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Light at the end of the tunnel?

The quest continues for a better link between Mill Valley and Corte Madera

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A packed crowd gathered at Edna Maguire Elementary in Mill Valley last Wednesday, Dec. 9, to learn more about the merits and costs of three proposed bike-and-pedestrian routes connecting Mill Valley and Corte Madera.

The meeting, hosted by Marin County's Department of Public Works, drew some 150 people to hear the latest version of a draft study done by Benicia-based consultants Alta/LandPeople on three bike-pedestrian routes, including the controversial option of reopening the long-closed Alto Tunnel rail passage.

The idea behind the study is to forge a missing link in Marin's north-south corridor of bike-pedestrian pathways. "This is a portion of a much larger network," said Carey Lando, senior transportation planner for the county.

An improved route between Mill Valley and Corte Madera would provide the missing link in a regional system connecting "to the future SMART rail corridor path system in Larkspur and extend north to Cloverdale in Sonoma County, providing a non-motorized connection from Cloverdale to San Francisco," as the report states. "The routes being studied would connect to the two most highly used bicycle and pedestrian routes in Marin County: the Sandra Marker Trail to the north and the Mill Valley to Sausalito Path to the south."

But as county officials have insistently pointed out, the draft study presented last week is just that, a report, and not a plan. Just when one or more of these paths might be improved will inevitably have a lot to do with the availability of funds.

The \$225,000 study itself was funded by Marin County's \$25 million Nonmotorized Transportation Pilot Program, a grant awarded to four communities nationwide by Congress to encourage walking and biking as alternative forms of transportation.

While the proposed routes share the same starting and ending place, they differ sharply in projected cost, elevation change and length. Here's a look at each option.

- The Horse Hill Route would head north from East Blithedale to Edna Maguire, where it would then turn right and follow Lomita Avenue to Highway 101.

After meeting up with the Horse Hill Path, the route heads north along the Casa Buena Drive frontage road to Sanford Street, Madera Boulevard and finally, Tamal Vista Boulevard to meet up with the Sandra Marker Trail.

An alternative version of the Horse Hill Route would follow Meadowsweet Drive, a more circuitous road to the west of Casa Buena Drive that has the merit of being farther from the highway.

Preliminary cost estimates vary for the Horse Hill Route but are in the \$4 million to \$6 million range.

A sunken path option along Casa Buena Drive, lessening the grade and shielding highway glare and noise, would add another \$9 million to \$10 million in cost.



A rendering from the Marin County Bicycle Coalition shows what the entrance to the Alto Tunnel might look like if the defunct passageway is renovated for bicycle and pedestrian use. Image courtesy MCBC

- The proposed Alto Tunnel Route follows a more direct path to Corte Madera by boring straight through the hill separating the two towns.

The first segment of the Alto Tunnel Route matches the first portion of the Horse Hill Route, running from the northern terminus of the Mill Valley-Sausalito path to Vasco Court (the Horse Hill option turns right at Lomita Drive).

The path then proceeds along an old railroad bed from Vasco Court to the tunnel entrance. The renovated tunnel, 13 feet wide by 16 feet tall, would be nearly 2,200 feet long, with reinforced steel supports and a concrete lining. Improvements would include lighting, a surveillance system, ventilation and fire hydrants.

(The tunnel, built in 1884 and closed in 1971, was originally a rail passage for Northwestern Pacific Railroad. After its closure, the tunnel's ends were blocked off and the northern end backfilled with gravel.)

Once cyclists and pedestrians emerge from the tunnel in Corte Madera, the route would continue along what is now an overgrown railroad bed before connecting with an existing bike path between Tamalpais Drive and Montecito Drive. From there, it's a short distance to meet up with the Sandra Marker Trail.

The Alto Tunnel Route is the most expensive option by far at an estimated \$48 million to \$52 million.

- Lastly, the Camino Alto-Corte Madera Avenue Route largely follows existing streets to make an overland crossing from Mill Valley to Corte Madera.

From the Mill Valley-Sausalito Path endpoint, cyclists and walkers would head west on East Blithedale Avenue to Camino Alto, and then follow the latter to the Mill Valley-Corte Madera city limit and down the other side.

Improvements to the street would be either the addition of two 5-foot bike lanes, requiring retaining walls and restriping, or a single 8-foot-wide bike climbing lane on the eastern side with an only slightly widened western shoulder.

At the city limits, the road changes from Camino Alto to Corte Madera Avenue, taking travelers down to Corte Madera's Redwood Avenue and eventually the Sandra Marker Trail.

Under the plan, Corte Madera Avenue would be widened to allow for 5-foot-wide bike lanes along the lower portion.

Depending on the improvements that are adopted, this route runs from \$4.6 million to \$9.9 million in estimated cost.

Paths differ in user projections

Widely varying cost projections aren't the only variable consultants noted. The study suggests that there would be significant differences in the number of cyclists and pedestrians that would frequent each of the three routes.

According to the study, an estimated 380 bicyclists and 72 pedestrians would use the Horse Hill Route on average daily.

A daily average of 1,036 bicyclists and 197 pedestrians would use the Camino Alto-Corte Madera Avenue Route, the report predicts.

Leading the projected numbers of walkers and bikers by a wide margin, the study estimates 1,863 bicyclists and 466 pedestrians would use the Alto Tunnel Route.

If the sole consideration is to get more residents onto their bikes and feet and out of their cars, the study's numbers suggest, the Alto Tunnel would draw the most users.

Aside from the shorter travel length, the reasons behind the tunnel's predicted popularity have to do with the fact that it would be comparatively flat and would present riders and walkers with an auto-free corridor.

The Camino Alto Routes includes a 300-foot elevation gain, compared to the Alto Tunnel's 75-foot elevation gain. Both Horse Hill routes fall somewhere in between, with a roughly 160-foot gain in elevation.

Tunnel opening raises fears

While the study predicts considerably more people would use the Alto Tunnel Route, reopening the path doesn't sit well with residents living in neighborhoods bordering the tunnel's entrances in Mill Valley and Corte Madera.

Some residents worry about the sudden influx of bikers and pedestrians intersecting the neighborhoods on their way to and from the tunnel. Others point to the cost and potential impact to homeowners living near or over the tunnel.

"We have two already-existing options: Horse Hill and Camino Alto," said Francine Millman, vice president of the Scott Valley Homeowners Association. "With some renovation on Horse Hill, it is a far more fiscally responsible alternative."

Millman said her association e-mailed a petition last week that sought support for the Horse Hill and Camino Alto routes rather than the tunnel. The association, which includes 195 homes, received about 150 responses in support of the tunnel alternatives, Millman said.

"It hasn't even been about 'We don't want it in our back yard'," she said, citing a range of concerns about safety, maintenance, construction costs and the possibility of homeless sleeping in the tunnel.

Scott Valley resident John Palmer is among those strongly opposed to spending millions rebuilding the Alto Tunnel. He argues that much more benefit could be obtained for far less by making improvements to the Camino Alto and Horse Hill routes.

"The cost of the tunnel is so great that it would of necessity eliminate other programs that would be equally worthy in other areas in the county and Mill Valley," Palmer said.

But it's not just costs that worry residents, as Palmer acknowledged. The possibility of thousands of cyclists and walkers passing through the neighborhood daily is clearly a concern.

"It's really a neighborhood issue," Palmer said. "We live in a quiet residential neighborhood. It would become a bicycle freeway that would run directly through two neighborhoods."

Nick Javaras, an avid mountain biker whose home abuts where the path would be on the Corte Madera side of the tunnel, also opposes the tunnel due to its cost and potential to bring thousands of cyclists pass his back yard.

"It's too costly for the benefit it gives," said Javaras, who has lived in the area for 35 years. The potential bike and pedestrian traffic also gives him pause. "It would be awful," he said. "An absolute nightmare."

Those concerns put residents like Palmer and Millman at odds with the Marin County Bicycle Coalition, which has strongly advocated for the opening of the tunnel. MCBC argues that the alternative routes are unappealing, circuitous and, at times, dangerous.

MCBC argues that the tunnel would encourage a "mode shift," encouraging hesitant residents to finally take up their bikes to head north from Mill Valley or south from Corte Madera. "Many auto trips could easily be replaced with bicycle or pedestrian trips once the tunnel is open," the organization writes in its Alto Tunnel fact sheet.

But residents like Millman and Palmer are skeptical. "This is a recreation expense," Millman said. "It's a nice thought but 60 million dollars doesn't seem to be what people want to spend."

For more details, check out the full report at walkbikemarin.org. Comments on the draft study are due by Jan. 11. Send them to Carey Lando at clando@co.marin.ca.us.

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