

Niles Canyon Trail plan seen as regional system connector

By Sam Richards

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SUNOL -- A 6-mile hiking and biking trail through Niles Canyon would be costly and time-consuming to build but likely would be popular and well-used, and worth the money and effort.

That is the essential message of a feasibility study sponsored by the East Bay Regional Park District and several Alameda County agencies.

The trail connecting Sunol and Niles is part of the park district's 2013 master plan and would connect with other trails in the area, including the planned Bay Area Ridge Trail segment at Niles.

"There are some gaps ... within the Alameda County trail system, and the canyon is a critical gap between the East Bay trails and the eastern part of (the county)," said Dawn Argula, who oversees transportation policy for Supervisor Scott Haggerty's office.

The Niles Canyon Trail would link with a proposed Bay Area Ridge Trail segment near Niles, said Suzanne Wilson, trails coordinator for the park district. It also would join with the proposed Sunol Ridge Trail, just west of Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park, on Sunol's west edge.

The trail, as laid out in the report, would share the relatively cramped canyon with busy state Highway 84, the Union Pacific/Altamont Corridor Express rail line, the recreational/historic Niles Canyon Railway tracks, Alameda Creek and the dormant Sunol Aqueduct.

The trail would run adjacent to each of them, except the creek, at various points.

Part of the proposed trail could actually be on the more than 100-year-old aqueduct, according to the report. Generations of locals have called the concrete aqueduct structure the "Secret Sidewalk." It would have to be widened for sanctioned use.

Phase 1 would begin at Niles and continue 2 1/2 miles east to Palomares Road. Phase 2 would stretch from Palomares Road east to Brightside, where the Niles Canyon Railway has its yard and train maintenance shop. Phase 3 would extend the trail from Brightside, skirting the rail shop, to the west edge of Sunol near its rail depot.

Depending on the options chosen, a pedestrian bridge could carry the trail over the highway, creek and both rail lines near Palomares Road or Brightside. There could be other overcrossings or tunnels under rail tracks.

All three phases would cost between \$57 million and \$69 million -- not accounting for inflation.

Funding, Argula said, hasn't been identified but could come from a variety of sources, including the Alameda County Transportation Commission, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the park district and, possibly, federal agencies.

The first construction is five to 10 years away, even after funding is lined up, Argula said. And before that, environmental studies, including the study of a trail's effects on Alameda Creek, need to be done.

Most of the players involved -- Alameda County, the regional park district, Caltrans, Niles Canyon Railway, the Alameda Creek Alliance, San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and others -- already are at the table or have offered constructive comments, Argula said. Wilson said others, such as Union Pacific, will be approached when plans are more firm.

And coming on board, trail planners say, is the public, who turned out in force for the Oct. 11 Stroll and Roll event, during which Highway 84 was closed to motor vehicles and opened for hundreds of hikers and bikers.

"We told people there that if you want this trail to happen, to put pressure on the public boards, to tell them you want it," Wilson said. "It would be a huge effort moving forward."