

Roadshow: New bicycle bridges open in Silicon Valley, more to come

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Twenty-eight bicyclists rolled down the new crossing over Highway 237 in Sunnyvale on a gorgeous Wednesday, pumping fists in the air and ringing bells in celebration.

The spandex-clad riders were celebrating the opening of a new bicycle-pedestrian bridge here and another a half-mile south over Highway 101 at Borregas Avenue. But they could have been celebrating more: They ride in what has become the most bike-friendly county in the Bay Area, and Wednesday's event kicked off an unprecedented \$40 million worth of improvements stretching from Cupertino to Santa Clara to San Jose.

Next week, a one-of-a-kind overpass will open across Interstate 280 in Cupertino, followed in June by the opening of another bridge over Moffett Boulevard near Highway 85 in Mountain View. Then in the summer, three underpasses in Santa Clara will be ready for riders on the San Tomas Aquino Creek Trail.

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And by Labor Day, work should be under way on extending the bike path along the Guadalupe River from Woz Way to Virginia Street, opening up the downtown San Jose river park to surrounding neighborhoods and improving a popular commute route from South San Jose to job sites in North San Jose.

"By far, we have the best bike plans in the Bay Area," said Chris Augenstein, a deputy director of planning with the Valley Transportation Authority. "We think it's just good planning."

That's no empty boast, said John Goodwin of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

"If the yardstick for measuring investments in bicycling improvements is the dollars committed by each county," Goodwin said, "one can make a strong case for Santa Clara County as the Bay Area leader."

But the county's improvements are just a start. The VTA has earmarked \$160 million for bike and pedestrian improvements over the next 25 years in Santa Clara County, compared with its last big infusion of \$30 million set aside nine years ago. And the MTC says it will spend \$1 billion on such improvements over the same period throughout the nine Bay Area counties, five times the amount it planned a few years ago.

2,000 users a day

Why this infusion of cash? Gas prices approaching \$5 a gallon in summer last year, our warm year-round weather, and the push to get people out of

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their cars to reduce global warming are all factors.

More than 2,000 bikers and pedestrians a day are expected to take advantage of the two new spans in Sunnyvale. Similar numbers are anticipated at other crossings.

"I saw that the San Tomas trail is almost ready when I drove by the other day," said Katie Grimes of Santa Clara, who longs to get out of her 1997 Grand Voyager minivan if she can count on a safe route to ride her Breezer three-speed, a European-style bike. "Yay! The more bike paths there are that are separate from roads, especially the high-speed ones, the better it will be."

Happy times for two-wheelers

Improvements to various bicycle and pedestrian trails:



- 1 Project:** Overpasses at Highway 101 and Borregas Avenue and at 237 and Borregas in Sunnyvale
Cost: \$8.7 million
Opened: Wednesday
- 2 Project:** Extending Stevens Creek Trail bike path from El Camino Real to Sleeper Avenue, and building bridge over Moffett Boulevard in Mountain View
Cost: \$7 million
Opening: Moffett bridge to open in June
- 3 Project:** Bicycle bridge over I-280 at Mary Avenue in Cupertino
Cost: \$14.8 million
Opening: Next Thursday
- 4 Project:** Underpasses on San Tomas Aquino Creek Trail at Central Expressway, at Walsh Avenue and at the Caltrain track in Santa Clara
Cost: \$9.7 million
Opening: June
- 5 Project:** Extending bike path on Guadalupe River Trail from Woz Way to Virginia Street in San Jose
Cost: \$1 million
Opening: Summer 2010

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The most visible — and most expensive — new addition is the 500-foot-long, 16-foot-wide bridge linking Mary Avenue between Cupertino and Sunnyvale over I-280. It cost nearly \$15 million and will be the lone bicycle bridge running over a state freeway held up only by cables — 44 of them that connect to white, almost diamond-shaped, 90-foot, 65-ton steel towers on each end.

"This is the gold standard for bike projects," Augenstein said. "Usually, cities are so strapped for dollars and beauty gets sacrificed. But this design couldn't be more beautiful."

Future projects

Pat Parseghian is looking forward to the improvements coming to the Stevens Creek Trail, which will improve her commute from Los Gatos to her job at Google. That's now a 40-minute trip involving worrisome crossings at busy streets like Stelling and Homestead roads.

"I'm also eager for the opening of the new bridge over Moffett Boulevard," said Parseghian, who bicycles about 3,000 miles a year, saying it "will eliminate another treacherous intersection for cyclists and allow motorists to flow more smoothly."

Want more? The Silicon Valley Leadership Group is lobbying Washington for \$30.3 million in stimulus funds for bicycle projects that could be under construction within a year. Capitol Expressway, Monterey Highway, Rengstorff Avenue and Alum Rock Avenue are all on this list.

The extra millions being spent may seem like a lot, but the \$1 billion set aside for bike and pedestrian improvements regionwide is a small fraction of the \$218 billion allocated for all transportation needs from highways to trains to bus lines over the next 25 years.

It's money well spent, said Rich Ellson, who works nearby at Labcyte and biked over to the Sunnyvale event. He no longer will have to navigate through the dangerous intersection at nearby Mathilda Avenue, known as the "Mathilda Monster," and can count on a safer route to ride.

"Drivers are not always paying attention," he said. "They are looking to merge and not looking for someone on their bike. I'd much rather come over on a more protected route."

No debate there.

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