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EBMUD Opening up Watershed Trails

By Nick Marnell



Hikers enjoy the trails at the EBMUD Valle Vista Staging Area earlier this month. Photo Nick Marnell

than our historic drought," said EBMUD director Marguerite Young, who told a standing room crowd at district headquarters Aug. 15 that she favored equal trail access. Moraga and Orinda reside in Young's Ward 3.

Concerns for safety and the destruction of the natural environment highlighted the presentations of nearly 60 speakers, whose comments appeared to be fairly balanced between the pro and anti-bicyclists.

"We are forced to ride on unsafe roads because we can't ride on the trails," said Austin McNerny, director of the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council. "But when bikes are ridden appropriately, it's hard to argue that bikes aren't doing less damage to the trails than a horse."

To that point, Ginger Jui of Bike East Bay allowed that her organization runs an education program to teach bicyclists to ride safely and confidently, and to take care of the environment.

Arguments against the bicyclists mostly dealt with their riding on single-track trails - narrow trails that can accommodate a horse and rider or maybe two adults side by side. Many of the trails proposed by EBMUD for equal access are single track trails.

Margaret Flaherty, a 30-year cyclist who worked as a bike messenger, traveled across country on a bicycle and raced mountain bikes in California, said the proposed single-track trail at Skyline Gardens between Tilden Park and Sibley Reserve was no place for bicycles. "I know that riding a mountain bike on a single track is one of life's pleasures, but we have to realize that the Bay Area is a crowded place and getting more crowded every year, and not everything can be up for grabs," she said.

"Widening the trail for bikes at Skyline Gardens will damage the flora," said Glen Schneider, speaking for many who feared the environmental damage potentially caused by bicyclists. "It would be like allowing bicycles into a botanical garden."

Mountain bikers will soon be able to share popular East Bay Municipal Utility District trails with hikers and equestrians if a proposed two-year pilot program for equal access is approved as part of the EBMUD Watershed Master Plan. The trial period would begin next summer and will feature four sections of district trails that connect to regional trail systems, including the Bay Area Ridge Trail.

The watershed comprises 28,000 acres of East Bay property that the district manages in order to protect the quality of drinking water for its 1.3 million customers and to promote biological diversity. Sections of the watershed familiar to Lamorindans include the Upper San Leandro Reservoir south of Moraga, the Briones Reservoir and the San Pablo Reservoir Recreation Area near Orinda and the Lafayette Reservoir.

"This issue has received the most attention, more

Hikers at the Valle Vista Staging Area seemed to support the equal access proposal. "I would be perfectly happy to share trails with the bicyclists," said hiker Ron Ucovich, but he did agree that riding bicycles on single track trails presents potential for conflict.

EBMUD representative Doug Wallace said that the district was considering opening up approximately 10 miles out of its 82 miles of trails for access to bicyclists in the pilot program.

"We are not a recreational agency," Wallace reminded the audience, and he said that the proposal must first pass a California Environmental Quality Act review and receive final approval by the district board of directors.

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