

NORTHERN NEWS



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Downtown San Jose
and East Bay Hills
Photo: Jonathan Schuppert, AICP



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Around the Bay in 500 miles

Regional and local planning for the San Francisco Bay Trail

By Jonathan Berlin

Starting at 5:30 AM on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Richard Yen bikes from San Francisco's Mission District through a patchwork of marshes, parks, golf courses, and local roads to his office in Mountain View. As part of the SF2G group, kicked off by Google employees in 2005, Yen rides in a pack with other members of the South Bay's high-tech sector.

"It is quite a nice way to start your morning and see the sunrise," Yen says of his 48-mile ride.

Bay Trail by the numbers

- 25 years of implementation
 - a Planning Landmark project
- 9 counties and 47 cities traversed
- 338 miles of trail completed
- 5 of 7 cross-bay bridges provide access

Types of Bay Trail segments

- Paved multi-use paths
- Dirt trails
- Bike lanes
- Bike routes

Present and future trends

- Growth in active transportation
- Awareness of public health
- Adaptation to sea level rise

Benefits of Bay Trail

- Free access to outdoor recreation
- Alternative to motorized transportation
- Connections to public transit (BART, ferry terminals)
- Revitalizes waterfront areas

The development of the San Francisco Bay Trail over the last 25 years has enabled many such commutes by bicycle, along with better access to recreation, on a network of trails ringing the Bay. When the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) adopted the Bay Trail Plan in 1989 to guide the development of this network, the agency inherited about 100 miles of preexisting trails but envisioned 500 miles total. Today, the Bay Trail Project at ABAG has completed 338 miles, including large chunks of a primary "spine trail" and spur trails toward the shoreline.

Based on this success, the APA's Northern Section and APA California both honored the San Francisco Bay Trail with a 2014 Planning Landmark Award of Excellence, signifying a historically significant effort that opened new directions in planning over at least a quarter century.

This story explores the contributing factors to development of the Bay Trail, emerging challenges, and lessons for regional and local planning.

Local partners for regional planning

Moving from a grand regional vision to local implementation, the Bay Trail Project's first step was to lobby all nine Bay-Area counties and 47 shoreline cities to incorporate the Bay Trail into their general plans, local trail plans, and specific plans for waterfront development. All local jurisdictions now unanimously support the Bay Trail. When shoreline developments are proposed, Bay Trail staff retains a role during the CEQA public

involvement process in "elevating public access as a priority at the local level to help further the regional goal of completing a continuous Bay Trail," says

Laura Thompson, who has managed the Bay Trail Project since 2004.



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Beyond enlisting cities and counties, the Bay Trail Project has partnered with the Trails for Richmond Action Committee (TRAC), the only citizen-led group solely focused on implementing the Bay Trail, since its inception in 1999.

“When we formed TRAC, Richmond had only 12 miles of Bay Trail built,” says TRAC chair and co-founder **Bruce Beyaert**, “and they were fragmented.” To put this into context, Richmond has 32 miles of Bay frontage — or “more shoreline than most cities can shake a paddle at,” as a current Chevron advertisement boasts. With a growing economy and many developments proposed on Richmond’s shoreline at the time, Beyaert saw a “window of opportunity” for improving connectivity.

TRAC found a niche preparing grant applications on behalf of the City of Richmond, bringing in more than \$7 million for Bay Trail segments, Beyaert says. Today, Richmond has more than 32 miles of Bay Trail completed, including more than four miles of shoreline trail not envisioned in the original plan.

CREDIT: TRAILS FOR RICHMOND ACTION COMMITTEE



“The joke at ABAG is they want to clone TRAC!” says Beyaert (in photo above).

Leveraging permits

A wave of grassroots environmental activism in the early 1960s led the State legislature to create the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC), whose mission is to minimize fill in the Bay while maximizing responsible public access.

With its goal of improving public access to the Bay, BCDC is a natural ally in implementing shoreline trails for bicyclists and pedestrians. The agency has an expansive area of jurisdiction, including but not limited to the Bay’s open waters, marshes, mudflats, and the first 100 feet inland from

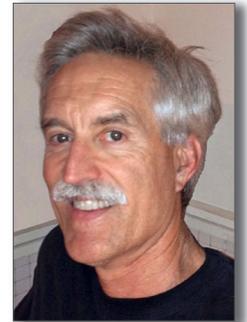
the shoreline. In this area, BCDC’s permitting authority over the subdivision of property, grading, construction, and substantial changes in use can compel project applicants to provide right-of-way for the Bay Trail.

“No agency is going to do it out of the goodness of their heart,” Thompson acknowledges, “because they just don’t have the funding for it.” But BCDC permits have provided the necessary leverage to close major regional gaps in the Bay Trail.

Following the catastrophic 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, Caltrans has conducted seismic retrofits of bridges in the Bay Area, triggering the need for BCDC permits. As a condition of obtaining these permits, Caltrans has granted right-of-way for Bay Trail segments on the Carquinez and Benicia/Martinez bridges and the new east span of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge. Today, five of the Bay Area’s seven bridges provide access to bicyclists and pedestrians, including preexisting access on the Golden Gate and Dumbarton bridges.

Conflict resolution through science

When **Rick Parmer** joined the Bay Trail’s Board of Directors in 1990, bringing scientific knowledge as a naturalist for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, controversy arose over the impacts of trail use on shorebirds and waterfowl feeding in mudflats.



To settle the question, the Bay Trail Project and multiple partners funded a three-year *Bay Trail Wildlife & Public Access Study*, led by researchers at San Jose State University. Thirty-two observers dispersed to three different shoreline sites in Marin County, San Mateo County, and Santa Clara County, and counted birds and trail users in paired plots with and without existing trails.

The preliminary results found no general relationship between human use of trails and the abundance or diversity of birds in foraging habitats at these locations. According to Parmer, this comprehensive study satisfied most people that shoreline trails would not significantly impair birds.

Parmer believes that trail planning benefits from the objectivity of science. “You’re not just using your subjective, best professional opinion,” he says, but rather relying on evidence backed by statistics.

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A broad supporting constituency

While the Bay Trail initially proved popular with recreational bicyclists and pedestrians, trail use diversified in response to social trends. In the last decade, Parmer has observed a surge in the number of bicyclists commuting on the Albany-Berkeley corridor. Thompson has witnessed increases in birdwatchers tracking the Pacific Flyway for migratory birds in the winter. And the rise of Internet-based social groups like SF2G has catalyzed growth in all types of trail users.



CREDIT: TRAC

Aware of growing employee interest in bike commuting, corporations are beginning to support the Bay Trail. Google recently became the first corporation to fund a non-adjacent trail segment, Parmer says, seeing value in improving connectivity throughout the South Bay.

As with planning in general, public health is becoming a motivating concern in trail planning. Kaiser Permanente, the health care provider based in Oakland, is sponsoring a series of events to celebrate the Bay Trail's 25th anniversary. The Bay Trail Project also is interested in appointing someone with expertise in public health to its board of directors, says Thompson.

Remaining challenges

In the effort to finish the 500-mile ring and protect existing trail access, leaders point to three main challenges: funding, feasibility, and climate change.

The bulk of funding to acquire right-of-way and develop trails has come from State bonds for parks, wildlife, and open space; however, existing bonds are running out, and the future funding environment on a State level is uncertain, Parmer says.

Implementation of remaining Bay Trail segments along interstate highways also depends on funding from the federal Highway Trust Fund. But the roadway user fees that supply this fund are increasingly too meager to meet demand. In August, the U.S. Department of Transportation

announced that the Highway Trust Fund is becoming insolvent. Congressional squabbling over reauthorizing the federal transportation program also endangers this funding source.

"Reauthorization of the federal Highway Trust Fund is a huge issue," says Parmer.

Filling the remaining gaps in the Bay Trail also tends to be less feasible because of the unwillingness of landowners or technical challenges such as bridge retrofits.

"We're down to the tough parts now" says Thompson.

For example, to complete access across the Bay Bridge's west span, between Yerba Buena Island and downtown San Francisco, could require a cantilevered structure attached to the existing span — with a cost of \$500 million to implement. The Bay Area Toll Authority is in the initial stages of planning this path.

Then there's sea level rise — the "800-pound gorilla," as Parmer calls it. BCDC's *Living with a Rising Bay* report from 2011 projects a 16-inch rise in water level by mid-century, accelerating to a 55-inch rise by the end of the century. For a shoreline trail, sea level rise poses a critical threat.

Already, high tides — combined with storm surge — flood the Bothin Marsh segment in Mill Valley. Anticipating this problem, the City of Alameda and East Bay Regional Park District submitted a grant application in April to elevate and resurface a three-mile trail segment on Bay Farm Island.

As sea level rise progresses, shoreline communities have "some hard decisions to make in the next couple of decades," Thompson says. They can either armor existing infrastructure or retreat from the shoreline. Whether trails remain fortified or shift inland, the Bay Trail Project wants to maintain public access.



CREDIT: ABE LEIDER

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