear Thursday it didn't want anything to get in the way of the tarplant's health.

"I really want to see the restoration and management go forward before any paths," said Commissioner Esther Sanchez.

A number of Thursday's speakers, including representatives of the California Native Plant Society as well as some from local conservation



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Melanie Michalik runs along a trail in Arana Gulch on Thursday. Michalik, who lives in the neighborhood, also rides her bike on the trails, but prefers they stay unpaved.

groups, agreed the city plan made environmental protection an afterthought.

Besides the trail connecting Brommer Street in Live Oak with Broadway in Santa Cruz, which included a bridge across Hagemann Gulch, the plan called for interpretive displays, overlook areas and benches to accommodate visitors.

"Let the red tailed hawks that live there soar over a greenbelt, not a blackbelt," said Penny Elia, on behalf of Friends of Arana Gulch, a group formed to protect the property.

City planners, largely in response to suggestions by the

Coastal Commission, made several concessions for the tarplant. The final plan called for rerouting trails around the most sensitive plant habitats, using permeable paving material for paths and launching a tarplant recovery program that went as far as ensuring cattle grazing, known to stimulate tarplant growth.

"The project has changed over time, and I'm very pleased with the changes the city has made," said Commissioner Stone, who earlier this year had reservations about the plan.

City planners had hoped to leverage \$2.7 million of federal

and local funds to initiate the project. The money was earmarked for trails, but planners had expected to use much of it for tarplant management.

"The city's proposal was clearly the best environmental outcome possible. It's a brilliant use of the funds they can get," said a disappointed Paul Schoellhamer after the meeting. "It was the only way that that much habitat and tarplant work could happen."

Commissioner Steve Blank, however, accused the city of presenting a disingenuous argument that trails were needed to save the tarplant.

The city's options for pursuing the plan now are few. The Coastal Commission, which has final say over any development near the coast, rarely reconsiders its decisions, and legal action by the city is a costly and uncertain prospect.

"This is denying access to our community," said Elizabeth Schilling, director of the Live Oak Family Resource Center, who has pushed for trails for neighbors to use. "We can almost touch the birds and wildlife (at Arana Gulch) from Live Oak but it's not for us to have."