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Scenic trail along Carquinez Strait to re-open on route of ruined century-old road



By BAY AREA NEWS GROUP |

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MARTINEZ — An old winding county road snaking along the Carquinez Strait bluffs was popular for decades with motorists looking for prime views of water, shoreline and ships.

Then brutal storms and landslides in 1983 tore open huge gaps in the road, closing a 1.7-mile-long segment to auto traffic forever.

The abandoned road begins a new life Saturday, when it reopens as a segment of the San Francisco Bay Trail after being rebuilt and repaved in a challenging construction project.

It took \$5.5 million, piers driven deep into hillsides, new drains and 19 new debris and stability walls to transform the crumbling, graffiti-laden Carquinez Scenic Drive into a sleek and smooth asphalt trail for hikers, joggers and cyclists between Martinez and Port Costa.

But East Bay Regional Park District officials say it was worth every penny to provide the choice views of the Carquinez Strait, which connects San Francisco Bay and the vast Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

“The views here are just stunning,” said Jim Townsend, the regional park trails development programs manager. “There aren’t many trails near the bay shoreline that are up higher like this where you can see for a long ways.”

The trail also provides hikers, cyclists and equestrians a new route to travel between Martinez, Port Costa and Crockett. But it’s the high views of water that make the route special, said Mark Ross, a recreational cyclist who serves on the Martinez City Council.

“It’s like our own shorter version of the 17-Mile Drive near Carmel,” Ross said. “You keep getting fresh new views of the water with each new twist and turn.”

During a recent visit to the trail, Townsend stopped at several points to check out the greenish waters flowing under the Carquinez and Benicia bridges.

Tankers, freight ships, barges and fishing boats cruised past. Trains chugged by on the shoreline tracks. Sea lions barked, drawn to these waters where most California salmon migrate upstream to find spawning grounds.

The state built the Carquinez Scenic Drive in 1912 and gave it decades later to Contra Costa County, which closed the 1.7-mile-long link in 1983.

County officials wanted to be rid of the headache, especially as hikers and cyclists continued to walk and ride the trail illegally by stepping or riding around the narrow landslide areas.

Some trail users asserted that the road should have been left as is for unauthorized trail use. But allowing the unsanctioned use would be unsafe, and the entire road would wash away in time, said Bob Doyle, regional park district general manager.

After years of trying, the park district lined up the repair money, aided by a \$3.5 million federal TIGER grant for innovative transportation projects.

The trail is named after Rep. George Miller, D-Martinez, who helped secure the grant for the trail and many other park projects.

The new trail segment is the only part of the 340 miles of San Francisco Bay Trail built on an abandoned road, according to Laura Thompson, the Bay Trail project manager.

Visitors to the Martinez end of the trail can use roadside parking or leave their cars in a lot at the Nejedly Staging Area of the Carquinez Strait Regional Shoreline.

Visitors to the Port Costa side of the trail can use roadside parking. In a few weeks, a gravel parking lot will open at the site of an old brick plant planned as a new regional park.

Some cracked asphalt from the old road surface was crushed and recycled into the bed for the new trail.

“It’s more fitting,” Townsend said, “to use some of the old pieces of that century-old highway in our new trail.”

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Grand Reopening

The George Miller Regional Trail between Martinez and Port Costa is scheduled to open after a dedication ceremony 10:30 a.m. Saturday at the trailhead on Carquinez Scenic Drive, west of Martinez. Parking is available at the Nejedly Staging Area in the Carquinez Strait Regional Shoreline on Carquinez Scenic Drive.