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City counts trail users to help boost its case for grant money

By Patrick May
Mercury News

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One by one they flickered by, a slow-motion parade of joggers and bicyclists, emerging like tumbleweeds from the dusty air along the Guadalupe River Trail.

But these were more than simply runners and spoke-spinning commuters passing the little card table under a shade tree off Coleman Avenue. For the volunteers behind San Jose's second annual trail count, gathering hard numbers to help the city go after federal and state grants, they were sweaty and helmeted data points.

Thanks to higher gas prices and the greening of American consciousness, the city's trail population appears to be way up over last year.

"We don't have all the numbers in yet, but at one counting station we've seen a 70 percent jump over last year," said Yves Zsutty, the city's trails program manager orchestrating Wednesday's audit. He was referring to the first count last Wednesday at this station, which showed 410 users, compared to last year's 243. "With the trail improvements we've done and with gas prices continuing to climb, we've seen a real mode shift in trail use, with more and more commuters riding bikes to work."

And voila! Old friends Diana Dellosso, helmeted, and Debra Morris, not, rolled up to volunteer Mary Ellen Hawkins' folding table just after lunchtime. Hawkins grabbed her pen and survey sheet: check, and check.

"I love the idea that we have these trails available, especially now with fuel prices climbing and traffic such a pain sometimes," said Morris, a downtown resident and self-described "entrepreneur, housekeeper and eBay seller."

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She and Dellosso were scoping out the 9-mile downtown-to-Alviso Guadalupe trail for the first time. They were counted, which will help Zsutty top the \$950,000 in grant money he won last year using the results as ammo. But because of construction beneath the Coleman Avenue bridge, their first trail experience was frustrating.

"We can't figure out how to get on to it," said Dellosso, staring up at an orange "Trail Detour" sign. "I guess we have to cross Coleman and then work our way down to the river on the other side?"

Morris was upbeat. Happy to help boost the trail count's running total, she joked that "if we get really lost, we may end up back here again and we could be counted a second time!"

Zsutty is hoping this year's new online survey — at

www.sjpark.org/trails — will arm him with even more firepower when the grant-writing begins.

"We're giving out a postcard to everyone on the trail, asking them to go online and compete the survey," he said. "The 20 questions, about which trails they use and the frequency and purpose of their travel, will help us identify who's commuting and who's out there for recreation," Zsutty said. "The granting agencies last year said they were impressed with our data and wish others would do the same."

Zsutty said he hopes to complete his count numbers by Friday and then compile the survey results in a couple of weeks. And as the city proceeds with its nearly \$20 million in trail improvements, linking up the almost 51 miles of paths crisscrossing the area, he's hoping the count will serve a larger purpose.

"We know trails are something people say they like, but we're trying to move this from, 'Yeah, they're nice to ride on' to something that really documents how useful they are for commuting to and from work."

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