Guest Commentary | Ultimate Trail next to rails fails safety test

By SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL |
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By J. Ben Vernazza

"Public safety and necessity" is a legal concept that refers to the government's responsibility and power to regulate private and public property for promoting the health, safety and welfare of the public.

Unfortunately, the "Ultimate Trail" under consideration by the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission is significantly unsafe for public usage from Pacific Avenue in the city of Santa Cruz to Capitola, and particularly in Segment 9.

By far the busiest utilization of the Coastal Trail between North County to South County will be Santa Cruz to Capitola because it is the most densely populated area in the county. The Santa Cruz, Live Oak, Twin Lakes, Pleasant Point and Capitola areas have about 4,000 residents per square mile. The rest of the county has only 285 residents per square mile. Tourism is concentrated in this same area. In the spring and fall, and, especially during the summer, thousands of visitors will be attracted to the trail. Many will bring with them their bikes, e-bikes, e-scooters, e-skateboards, or they will rent them here. Many will be disabled with canes and e-chairs and with hearing and sight disabilities. Families with small children will come as well as walkers and runners.

All these uses combined will create multiple risks for people using the proposed Ultimate Trail of 12 feet wide (sometimes only 9 feet). The risk is due to so many users on a trail with fencing on one side and retaining walls on the other not allowing escape in an emergency. In such situations, might the RTC and/or the county be liable for damages?

The environmental impact report for Segment 9 sets out goals overlooked in the Segment 9 Ultimate Trail proposal. The goals section of the Segment 9 environmental plan says: "Improve transportation safety, especially for the most vulnerable users – Prioritize funding for safety projects and programs that will reduce fatal or injury collisions. Reduce the potential for conflict between bicyclists, pedestrians, and vehicles."

The RTC's Monterey Bay Sanctuary scenic trail master plan does not specifically address the width of multi-use trails but provides guidance on how to design safe and accessible multi-use trails. They recommend trails be designed with sufficient width to accommodate all types of users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, and e-rideables and recommend trails be designed with a separation between different user groups, where appropriate.

The U.S. Access Board is an independent federal agency that promotes equality for people with disabilities through leadership in design, accessibility guidelines and standards. One entire chapter is "Conflicts Between Shared Path Users" asserting safety concerns when it comes to sharing a path with a high-density mixture of users. Their concern is the risk of collisions between pedestrians who are blind or have low vision, those with hearing deficiencies, as well as those with limited mobility and bicyclists who pass them too closely at fast speeds. Their recommendations include separate pathways for pedestrians and bicyclists along with regulating and strictly enforcing traffic on shared-use paths to protect pedestrians.

The Ultimate Trail for Segment 9 (Pacific Avenue to 17th Avenue) is a dangerous alternative and is a potential public safety nuisance. The law and public safety and design common sense demand that public trail projects be wider with separate to-and-from lanes available to pedestrians and for bicycles together with e-rideables. Unfortunately, the Ultimate Trail for Segment 9 provides only one trail for all users within a width of 9.5 to 14 feet.

The Alternative Interim Trail provides a 16-foot-wide trail with two separate 8-foot to-and-from lanes. It also saves 257 of the trees being cut down in Segment 9 along with no retaining walls and millions of dollars saved. Most importantly is the safety of the Alternative Interim Trail because separating of pedestrians and human-powered modes of transportation saves lives, avoids serious injuries and minimizes crashes.

J. Ben Vernazza has been a resident of Aptos CA since 1967.

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