

Watsonville to Davenport The Rail and Trail Neil Wiley

It's still in pieces, but the Santa Cruz County Rail and Trail is coming together. It took lots of planning, money, and compromises between train and trail lovers. Although building a viable train service will take longer, the existing right-of-way and tracks provide a solid basis for a 32-mile route from Watsonville to Davenport.

In 2015, a test train ran the route from Watsonville to Bonny Doon, just a few miles short of Davenport. (To see a video of the trip, visit the "Friends of Rail and Trail" website at santacruzrail.org. Click on *exploring*, then *rail trail videos*.)

The project is supported by the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, California Coastal Commission, local governments, and Measure D funding.

While preserving rail-transit options for the future, the Rail and Trail offers safer, off-street access to 92 parks, 45 schools, and half the county population. It will be open to walkers, runners, bikers, wheelchair-users, and equestrians. To make it even better, another 18 miles of spur trails will add more useful connections.

Few users will need to travel the entire length of the trail. Many access points encourage use by commuters, children walking or biking to school, visitors and tourists visiting parks, seniors and people with disabilities, and others who don't want to drive a car.

Progress is real. In March 2019, the Regional Transportation Commission

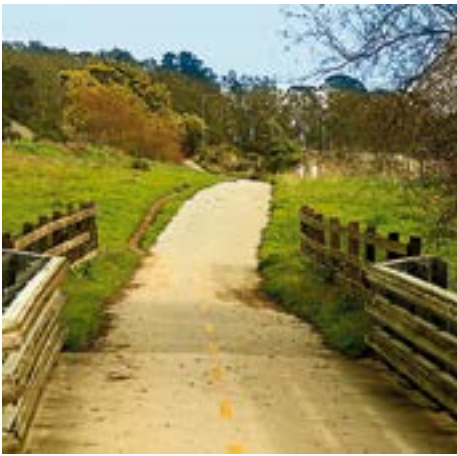


cleared the way for final design and construction of the 7.5-mile segment from Wilder Ranch to Davenport. On January 25, 2020, Westside Santa Cruz celebrated groundbreaking for a 1.3-mile segment between Natural Bridges and Bay Street. In the meantime, you can enjoy some trail pieces before they are finished.

If you want ocean views, giant bluffs, and miles of beaches, visit the Davenport/Wilder Ranch segment. I especially like the views from the Davenport Bluffs. I park in the big field across the road from "downtown" Davenport. To the left are rough and rocky steps that look dangerous, so I go to the right of the field where an easier path takes me down to the tracks. I go back left along the tracks to find a gulley trail up a short way to a large field with a short loop to the south edge. From there it's a great view of bluffs, beaches, and a sea stack, especially when big waves are breaking. When I feel courageous, I climb back via the steeper rock steps.

Going south are beaches named Bonny Doon, Yellobank, Panther, and several in Wilder Ranch. Wilder also has good trails on both sides of the freeway plus a ranch with





lots of history. Closer to Davenport, we can anticipate the opening of the San Vicente Redwoods and Coast Dairies properties for more exploration opportunities.

In the City of Santa Cruz, you can see a beautiful example of co-existing rail and trail on the bridge east of the Boardwalk. From the bridge, you also get good views of the Boardwalk, the San Lorenzo River, and several trails.

You can climb up the railroad bridge above the Santa Cruz Boat Harbor for views of the harbor and lighthouse to the south, and trails around the upper harbor to the north.



The track continues along Capitola Road. As you enter Capitola, you'll see a nice view of Monterey Bay and the Capitola Wharf. Park in the lot overlooking the water, and then take the stairs up to the trail. You can walk into town, walk along the river walk to see the Capitola Trestle, and take a side trip to the Esplanade for food and drink at Zeldas.



Further northeast on Park, watch for a eucalyptus forest on the right. The railroad track and an informal trail run for several miles along a narrow strip of land between the road and the ocean down to New Brighton State Park.

Other interesting places along the tracks are Aptos Village Bridge, La Selva Beach and Bridge, and Manresa State Beach.

Hopefully, we soon can use more formal trails to these sites. Even better, someday we may see them from the train.

Enjoy.

