

Recreational Trail Opportunity for the Gaviota Coast

by Mike Lunsford

April, 2011

The Gaviota Coast contains significant recreational resources, and these resources are one of the elements sought to be protected and enhanced in the current Gaviota planning process. Trails, as windows to nature, offer necessary, recreational experiences for young and old. They open new perspectives, and provide opportunities for healthy, invigorating exercise.

As we plan for the future, we should not lose sight of past efforts to realize the recreational potential of the Gaviota Coast. Below is a list of some of those previous efforts and their public policy framework. Our current efforts are but the latest in a long continuum of effort over the last 40 years.

1972 Proposition 20 provided that "A hiking, bicycle, and equestrian trails system shall be established along or near the coast" and that ***"ideally the trails system should be continuous and located near the shoreline."*** (Completing the California Coastal Trail, pp 10-11, 2003.)

1973 The local vision of a public trail along the shoreline on the Gaviota Coast was described in detail in the report SANTA BARBARA COUNTY COASTAL TRAILS SYSTEM, Mission to Mission Trails for Bikers, Hikers and Equestrians. The report was published in October, 1973 by the Santa Barbara County Trails Council, a Santa Barbara based non-profit.

1974 The California Recreational Trails Act of 1974 called for the creation of the California Recreational Trails Plan, which was adopted in 1978, and updated in 2002. That Plan, described the Coastal Trail as a hiking, biking, and equestrian trail corridor **"...from Oregon to Mexico within the sights, and sounds of the Pacific Ocean."**

1976 The Coastal Act of 1976 required local jurisdictions to identify an alignment for the California Coastal Trail in their Local Coastal Programs.

1981 In compliance with the Coastal Act, the County began planning a Coastal Trail segment between Isla Vista and El Capitan. A staged EIR was published on June 18, 1981 by Envicom Corporation which studied a project described as "SANTA BARBARA COUNTY COASTAL TRAIL SYSTEM, EL CAPITAN – DEVEREAUX DUNES SEGMENT, (Final Environmental Impact Report 80-EIR-44.) In 1982, the County issued a Coastal Development Permit for constructing the trail, but the project was delayed and the permit lapsed.

1990 Congress established the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail, which is expected to share a common alignment with the Coastal Trail on the Gaviota Coast, adding an important historical element to the value of the trail.

2000 The Coastal Trail was chosen to be California's Millennium Legacy Trail by Governor Davis. As part of the Millennium Celebration, the White House recognized the California Coastal Trail as a National Millennium Legacy Trail. Only one trail in each state was selected.

2001 Assembly Concurrent Resolution 20 (Pavley) declared the Coastal Trail an official state trail, and urged its completion. The State Legislature passed SB 908, the Coastal Trail bill, requiring the Coastal Conservancy in cooperation with State Parks and the Coastal Commission to develop a plan for the completion of the Coastal Trail. In response to this mandate, the Coastal Conservancy issued a report to the State Legislature in January, 2003 entitled "Completing the California Coastal Trail"

Existing Policies Not only is it prudent to be aware of past efforts, it is helpful to understand the present policy context for current efforts to update the Gaviota Plan. The County's Open Space Element gives priority to the protection of coastal areas for recreation where it says, "...where coastal and inland sites are equally suitable for urban development, ***the County and the cities would be wise to preserve the oceanfront lands in open space, wherever possible, because of their unique scenic, recreational and ecological values.***" (Page 95)

The Coastal Land Use Plan (CLUP) recognizes that "...there is a need for trails for hiking, biking, and equestrian use to provide increased opportunities for coastal access and recreational use." (Page 88) And on Page 89 it says, "...coastal dependent and related recreational uses are given priority in the coastal zone." CLUP Policy 7-18 states, "***Expanded opportunities for access and recreation shall be provided in the Gaviota Coast planning area.***" (Page 97) CLUP Policy 7-25 states, "***Easements for trails shall be required as a condition of project approval for that portion of the trail crossing the parcel upon which the project is proposed.***"

The Need

Although the GavPAC intends to take up the matter of public recreation soon, final action by the County on recommendations is years away. In the mean time, there are several pending development projects being processed by the County on the privately owned lands between El Capitan and Goleta. Each of these projects includes offers to dedicate Coastal Trail easements without coordination of siting, resulting in inappropriate alignments which don't satisfy the long-established policy objectives stated above. Additional planning is necessary to find an acceptable route before those projects are approved.

Recommendation

It is important to not only acquire these public trail easements, but to also identify a more appropriate, integrated route. Therefore, I recommend that a subcommittee be appointed to work with CRAHTAC, property owners, and other interested groups to plan an appropriate route for the Coastal Trail between Goleta and El Capitan. The work product of this sub-committee could make an important contribution to the final recommendations the GavPAC makes to the County.