

Linking trails offer vast possibilities

by Gerald Erickson
Staff writer

For all the hikers, cyclists, and equestrians whose adventures have been brought to a screeching halt by a dead-end trail, the future could look bright. Those "Trail Ends" signs could be coming down.

In a meeting earlier this month hosted by county Supervisor Millie Greenberg, plans were unveiled to create a continuous system of trails in East Contra Costa County. At present, according to Supervisor Greenberg, "Each city is doing a great job in identifying trails within its city limits." What's needed, she said, is a regional system, which not only connects existing trail sections and builds new ones, but also provides for the long-term maintenance of all trails.

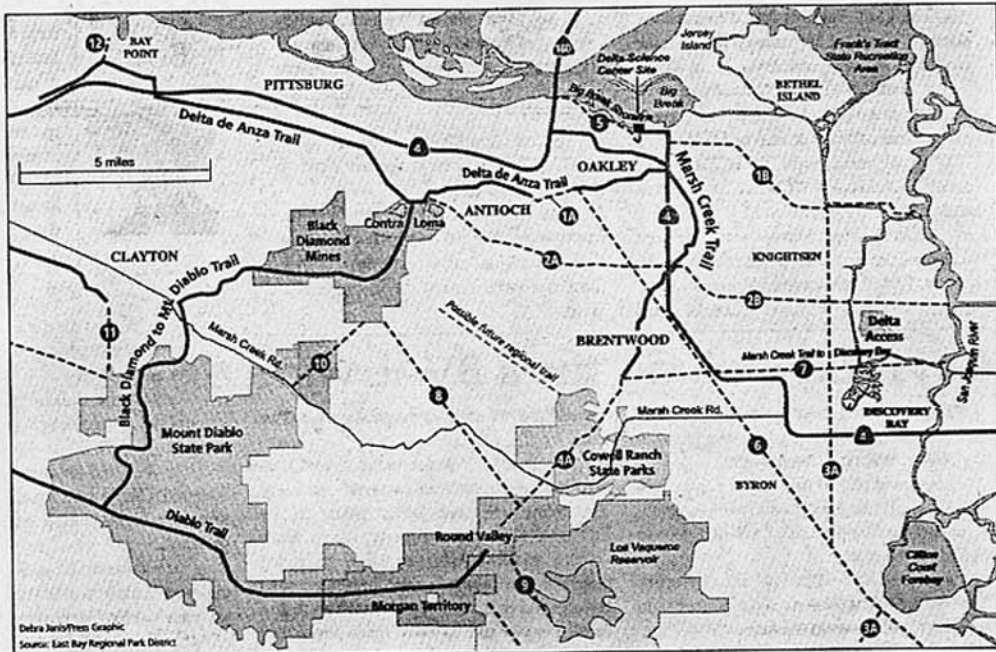
The meeting was marked by a wide range of viewpoints. In attendance were representatives of the Contra Costa Water District, the East Contra Costa Irrigation District, the East Bay Municipal Utility District, city officials and developers. Also on hand were members of the equestrian, cycling and hiking communities. The organization with the most experience in these matters and most intensively involved in the project, the East Bay Regional Park District, was represented by trails development program manager Steve Fiala, who bore the lion's share of presentation and feedback time.

Two immediate tasks were emphasized: to identify a trail system and investigate a funding mechanism.

The existing system of trails is vast but incomplete. A few notable examples (see accompanying map) are the gaps between Brentwood and Round Valley, along the Marsh Creek Trail; between north Oakley and the Antioch Shoreline, along the Big Break Shoreline Trail; and between Antioch and Oakley, west of Neroly Road, along the Delta DeAnza Trail. It is hoped that this latter connection will be in use before year's end.

Possibly the most daunting stretch lies between Brentwood and Discovery Bay, a proposed six-mile straight shot along an East Contra Costa Irrigation District canal. Together with a gap of about a mile between Oakley and Antioch, the section, once completed, will become part of a 30-mile chain of unbroken trails from Discovery Bay to Bay Point.

The trails are not just for recreation. According to Fiala, "Sixty-four percent of trail users are commuters." A prime example is Pittsburg, where the



Delta DeAnza Trail
Source: East Bay Regional Park District

Existing Trails

----- Proposed Trails

■ East Bay Regional Park District Parklands

■ Other open space land

Potential regional trails/new sections

Delta de Anza Trail:

- 17 Antioch to Oakley section
 - 18 Marsh Creek Trail to Rock Slough
- Mokelumne Coast to Crest Trail:
- 21 Contra Loma to Marsh Creek Trail
 - 20 Marsh Creek Trail to Delta
- De Anza National Historic Trail
- 19 Rock Slough to Bethany Reservoir
- San Francisco Bay to San Joaquin River Trail
- 22 Round Valley to Big Break

Other regional trails

- 5 Big Break Shoreline
- 6 Southern Pacific Railroad
- 7 Marsh Creek Trail to Discovery Bay
- 8 Black Diamond Mines to Round Valley
- 9 Round Valley to Los Vaqueros Reservoir
- 10 Black Diamond Mines to Mt. Diablo
- 11 California State Riding & Hiking
- 12 Delta de Anza to Bay Point

Delta DeAnza Trail connects with both Los Medanos College and the Pittsburg/Bay Point BART. There, the trail has become a true corridor of commerce.

When one imagines the many creatures that inhabit the trail system, the golden eagle and kit fox come readily to mind. So should the horse. A study conducted by the East County Horsemen's Organization, presented at the meeting by Milton Clarke of Los Medanos College, asserted that equestrians are eager to see the trail system expanded and enhanced for horseback riding. Of all the preferences expressed in

ECHO's survey, one overwhelmed all others. In Clarke's words, "Equestrians are saying, 'What we want most are trails.'"

Kathryn Brage of Shea Homes stressed the importance of cooperation between trail planners and home builders. Timing, said Brage, is a crucial factor.

"You'll have more success if you put the trail in before the people move in," she said. And she warned against the expectation that a private entity such as a developer will automatically volunteer to devote

see Trails page 4B

Trails

from page 1B

resources to maintain a public trail. In her view, trails do enhance the value of nearby homes, although supporting statistics are hard to come by. But developers do recognize - and factor in - the attractiveness of the public trails that wend their way through residential areas.

Fiala then led a discussion of the other immediate task identified in the agenda: arriving at a funding mechanism. Funding an ambitious public project is always difficult, Fiala said, adding that taxpayers prefer not to add to their already substantial burden. But Fiala chose a different emphasis: not how to find the money but how to allocate it. His conclusion underscored the value of visualizing the long-term. Maintenance, he said, is the key to the success of any trail project. "It's a lot easier to get a block grant to build something than to maintain it." Everyone gets excited about a brand-new trail, he said, but not everyone gets excited about its upkeep. Maintenance funding might be available from sever-

al sources, but none have as yet been secured.

In the open discussion that followed, comments were offered ranging from suggestions by cyclists about helpful signage along the trails to requests to move from the thinking stage to the doing stage. In response to the latter, Greenberg called for a follow-up meeting in about two months. The deadline will give communities and agencies a spur to further crystallize and coordinate their plans.

The atmosphere after the meeting was upbeat. Members of the hiking, cycling and equestrian community were glad that such serious public attention was finally being paid to their personal passion.

Annette Rains of Byron, a longtime equestrian advocate, felt "a wonderful energy in the room." She was also relieved to see all those powerful regional agencies involved in the process - to see some of the burden taken off the little guy.

"It's good to see the project being driven from the top," she said.