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Setback for Tam bicyclists

MMWD rejects new trail; higher fines endorsed

By Maura Thurman

Independent Journal reporter

Bicyclists gained little ground Monday in an uphill trek to gain more access to the Mount Tamalpais watershed.

The Marin Municipal Water District board denied a proposed new trail for bicycles and recommended higher fines for scofflaw riders, ending the latest wrestling over management of 21,000 acres beloved by hikers, bikers and equestrians.

Cyclists won two points: use of short trails near Lagunitas Dam that will let bikers complete loops around the lake and a four-month trial of downhill riding on the Upper Eldridge Grade fire road above Fairfax.

"I was hopeful, and I'm disappointed," said Jim Jacobsen of Forest Knolls, a leader of the Bicycle Trails Council.

But he doesn't see Wednesday's vote as the last word on the subject.

"There are going to be more and more bicyclists using these areas, and these issues are going to arise again and again in some form," he said.

Others said opposition to more bicycle routes will remain as long as there are reckless riders.

"Bikers that stay within the rules and regulations are very welcome," said Nancy Sandy of the Marin Horse Council. "But there are a lot of the other ones."

The district voted to:

- Open the Upper Eldridge Grade fire road to downhill riding for a four-month trial starting in June. The road is restricted now to uphill riders.
- Deny a plan to build a one-mile trail for bicycles from the Sky Oaks ranger station above Fairfax to the Azalea Hill parking area.
- Keep the Lower Hogback fire road above Mill Valley closed to bicycles.
- Recommend raising the fine for illegally riding on trails from \$75 to \$200 for a first offense. Cyclists are limited to fire roads throughout the watershed.

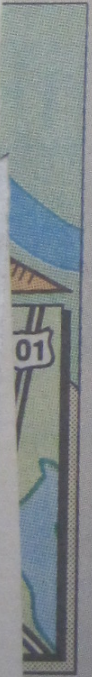
People opposed to expanded bicycle access, many wearing green ribbons pinned to their sweaters, applauded Monday when the board rejected the proposed new trail.

About 120 people gathered at San Rafael City Hall for the meeting, which was noticeably quieter than a similar session on bicy-

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Trails

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Marin Municipal board member Leo Cronin argued for studying the proposed trail further, saying it would let bikers avoid riding about two miles on Fairfax-Bolinas Road to reach the popular Pine Mountain area.

Others complained the project would encourage more bicycling in the area, contrary to policies that stress protection of the watershed as a first priority.

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Board member Joan Boessenecker led criticism of the plan, saying the district should not foster more riding.

"Our children and grandchildren would like to enjoy that primitive western section of the watershed as it is today," she said.

The board voted 3-2 against the plan, with Cronin and board member Chris Morrison backing it.

Hiker Martin Friedman of Mill Valley cited the road as "too steep, too narrow and too rocky" for downhill cycling.

"Ratepayers should not be subsidizing hot-dog bikers or the bicycle industry," Friedman said.

Bikers said the change would give riders more options for loop rides, drawing them away from congested areas.

"The idea of doing that without any additional ranger staff — it's crazy," equestrian Connie Berto said.

June to allow time to fill one vacant ranger position. That would bring the ranger staff to eight.

"We're going to be working to make that trial successful," Jacobsen promised. "We're not going to run away and become anarchists."

Though the board approved the idea of higher fines for trail riding, their recommendation must wait until fall to be submitted to Marin Superior Court, district lands manager Robert Badaracco said.

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Trails

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Others complained the project would encourage more bicycling in the area, contrary to policies that stress protection of the watershed as a first priority.

"This is not in the best interests of the

ratepayers or the watershed," Sandy said. Jacobsen disputed that view, saying few bikers would be drawn to the area solely by a new one-mile trail.

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Bike critics were less successful in turning the board against a test of downhill rid-

ing on Upper Eldridge Grade.

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The board supported the trial unanimously but agreed to delay its start until

June to allow time to fill one vacant ranger position. That would bring the ranger staff to eight.

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"The biggest problem we have on the watershed is illegal use of bicycles on single-track trails," board member Chris Morrison said.

Cronin agreed, noting trail riding is a deliberate violation of the rules that shows an "I-don't-care attitude."

"A lot of our members are frightened by speeding bicycles," said Ron Olson of the Tamalpais Conservation Club. "I hope you can provide enough patrolling that hikers feel a little more safe."

But the board voted to table a proposal for hiring two extra rangers, saying district finances don't permit adding staff.

Boessenecker suggested the board could aid rangers by ensuring they feel top-level support. To that end, she asked for an affirmation of the policies encouraging watershed protection at a future meeting.

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In February, the Planning Department received a petition with 178 signatures requesting an EIR. The signatures were gathered after the Planning Department's initial determination that the project's negative impacts on the environment would be minimal, Powell said.

"We are disappointed that this will continue to delay the proposal, but we understand that in a community as involved as Tam Valley that it is important for everybody to be comfortable with the final deci-

sion," said John Jay, one of the principals in Jay-Phares.

"Most of the technical data has already been prepared. The EIR shouldn't require new studies," Jay said. Nevertheless, the study will set the project back at least six months, he said.

Jay said his firm can ill afford a delay. "Time is money. We have overhead," he said. A long delay "could cost us into the six figures and jeopardize our ability to hold the deal together," Jay said.

Jay-Phares has arranged to purchase the property from nine owners, he said.

But the Planning Department's decision is victory for Tam Junction residents such

as Charles Baumbach. Baumbach couldn't drive to a hardware store in Mill Valley because of traffic congestion on Shoreline Highway.

"Now they want to add a shopping center to the area. That's ridiculous," Baumbach said.

As it is, "I'm paying a mortgage, but I can't park in front of my own darn house," Barrow said.

Jay-Phares has noted the project falls 150 parking spaces short of county requirements. "And I have this feeling those extra cars are all going to end up in front of my house," Barrow said.

Critics of the shopping center say that it

is at least 25,000 square feet too big. As a result, the project virtually extends into neighboring residents' yards, they assert. "Some buildings will be five feet from people's back fences on Cardinal Court," said Eric Montizambert, a member of the Kay Park Residents Coalition.

Jay-Phares is seeking a variance to exceed the county's height requirement of 30 feet by four to six feet. "You have to add to that the three to four feet that the entire project area must be raised to prevent flooding," Baumbach said.

Nevertheless, Mill Valley resident Stacy Swor gives Jay-Phares high marks for attempting to meet the community's needs.

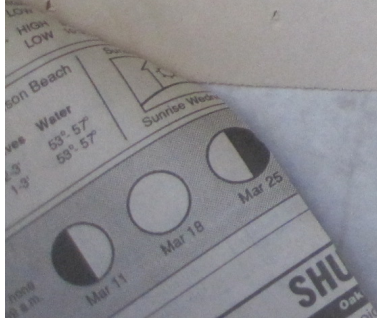
Swor sits on a 12-person steering committee that is revising the 1981 Tam Area Community Plan. "They have been trying hard to comply with the plan," Swor said.

"We believe that this project has been designed in the most responsible manner possible," said Jay.

Critics said they don't oppose development of the area, but believe a closer look at environmental effects is needed.

"I'm not against the development, but it's a question of being fair-minded," Baumbach said.

"It's possible that adequate information exists to address these concerns, but it hasn't come out so far," Montizambert said.



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