

# **GREAT PATHS BUT GALLING GAPS: BICYCLE RIDING IN SLO COUNTY**

## **SUMMARY**

For cyclists, San Luis Obispo County should provide a very good ride. We enjoy a great climate and beautiful scenery. Compared to large cities, the traffic is light and the air quality is good. Paths along streams and beaches offer safe and easy riding for young children and seniors, while remote mountain roads challenge the most physically fit adults and teens. In a variety of ways the county and cities encourage bicycling for both commuting and recreation. They provide bicycle paths, lanes and routes. Join us on a brief tour of local bikeways.

Our county and cities have built sections of some very fine bikeways. San Luis Obispo County residents will benefit from a *network* of these paths whether or not gas returns to \$4 a gallon. The environment will benefit too. Local government should now focus on closing the sometimes dangerous and often frustrating gaps in bicycle trails. This report suggests ways the cities and local agencies can do that.<sup>1</sup>

## **METHOD**

To complete this inquiry, Grand Jurors (1) interviewed city and county staff members, (2) talked with citizens who have bike expertise (e.g. leaders from the SLO County Bicycle Coalition and bicycle shop owners), (3) reviewed relevant public documents, (4) received memos and documents from riders and groups, (5) inspected routes and facilities and (6) rode our bicycles on segments of city and county streets and paths.

## **NARRATIVE**

Officially, San Luis Obispo County recognizes the value of bicycle riding for both commuting and recreation. It has a County Bikeways Plan and addresses cycling in the Circulation Element of the County General Plan and Local Coastal Plan. The San Luis Obispo Council of

Governments (SLOCOG) Regional Transportation Plan, the Air Pollution Control District's Clean Air Plan and the County's *Bikeways Plan* (2005 Update) all encourage increased bicycle use. The Board of Supervisors has created a standing Bicycle Advisory Committee that meets quarterly. Arroyo Grande (2006), Atascadero (2000), Morro Bay (1997), Paso Robles (2002) and San Luis Obispo (2007) have also adopted bicycle plans. Grover Beach (2005) and Pismo Beach (2000) address the needs of bicyclists in the Circulation Elements of their respective General Plans. The Arroyo Grande, San Luis Obispo and SLO County plans were approved by Caltrans, making those jurisdictions eligible for certain state and federal grants.

## **Building and Maintaining Bikeways**

With few exceptions, California state law authorizes bicyclists to use all public roads except freeways. Still, as the SLO County *Bikeways Plan* reminds us, “**The key element in encouraging people to select bicycling for their transportation needs is the provision of a safe and efficient *network* of bikeways.**”<sup>2</sup> [Bold in original, *italics* added] In the jargon of public agencies, the county and cities offer three levels of bikeways:

**Class I Bike Paths** are paved and physically separated from roads and streets used by motor vehicles. One example is the Bob Jones, “City to Sea,” path from San Luis Obispo to Avila Beach. When, and if, completed, the Bob Jones will offer a mostly level, safe and pleasing ride to the beach.

**Class II Bike Lanes** are striped for one-way travel on a street or highway. They are a minimum of four feet wide. Arroyo Grande provides such lanes on James Way and several other collector and arterial streets.

**Class III Bike Routes** are simply streets or roads appropriately signed to encourage their use by cyclists and put motorists on notice that they need to “share the road.” A rural section of Orcutt Road in the county south of San Luis Obispo is a class III route.

## **Encouraging Cycling**

Besides providing bikeways, the county and cities assist riders by installing bike racks and/or lockers in downtown areas, at parks, swimming pools, playing fields, park and ride lots and other

gathering places. Public transit systems encourage commuting with bike racks on their busses and, sometimes, - lockers at transportation centers. Other public entities including Cal Poly and local school districts support cycling by providing paths, racks and other facilities for riders. Local governments and bicycle clubs publish trail maps, ride directions and related information in brochure form and on the internet.

### **Those Galling Gaps**

While all these efforts are helpful to those who travel on self-powered two-wheelers, the Grand Jury also found that the usefulness of important bikeways is frequently diminished because the paths are incomplete. Rural area riders attempting to get from here to there on well-designed, safe bikeways frequently find themselves dumped on to narrow rural roads where cars and trucks whiz by uncomfortably close. Similarly, city cyclists literally enjoying a ride in the park are abruptly diverted onto pot-holed commercial or residential streets where the doors of parallel parked cars can open, unexpectedly forcing the rider either to swerve into traffic or crash into a vehicle's door. Both bad choices. Occasionally, Class I bike paths simply dead-end requiring the rider to return from whence he or she came. Such bikeways may work as a venue for exercise and recreation, they are useless for commuting that depends upon the existence of the **“safe and efficient network of bikeways”** defined in the county plan. Public officials accurately note that bikeways are usually funded via grants. This means the money to build one mile of new path may be secured in a given year, but funds for the next segment of that may be far in the future. Consequently, the *network* of bikeways remains a dream unfulfilled.

### **Why No Network: Not Enough Money**

While SLOCOG's approach to securing and allocating funds for transportation is orderly, the dollars available are hopelessly insufficient for meeting our transportation needs. The problem is national and statewide. Tax funds dedicated to transportation have not kept pace with costs. For example, the California state gasoline tax, 18 cents per gallon, has not been increased since 1994. The 18.4 cents per gallon federal tax is unchanged since 1993. Meanwhile construction and maintenance costs more than **doubled** between 1994 and 2004. What's more, in the 15 years since the federal gas tax was raised, the average mileage per gallon of our cars and trucks has increased; the result is more road wear per gallon. That's good for our pocketbooks and the

environment, but it leaves more potholes unfilled and fewer new bikeways. We can only hope that the big economic stimulus programs recently passed by the Congress will, literally, “pave” the way forward.

### **San Luis Obispo Council of Governments**

SLOCOG, the San Luis Obispo Council of Governments, is a public agency whose board includes the five county supervisors and a representative from each incorporated city. It plays the lead role in the planning for and allocation of transportation funding. State laws and locally developed SLOCOG policies substantially influence the allocation of transportation tax funds as well as the awarding of various grants that fund the construction of bike paths and related facilities. So, this little-known agency exercises substantial, and often decisive, influence on what new bikeways are built and which existing facilities are improved.

A subsidiary agency to SLOCOG, the Rideshare program, has developed well-delineated online maps of bike routes in cities and communities throughout the county that provide useful but slightly limited guidance to anyone tackling a new route for a recreational or commuter ride.

### **SLO County**

In the view of the Grand Jury, the County’s primary transportation obligations are at least two-fold.<sup>3</sup> First, it constructs (or in the case of new subdivisions requires developers to build) and maintains roads (and bikeways) in the unincorporated areas. Second, it coordinates transportation routes with the incorporated cities’ local streets and bikeways. As previously noted, the *County Bikeways Plan* was revised in 2005. Among other things, it (1) sets standards for paths, listing more than a hundred, or six pages worth, (2) maps existing bikeways all over the county, and (3) shows routes for proposed additions to the bikeway network (about 80 paths that might someday be constructed at an estimated cost of millions of dollars). A completed **network of SLO County bikeways** is unlikely in our lifetime.

Today the vast majority of county commuters travel, alone, in automobiles. An objective articulated in the county plan is to persuade some who are able to do so to take their bikes. Fewer than 2% of commuters do so. Naturally most ride short distances within incorporated cities, but

some are locals who live and work in an unincorporated community (e.g. Oceano, Los Osos, Templeton) where the county must provide the network of bikeways they travel.

### **City of Arroyo Grande**

Bicyclists in Arroyo Grande benefit from a dedicated effort by city officials to improve the bike trails in town for local commuters students, shoppers, and serious recreational bicyclists.

However, some serious barriers stand in the way of Arroyo Grande's plans. Some of these involve aging streets that may be prohibitively costly or virtually impossible to reconfigure in an effort to provide uninterrupted Class II bike lanes on a complete network of routes around town. Some narrow streets and existing intersection configurations -present serious impediments to bicycle traffic. Improvements at those locations would be very costly. And plans to eliminate business parking along some major streets can prove controversial.

In spite of these barriers and with a recently approved bikeway plan in hand, improvements are proceeding. These include: (1) A stretch of Class II lanes along East Grand Avenue, an important but busy route to the beach; (2) new striping from Highway 101 to Halcyon on East Grand with the exception of a stretch from Alpine to Bell where curb to curb widths could not accommodate bike lanes on one side; and (3) on James Way and Rancho Parkway in the northeast sector of the city, Class II lanes that were added along with other street improvements, all made without state grant assistance. Also, city officials project that within a few months Class II bike trails will be added along most segments of Traffic Way, El Camino Real and West Branch Street.

### **City of Paso Robles**

A combination of unusually rough, deteriorating pavement and hillside sections with little or no gravel shoulder has made biking along Vine Street south from 1<sup>st</sup> Street in Paso Robles to Highway 46 West prohibitively unsafe and uncomfortable. Bike riders who are willing to put up with the rough pavement confront two-way car and truck traffic whizzing past at speeds up to 65 or 70 miles an hour as the drivers hurry to the large shopping center southwest of the Vine – Highway 46 East intersection. Many recreational bikers have abandoned the nearly two-mile route for safety reasons after using it once or twice and being driven onto the almost nonexistent

shoulder. Members of bike clubs from out of town who have come to ride the rolling rural routes that serve wineries around Paso Robles shake their heads and find other routes for exploring the area. Experienced bike commuters find there is no viable alternative for heading south toward Templeton and San Luis Obispo.

That could change by fall of 2009 if the city's recent approval of the contract for repaving and installation of four foot wide, Class II bike lanes on 1.6 miles of both sides of the route proceeds as contracted. City officials say they are committed to the South Vine Street bikeway project and pledged that work would begin in March of 2009.

A first construction contract, totaling \$2,026,080, was awarded in December. Under that contract, a small but dangerous gap would have remained where Vine approaches Highway 46 West. But the City Council on February 17, 2009, amended that contract and provided \$400,000 in available gas tax funds to finish repaving the street and extend the bike trail through that final section. At that time, the council allocated another \$440,000 in gas tax money to the project, to fill in for a state grant that is being held up because of the state's fiscal problems. The city expects the state to eventually provide that \$440,000.

Paso Robles adopted a city bike plan in 2002 that demonstrates support for improving its bikeways. A wide and well-stripped Class II bike lane along Vine Street through the west side of town from 1<sup>st</sup> Street to 24<sup>th</sup> Street gets frequent use both by local commuters and recreational riders. Futuristic plans for separated bike paths along one residential street on the west side are in the works as are discussions with developers about financing bike lane improvements throughout east Paso Robles. The city is currently working on plans for dual bike boulevards linking the northerly and southerly sections of town. They project that completed Vine Street and Riverside Boulevard bike trails will provide links between residential and employment centers in town. City officials are updating the Bike Master Plan with a goal of SLOCOG and Caltrans approval before the next bikeway funding cycle.

## City of San Luis Obispo

The city has a comprehensive *Bicycle Transportation Plan*, which was last updated and published by the Public Works Department on May 15, 2007. It covers program goals and objectives, bikeways (including standards for same), bicycle parking and storage, other facilities, education and promotion and funding. Extensive appendices include detailed maps of existing and proposed bikeways, proposed projects with associated priorities and a listing of expenditures for facilities installed or improved between 1995 and 2007. During that 12-year period a total of \$3,676,000 was expended, a third of that for construction of the Jennifer Street Bridge over the railroad tracks.

As a matter of policy, the city encourages biking for recreation and commuting. For approximately twenty years the plans for major new subdivisions have included bike paths (e.g. Meadow Park, Edna-Islay). Sections of the Bob Jones Trail have been built in the city, where, when completed, it will intersect Los Osos Valley Road and go southward toward Avila Valley. Caltrans has plans to improve the Los Osos Valley Road interchange at Highway 101. Those plans include an “at grade” crossing of LOVR by the Bob Jones Trail consistent with city plans. The interchange project as currently planned would not preclude a grade separated crossing under LOVR by the Bob Jones Trail if the city wished to pursue one. In the opinion of the Grand Jury the trail should pass *under* LOVR to provide safety for riders.

San Luis Obispo has 25 miles of class II bike lanes and the long-term goal of having Class II bike lanes along all arterial streets and highways except U.S. 101. When arterial streets are improved or repaved, bike lane striping is added at minimal cost. The “Bicycle Boulevard,” a little-known but innovative concept, permits motor vehicles but privileges two-wheeled human-powered transport on a few designated streets. A donation program resulted in the installation of bike racks and lockers at strategic locations downtown and elsewhere, and there are bike racks on all city busses. The city’s biennial and systematic counts of bike traffic at strategic locations, the most recent reported in December 2008, reveal a pronounced increase in riders, especially near the Cal Poly campus.

In 1995 the city started work on a 4.5-mile path along the railroad. Because it follows the tracks, this path is (a) relatively flat and (b) infrequently intersected by city streets. Consequently, it is appropriately named the **Railroad Safety Trail**. Segments at the southern end of the city were built along with the Edna Islay area residential subdivisions. The city constructed additional sections between Orcutt Road and the Jennifer Street Bridge in 1998 and 2002. With recent grant funding from the State Bicycle Transportation Account (\$890,000), the Railroad Safety Trail will be extended from the Amtrak Station to Marsh Street with bridges over Johnson Avenue and San Luis Creek. When that portion of the project is complete, perhaps in 2010, bikers can ride from Orcutt Road to the high school and Marsh Street with little or no motor vehicle competition.

Cal Poly recently completed a section of the path from the Football Stadium to Campus Way, approximately 300 feet from Foothill Blvd. The city is now constructing a 1200-foot section from Foothill to Hathway, about a block from the 101 Freeway. Various organizations including Rotary clubs are raising funds to close the 300-foot gap between the Campus Way and Foothill. Recently the city obtained funding for a bridge over the 101 Freeway. Regrettably, when that segment is completed (maybe in 2011), a gap in the Railroad Safety Trail will remain: the segment from Marsh Street to the 101 Freeway with a bridge over Monterey street and an underpass at Mill Street. Closing this gap will be expensive--- one estimate suggests a total cost of \$7.6 million--- and until then the 101 over pass will be of little value to commuters.

## **FINDINGS**

### **SLOCOG**

**SCG1.** SLOCOG's planning process and products are generally sound.

**SCG2.** Declining resources and increasing construction costs mean that each year the county and cities can do proportionally less to meet transportation infrastructure needs, including the paths for bicycle riders.

**SCG3.** SLOCOG maintains a countywide perspective on efforts to improve bicycling routes.

**SCG4.** For *commuting*, it is *more important* that one or two bikeways be finished than that isolated segments of a larger number of them be constructed.<sup>3</sup>

**SCG5.** Some cities in the county do not have bikeway plans approved by SLOCOG and the state.

**SCG6.** Rideshare's maps can and should be made available to a wider audience.

### **SLO County**

**C1.** The County of San Luis Obispo has an extensive Bikeways Plan.

**C2.** Decisions on which bikeways (usually only segments of same) are constructed appear to depend largely upon grants which county secures from state or federal sources.

**C3.** The goal of providing a "*Network of Bikeways*" envisioned in the County plan is appropriate and commended, but under existing practice it is unlikely to be realized for decades.

### **Arroyo Grande**

**AG1.** The city is well ahead of other smaller incorporated areas of San Luis Obispo County in its effort to add bike trails that will be useful to both residents and visitors.

**AG2.** Given the barriers to adding uninterrupted bike lanes, the city's signing and available maps may not prove sufficient to guide unprepared bicyclists in ways that enable safe and comfortable use of new bike lanes.

### **Paso Robles**

**PR1.** The city is committed to the South Vine Street Bikeway project. A construction contract has been awarded and amended to complete the project to Highway 46 West. Work was scheduled to begin in March of 2009.

**PR2.** The city reports it is developing plans for dual bike boulevards linking the northern and southern sections of town. Those routes would link residential and employment centers.

**PR3.** To obtain funding for future bikeway projects, the city should update its Bike Master Plan.

### **San Luis Obispo City**

**SLO1.** San Luis Obispo has made a substantial commitment to the promotion of cycling.

**SLO2.** The Grand Jury *commends* the city and others who have contributed to the **Railroad Safety Trail**. The sections built to date are first rate.

**SLO3.** Until completed, the Railroad Safety Trail is of minimal value for the hundreds who **could** then use it for commuting to and from the Cal Poly campus and its surrounding community and/or to and from downtown and the southern portions of the city.

**SLO4.** The city has built portions of the Bob Jones Trail, including one between Prado Road to a point near Los Osos Valley Road (LOVR) where it dead-ends. The utility of that isolated trail segment is negligible until it is connected to LOVR.

**SLO5.** The City's current plans do not provide for the Bob Jones Trail to pass under LOVR when the LOVR overpass at Highway 101 is widened however the interchange plans would not preclude such an improvement in the future.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **SLOCOG**

**SCG1.** SLOCOG and its associated governments should continue to aggressively seek grants and other funding to build and then maintain a **network of bikeways** in the county and cities.

**SCG2.** SLOCOG should encourage and assist our cities in developing approved bikeway plans where they don't have them and keeping existing plans current where they do.<sup>4</sup>

**SCG3.** To expedite the completion of at least one or two major bikeways, SLOCOG should lead the county and city governments in deciding which of the many proposed paths should be completed as soon as possible. This will require abandoning the current practice of building a segment of one bikeway here and another there, with none being completed within a reasonable time frame, say 5 or 10 years!<sup>5</sup>

**SCG4.** Rideshare should make its bike maps more readily available to riders through distribution of printed maps at schools, libraries and biking events.

### **SLO County**

**C1.** The County should review and revise its *Bikeways Plan*, with the goal of setting priorities that will lead the *completion* of one or more safe Class I and II bikeways that commuters can travel from their home neighborhoods to work (or school) and back. This would be a shift from the present practice of building one piece of a Class I bikeway here and another segment of another Class II there, so that neither is particularly useful to commuters.

### **Arroyo Grande**

**AG1.** As each improvement is made to bike lanes in the city, readily available bike path maps and clear signage should be provided to explain how best to negotiate the new routes.

### **Paso Robles**

**PR1.** Paso Robles should update its 2002 Bike Plan and secure SLOCOG and Caltrans approval of same to be eligible for state Bicycle Transportation Account funding.

### **City of San Luis Obispo**

**SLO1.** The city should continue to aggressively pursue grants and other funding to build bike paths and other bicycle friendly facilities.

**SLO2.** Completion of the Railway Safety Trail should be the city's top bike priority, because once finished, it will provide **safe and efficient commuting**.

**SLO3.** The city, working with Caltrans, should promptly connect that segment of the Bob Jones Trail that starts at Prado Road but ends just north of Los Osos Valley Road with LOVR.

**SLO4.** When the LOVR overpass at Highway 101 is improved, the Bob Jones Trail should pass *under* that heavily traveled street.

## **REQUIRED RESPONSES**

**The San Luis Obispo Department of Public Works** is required to respond to recommendation C1. The response shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge at the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by May 11, 2009.

**The San Luis Obispo Council of Governments** is required to respond to recommendations SCG1, SCG2, SCG3, and SCG4. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge at the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by June 10, 2009.

**The San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors** is required to respond to recommendation C1. The response shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge at the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by June 10, 2009.

**The City of Arroyo Grande** is required to respond to recommendation AG1. The response shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge at the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by June 10, 2009.

**The City of Paso Robles** is required to respond to recommendations PR1. The response shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge at the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by June 10, 2009.

**The City of San Luis Obispo** is required to respond to recommendations SLO1, SLO2, SLO3, and SLO4. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge at the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by June 10, 2009.

Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well. The mailing addresses for delivery are:

<b>Presiding Judge</b>	<b>Grand Jury</b>
Presiding Judge Martin Tangeman Superior Court of California 1035 Palm, Room 385 San Luis Obispo, CA 93408	San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury P.O. Box 4910 San Luis Obispo, CA 93403

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Authority for the Grand Jury to conduct this investigation is found in Section 925 of the California Penal Code.

<sup>2</sup> Bicycle Advisory Committee, Department of Public Works, *County Bikeways Plan 2005 UPDATE*, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> While primary responsibility for construction and maintenance of county bikeways rests with the Public Works Department, the Parks and Recreation Department handles paths in parks.

<sup>4</sup> Cities that have approved bikeway plans thereby improve their position in competing for state and federal grants to construct bike trails and facilities.

<sup>5</sup> We recognize that completing fewer bikeways means the some cities and unincorporated areas will not get a "slice of the financial pie," but we conclude that it is better to complete bikeways for some commuters than to build isolated segments that effectively serve no commuters at all.