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Missing link on Pleasanton's section of Iron Horse Trail set for January completion

Will connect BART to business offices and homes

by Glenn Wohltmann

With the Iron Horse Trail due to be completed in January, those who commute to and from Pleasanton will soon have an easier way of getting to and from their jobs.

The final link will connect Santa Rita Road to the Pleasanton/Dublin BART station, literally paving the way for people to use the trail by bike or on foot to get to and from BART. It will connect the BART station to major corporate business offices and employment centers, such as Kaiser Permanente in the Hacienda Business Park.

The main purpose of the trail is for recreation, according to Jim Townsend, the East Bay Regional Parks District trail development manager. EBRPD estimates that a half-million people use the completed portions every year, to walk, bike or ride horses.

Pleasanton Planning Commissioner Arne Olson, an avid bicycle rider, said he welcomes the new section of trail in both professional and recreational capacities.

"Anything that improves the route through Pleasanton is welcome. I've gone from Pleasanton to Walnut Creek and back -- most of it is pretty easy to do, just when you get to the BART station it's been somewhat of a hassle to get through the area just south of the BART station. I think that'll be a big improvement," Olson said. "I could see the possibility of people using the trail with bicycles to get to the BART station and using BART to get to their jobs."

The trail will run next to several existing apartments and close to one of two new projects planned by BRE, allowing people who work elsewhere in the East Bay to walk from home to BART.

Closing the 1.6 mile gap will cost an estimated \$3 million, according to Ryan Perry of Harris and Associates, which was hired as construction manager for the project.

"They've got the majority of the concrete in between Owens Drive and Hacienda Drive, and the majority of the concrete in between Tassajara Creek and Santa Rita Road. There's a few extra gaps that are open," Perry said. "The estimated completion date is Jan. 2 right now. They're still shooting for a spring of 2014 grand opening."

He said a deal made with the owners of an apartment complex will bring a new tennis court and a new basketball court to Owens Plaza Park. The landowner lost the two courts to make way for the trail, and the builders made a deal to move them to the park.

Once the trail is completed, Perry said, "people will be able to ride from Valley Avenue to Concord on paved trails."

But there are some problems when it comes to crossing busy streets, most notably at Hacienda Drive, West Las Positas Boulevard, Santa Rita Road and Stoneridge Drive.

Work on the trail at the intersection of Santa Rita and Stoneridge came at an opportune time, as Pleasanton works to extend Stoneridge Drive to El Charro Road in Livermore.

As the city does improvements in the area, including moving a sidewalk, it will also do work to link the trail between Santa Rita and Stoneridge, according to Pleasanton Traffic Engineer Steve Kirkpatrick.

At Owens Drive, the trail will cross at an existing crosswalk. At other intersections, Townsend said, pedestrians and bikes will be able to push a button and wait for the light.

Herb Ritter, who is a member of the Planning Commission and served on the city's Bicycle, Pedestrian and Trails Committee, said he knows the trail won't be for everyone.

"The crossings are supposed to be designed for kids to cross, so it will be safe as can be. I don't think you'll get the hardcore bicycle riders," Ritter said. "I think the Iron Horse is designed to be a safe avenue for recreational bike riders, pedestrians, runners and those kinds of things."

He said having it paved will make the section easier to maintain and make it useable to more people, but added that education will be needed.

"The challenge is going to be getting everyone to learn how to use the trail, pedestrians stay on the right, that kind of thing," he said.

Pedestrians on the trail yield to horses and bicyclists and bicyclists yield to horses. The East Bay Regional Parks District has a list of more general rules, but the overarching rule is courtesy.

When completed, the trail will offer a continuous multi-use path running from Martinez on the Carquinez Strait to the San Joaquin County line near the Altamont Pass. So far, about 33 miles of what will ultimately be 55 paved miles of trail have been completed at a cost Perry estimated to be between \$30-\$40 million.

The Iron Horse Trail generally follows the former Southern Pacific Railroad right of way established in 1891 and abandoned in 1977. The old rail line was ideal for converting to a trail -- it was a relatively straight path with few hills and already linked several cities.