

Plans afoot to build five-city BART Greenway for East Bay

By Matt O'Brien, STAFF WRITER
Inside Bay Area

HAYWARD Long a pipe dream for bicyclists in the urban East Bay, a proposed 30-mile, five-city greenway along the BART tracks is getting some serious attention this year.

"The proverbial challenge is how do we fund it," Hayward City Manager Jesus Armas said. "The main point is to start to bring it forward so it's on people's radar screen."

Environmental design firm Urban Ecology, with encouragement from the BART Board of Directors, recently launched a yearlong study to design the trail.

The East Bay BART Greenway, as the group envisions it, would twist around and beneath the tracks for nearly 30 miles.

It would begin somewhere south of the Lake Merritt Channel, where BART emerges from underground downtown Oakland, and continue south through San Leandro, Ashland, Hayward and Union City, ending at the Fremont BART station.

"The concept is identical to the greenway that is underneath the BART tracks in Albany and El Cerrito," said Donald Neuwirth, Urban Ecology's executive director.

The San Francisco-based organization, which has been working on smaller park projects in the San Antonio neighborhood of Oakland, picked up a \$100,000 grant from the California Coastal Conservancy and is using the money to spearhead the path's design.

"If the cities are keen on it," said Tom Radulovich, a BART director from San Francisco, then the transit agency might consider hitching Urban Ecology's greenway plans onto an upcoming seismic retrofit project.

The work to repair BART's aerial viaducts is scheduled to begin in 2009. And while the agency cannot spend any retrofit money on anything other than seismic safety work, Radulovich said there might be an opportunity for coordinating the projects at the same time.

"We have a very tight time frame to play into the BART process," Neuwirth said. The plan must be completed by August 2007 to get BART's consideration.

A similar dream, though even more pie-in-the-sky right now, is to incorporate the nearby Union Pacific Railroad right-of-way into the project.

Union Pacific owns three historic railroad tracks that run north-south through the East Bay flatlands west of the hills.

The eastern track, formerly owned by the Western Pacific Railroad, is directly adjacent to BART for much of the route. It is also the track that is the most infrequently traveled by trains, resulting

in years of speculation among East Bay officials that Omaha-based Union Pacific intends to relinquish it someday.

Armas said various city officials met to discuss the idea of a rail trail a few years ago.

In fact, it is "highly unlikely" that Union Pacific will sell off any of its rail corridors in the busy Bay Area, with both freight and passenger use growing, said company spokesman James Barnes.

"The way rail traffic is today, and the way volumes are hauling, active track is at a premium right now," Barnes said.

Neuwirth said that with the prospect of obtaining traditional railroad right-of-way so unlikely, the BART line makes the most sense.

The project would be easiest to design where BART runs on aerial tracks, leaving room below for a line of paved paths, landscaping and benches. The model is the Ohlone Greenway, a popular, decades-old path that follows BART from Richmond to North Berkeley.

But there are many obstacles, Neuwirth said, including hard-to-cross roadways such as Interstate 238 and High Street in Oakland.

On stretches where BART runs at grade level, the plan would be to divert the biking and walking paths onto nearby streets.

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