

Sanctuary Scenic Trail off and rolling

\$5.3M of \$14M in local projects goes toward trail

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SANTA CRUZ — The Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission on Thursday voted to spend millions to kick-start the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail, fix local roads and put a down payment on the continued expansion of Highway 1.

The 12-member board approved a \$14 million list of local projects, including bike and pedestrian improvements to local roads, street repairs, planning funds for a Capitola roundabout and \$2.5 million to continue expanding Highway 1 between Soquel and 41st avenues.

But the big winner was the Sanctuary Scenic Trail, which saw \$5.3 million go toward the planned 50-mile, \$122 million network of trails. It includes \$4 million for a segment through Santa

TRAIL

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Cruz's Westside, linking a trail that extends to Wilder Ranch along Highway 1 with the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk and San Lorenzo River levee.

"With one allocation of funds, (we) have a really long trail network that we can showcase to the community," said Micah Posner, a Santa Cruz city council member and bicycle proponent. "Not just to benefit that segment or that community, but to say, 'Look, this is what we could have for the whole county.'"

The RTC is also spending \$1 million on a Scenic Trail segment connecting Watsonville Slough to Lee Road. Another segment included \$200,000 for a two-block

trail along Twin Lakes State Beach, where the county plans a beachfront makeover.

But there was debate about a plan to spend \$2.5 million on the future expansion of Highway 1 between Soquel and 41st avenues, with the Regional Transportation Commission now finishing a segment between Soquel Avenue and Morrissey Boulevard.

The decision includes putting aside \$2 million for future construction on the \$27 million project. But Santa Cruz-based commissioners wanted to put \$500,000 toward expanding the San Lorenzo Bridge, wanting to maintain momentum on efforts to fix the Highway 9 and Highway 1 intersection.

"We've prioritized the project that serves 100,000 people over that one that

serves 85,000 people," said RTC senior transportation planner Rachel Moriconi. "It's not that it's a bad project."

While a local priority to some, a top Caltrans official indicated the agency does not back a bridge expansion as the answer to broader, long-standing congestion problems at the intersection.

"One of our engineers has called it \$22 million for a bigger parking lot," said Aileen Loe, a Caltrans deputy district director.

Though it did approve separate funds for new bike and turn lanes at the intersection, the commission ultimately sided with Highway 1 widening. It also approved funds to repair Summit Road, Ocean Street, Bean Creek Road, Bear Creek Road, Empire Grade, Freedom Boulevard and more.

It also voted to spend \$1.2 million on bike and pedestrian improvements to Airport Boulevard. And it set aside \$90,000 to look at a possible new roundabout at Bay and Capitola avenues, near Gayle's Bakery.

The Watsonville trail segment intends to tie slough trails to the backbone of the Sanctuary Scenic Trail. It received strong backing, including from the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, which is pitching in \$300,000 toward the project.

The trail is also seen as the start of a future trail linking downtown Watsonville with Pajaro Valley High School, which sits south of Highway 1. Students must now navigate narrow, traffic-choked roads to get to class.

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