

1218 Willow Street
San José, CA 95125
March 2, 2009

Honorable Mayor Reed and City Council
200 E. Santa Clara Street
San José, CA 95113

subject: Willow Glen Spur Trail, Focus Group Summary: a “Minority Report”

Dear Mayor Reed and Councilmembers,

You will receive soon a Summary and Recommendation memorandum from Albert Balagso, Director of Parks Recreation and Neighborhood Services (PRNS). The memo will report on the Focus Group that the City convened “to explore opportunities and challenges associated with development of a trail system from Los Gatos Creek to Coyote Creek”. This trail, formally named “the Willow Glen Spur Trail” (after the old rail line it follows) and called “the Three Creeks Trail” by the community (honoring its regional scope in connecting the Los Gatos, Guadalupe, and Coyote Creek Trails), is prioritized in “the Greenprint”, San José’s strategic plan for parks. The PRNS memo will suggest forgoing half of the trail (from Guadalupe to Coyote) and settling for an on-street bike lane on Alma, in effect becoming “the Two Creeks and an Arterial Roadway Trail” instead. The memo will go on to say, “It should be noted that the Focus Group members did not reach consensus”. As the Community Representative (and bike/trail advocate) at the table, I am writing to give a “minority report”.

I recognize that trail building takes patience: I’ve already been involved with the Three Creeks Trail for nearly a decade now, and I also have experience with the Guadalupe, SF Bay, Los Gatos, and other trails. (I’ve been working 25 years now on the Los Gatos Creek, and there’s still more to do!) I recognize that the City does not have all the funding now to acquire all the lands, build the trail, and landscape a parkway corridor, and I also recognize that some of the right-of-way is not now inviting. But I also recognize the need to grab an opportunity when it’s presented: this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance for a trail that connects people, neighborhoods, and community together across the heart of San José – there just aren’t any other corridors that can provide this degree of trail connectivity in the region. Some of the adjacent lands are underutilized now, but they will be developed over time and can be designed to enhance the trail and also benefit from it: we just need to plan for it. The trail can connect employment centers to transportation nodes and residential neighborhoods to neighborhood and regional parks, and it can provide recreational and health benefits for employees and community members alike. Thus I recommend that the City work now to acquire the easements and options-to-purchase now, while they’re still available: preserve the entire right-of-way now from Willow Glen to Kelley Park, and then develop the trail to connect the three creek trail systems over time as the funding permits.

I would welcome an opportunity to give a more detailed presentation on the current right-of-way conditions and future trail possibilities, and/or to give an on-site tour of the corridor: please contact me at LAmes@aol.com or 408/742-1798 to arrange for a convenient time.

Thank you,

Dr. Lawrence Ames, Focus Group member

cc: Garnetta Annable, Santa Clara County Open Space Authority
Albert Balagso, Director of Parks, Recreation, and Neighborhood Services
Jim Beall, State Assemblymember
John Brazil, San José Bicycle Coordinator
Matt Cano, SJ PRNS Division Manager
Kris Cunningham, Office of the County Executive
Debra Figone, San José City Manager
Autumn Gutierrez, Washington/Guadalupe NAC
Michael LaRocca, Citizens for a Livable San José (CalSJ)
Barbara Marshman, Editor, San José Mercury News
Taisia McMahon, Save Our Trails
Anne Ng, Silicon Valley Bicycle Coalition
Melanie Richardson, San José Parks & Recreation Commission
Brian Schmidt, Committee for Green Foothills
George Shirakawa, Santa Clara County Supervisor
Willow Glen Neighborhood Association (WGNA)
Willow Glen Spur Trail Focus Group members
Ken Yeager, Santa Clara County Supervisor
Yves Zsutty, San José Trails Coordinator

Willow Glen Spur / Three Creeks Trail Minority Report

The following report is my evaluation of the opportunity for the Three Creeks Trail, based upon my years of experience on parks and trails commissions, task forces, and committee, combined with multiple on-site inspections and my engineering background.

Dr. Lawrence Lowell Ames, member, Willow Glen Spur Trail Focus Group
March 2, 2009.

The “Willow Glen Spur Trail”, as envisioned in the San José Park Department’s 2000 strategic plan (“the Greenprint”), follows the right-of-way (ROW) of a spur rail line that was built across the valley floor early in the last century to serve the canneries in Willow Glen: hence the name. To emphasize that the trail is to connect the Los Gatos Creek Trail, the Guadalupe River Trail, *and* the Coyote Creek Trail, and also to point out that the trail serves a community much larger than just Willow Glen, many favor the name “the Three Creeks Trail.”

The challenges for the Three-Creeks Trail fall into three categories: engineering, financial, and political.

Engineering:

The engineering challenges are noted on the accompanying chart (labeled “Challenges”): they need to be addressed, but they are not severe:

- River crossings: The trestle across the Los Gatos Creek carried freight trains for nearly a century, and the San José Parks Dept. has long had engineering plans for its adaption into bike/ped bridge. The train bridge over the Coyote appears newer, stronger, and even easier to adapt for trail use.
- A bridge is needed to cross the CalTrain and future High-Speed Train (HST) lines adjacent to Freeway-87. (The current plans for the HST appear to call for it to be at-grade in this vicinity.) While non-trivial, the bridge would be far shorter (and cheaper) than the bridge that Mountain View built for the Stevens Creek Trail that spans CalTrain, Light-rail, future HST, Central Expressway, and a local street; it also would be simpler than the bike/ped bridges that Sunnyvale and Cupertino are building now over Freeways 237, 101, and 280.
- The trail alignment does cross a number of roadways. Traffic signals (“mid-block crossings”) would be needed for some of the busier ones (e.g., Alma, 10th St., and maybe 7th St.), much like the mid-block signals now used for Paseo de San Antonio at 3rd and 4th Streets downtown. Almaden Expwy. can be crossed at the intersection with old Almaden Rd. (the signal and crosswalks would need to be realigned), and the trail can jog southward a quarter block to cross Monterey Highway at the San José Ave. signal. The trail can cross quieter streets at mid-block crosswalks, just as the Los Gatos does now at Auzerais and the Guadalupe at St. John St.
- Several ROW parcels have already been sold. The Falcon Place development (south of Alma) is already constructed and includes the trail connection; the developer of the parcels at Coe and Broadway is amenable in accommodating the trail connection. The Stucco Supply Co. bought the parcels between Almaden Expwy. and Little Orchard St. and has paved them over as parking to enhance their operations: it appears it may be feasible to acquire a trail easement across the southern edge without significantly impacting their improved operating conditions.

Financial:

The trail will cost money – all trails, parks, open-spaces, and recreational services cost money: the questions are whether this particular trail is worth the expense, and whether the funds can be found to build and maintain it.

To answer the first question: this trail is especially valuable because of the connectivity it provides, linking three of San José’s most important regional trail systems (the Los Gatos, the Guadalupe, and the Coyote), and doing so in the densely populated valley floor. It also links to the bikeway already constructed along Freeway 87, and links both new and established residential communities to employment centers, and local and regional parks (Bellevue and Kelley) to the regional transportation hub at Tamien.

Regarding the availability of funding: the Santa Clara County Parks & Rec. Department has already committed \$2,000,000 (and may be willing to consider more), the Open Space Authority has committed \$1,000,000 twice, and the Santa Clara Valley Water District has given \$300,000 towards the creek crossings. Speaking on behalf of “Citizens for a Livable San José” (CalSJ), I briefed State Assemblymember Jim Beall last spring, after which he identified a number of other available regional, State, and Federal grants that could be applicable. (The presentation chart package is online at www.CalSJ.org/3CreeksTrail.htm.) The trail connects directly to the CalTrain/Light Rail regional transportation hub at Tamien, and would probably qualify for multi-modal funding from a number of sources. I see that the city of Palo Alto has requested nearly \$10 Million from the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC’s “T-2035”) to fix up a bike lane on Page Mill Road, and yet San José didn’t ask for a dime for the 3-Creeks Trail.

Maintenance costs can be reduced by design (e.g., landscaping with low-maintenance native plants), by high-quality construction, and by volunteers (e.g., the Adopt-a-Trail program). From my experience with the Los Gatos Creek Trail, I’ve noticed that the trail users appreciate the trail so much that they keep it clean themselves at all times, and so, while we in the neighborhood association adopted the trail, we find that little extra clean-up is needed.

Political:

- There is definite public support for the trail. Neighbors came out for an on-site rally in May of 2002, and they have been attending neighborhood association meetings and public forums in support of the trail ever since. Several groups of neighbors (e.g., Save Our Trails) have been formed in support to petition and work for the trail.
- The Council has been supportive: last year, I and CalSJ briefed Councilmembers Oliverio (D6) and Nguyen (D7), and since then I have worked with their staff on the Focus Group.
- Mayor Reed, I am very appreciative and supportive of your Green Vision for San José. I feel that the Three Creeks Trail exemplifies your Goal #10, which calls for an interconnected trail network, by linking three of the region’s trail systems, and also by connecting communities, businesses, parks, and public transportation.
- The County Supervisors have been very supportive. I represented Supervisor Blanca Alvarado (D2) as Commissioner on the County Parks & Rec. Commission for two terms, where I relayed her strong support of the trail, especially in the less well-served areas along the eastern half of the trail.

- And, as noted above, at the briefing last spring, State Assemblymember Jim Beall was very supportive.
- It is the City Staff that actually implements the trail, negotiating with the landowners and signing contracts, and they need to be on board in order to accomplish this wonderful parkway and trail connection.

Alternatives:

Good engineering practices include the evaluation of alternatives. As such, a bike lane on Alma has been proposed as an alternative.

I am an “avid” cyclist, and would love to see bike lanes on Alma – and everywhere else in the valley as well! However, the stretch of Alma east of Almaden is a busy road five-lanes wide curb-to-curb, with no room for shoulders or bike-lanes. The Focus Group looked into having Alma restriped as four-lane (which would remove the two-way left-turn lane and the left-turn pockets at the signalized intersections) or as three-lane (keeping the left-turn lane but removing a through-lane in each direction): each had significant traffic impacts that would unacceptably degrade the traffic Level of Service (LoS). Additionally, the Greenprint update is counting on the Three Creeks Trail to provide the neighborhood-accessible parkland needed for the communities in the area, something that a bike lane along Alma wouldn’t do.

Vision:

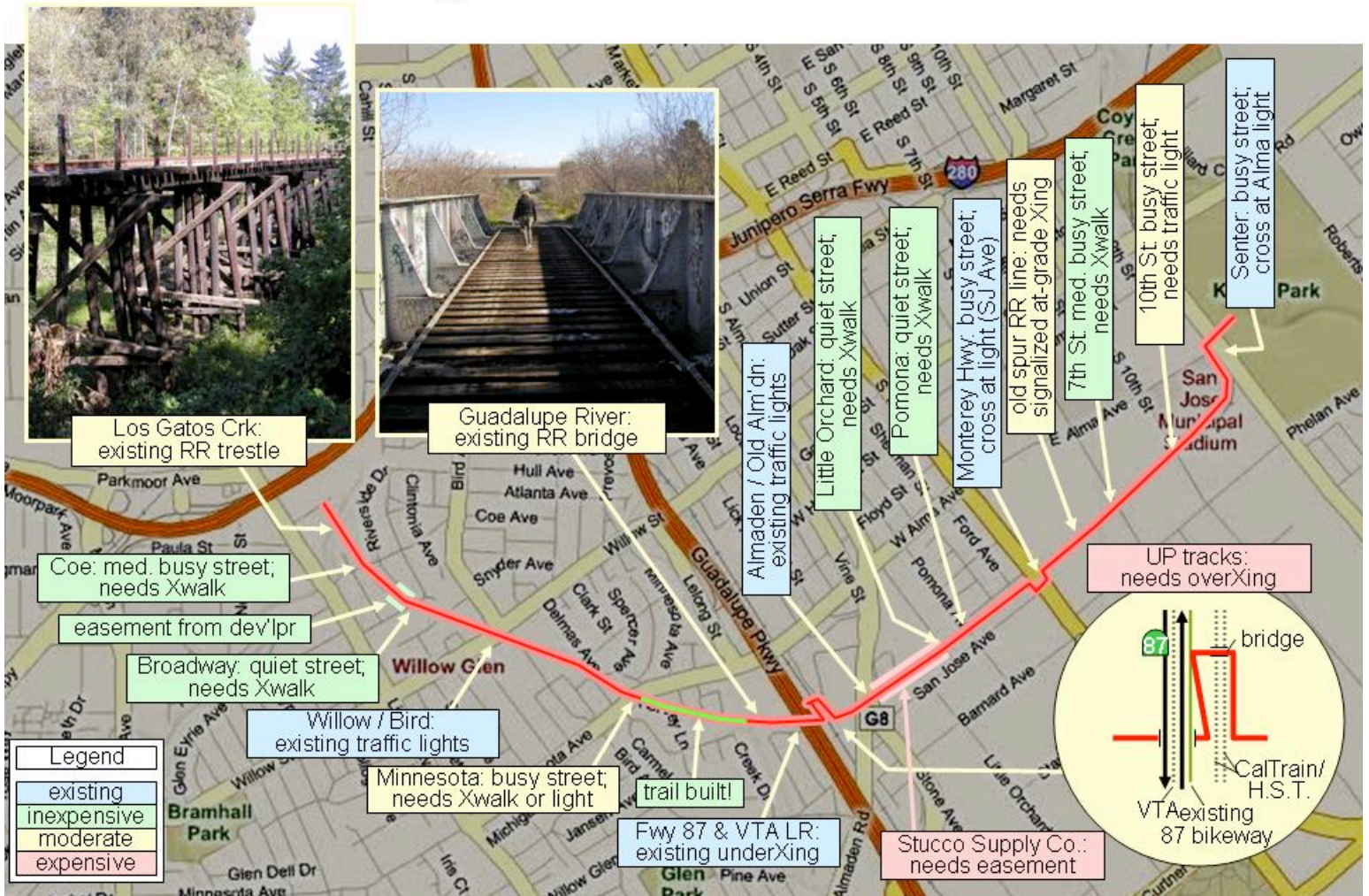
One of the main hesitations of Staff seems to be that they don’t consider the eastern part of the trail to be “pretty”. Admittedly, that is true: it is now basically underutilized industrial land. Three points:

- While much of the trail is across land that is zoned industrial, there are residences nearby: there are condominium and townhomes just adjacent to the trail near Almaden, and a community of older single-family homes is just a quarter-block north of the trail at Little Orchard Street and Pomona Avenue.
- Regardless of the adjacent land use, the trail provides continuity, connecting the neighborhoods and the new townhouse complexes to Bellevue and Kelley Parks, and also connecting the parks to the CalTrain/Light Rail station.
- And trails can benefit industrial-zoned lands as well: employees can commute to and from work without using a car, and trails provide an opportunity for lunchtime recreation and exercise. The trail is not likely to be built immediately, so it is possible to address future construction plans so that the projects face, and embrace, the trail.

The opportunity and vision of the Three Creeks Trail is summarized in the second chart (“Opportunities”). The San José General Plan update (“Envision 2040”) is calling for increased housing density in the urban center while preserving a high quality of life. As I’ve said above, the Three Creeks Trail will provide for healthy recreation and non-polluting transportation for these new residents, along with residents who live in the establish neighborhoods. The trail will connect both these new and established residential communities to employment centers, local and regional parks, and to the regional CalTrain/Light Rail transportation hub.

The City needs to act now to preserve the entire corridor right-of-way between the Los Gatos, Guadalupe, and Coyote Creek Trails.

Challenges: the 3-Creeks Trail



Opportunities: the 3-Creeks Trail

