

San Jose Mercury News

Proposed trail would link Niles to Sunol

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POSTED: 04/16/2015 11:04:23 AM PDT | UPDATED: 5 DAYS AGO

Plans for a multi-use trail through Niles Canyon connecting Fremont and Sunol are gathering steam.

In its early stages, the proposed project would create a 10-foot-wide path for pedestrians, bicyclists and possibly equestrians to travel the picturesque canyon for about 4 miles, according to East Bay Regional Park District in a Tuesday night presentation to Fremont City Council.

Also proposed are two other trail connections which would tie Vallejo Mills Park at Niles Canyon Road and Mission Boulevard to the Bay Area Ridge Trail and another to connect from Vargas Plateau Regional Park in the Fremont hills to the Sunol Water Temple.

Similar proposals have been attempted since the mid-1970s, said Jim Townsend, trails development manager for East Bay Regional Park District. However, the latest effort began moving forward last year when Alameda County District 2 Supervisor Richard Valle approached the park district, he said.

Addressing council members Tuesday, Valle said there are plans to hopefully close the canyon for a full day from one end to another sometime this year to allow access to the community.

A feasibility study for the route, which could determine a preferred alignment, is being developed. Once a preferred alignment is agreed upon, cost estimates should become defined. Funding from federal, state and Measure BB, Alameda County Transportation Commission's \$7.8-billion initiative approved in November 2014, are possibilities, Townsend said.

Following the study, an environmental impact report would be included in the next phase.

Two town hall meetings on the project, in Sunol and in Niles, were held last October and January, respectively. A third public meeting on the feasibility study is expected in May and has yet to be scheduled, Townsend said.

Options for the trail include portions adjacent to Highway 84, adjacent to Niles Canyon Railway and adjacent to Union Pacific Railroad tracks. The trail project is "particularly complex" because of roads, railroads, Alameda Creek and the steep topography, Townsend said.

Partners in the project with the park district are County of Alameda, San Francisco Water Power and Sewer and Alameda County Water District. At the moment, the City of Fremont's role is as a stakeholder.

Council members said the trail project is long overdue and a welcome addition to the community. "I think this is a great project," said Councilman Vinnie Bacon, who serves on a liaison committee between the city and park district. "This is a great idea"

Mayor Bill Harrison said the staging area for the trail will need more than just parking for it to be successful.

At the popular Stanford Avenue staging area for Mission Peak, the city is dealing with many issues including lack of parking and public facilities such as restrooms, though portable toilets have been added.

The trails project is separate from a contentious Alameda Creek Bridge replacement proposal on Niles Canyon Road by Caltrans.

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