

Mile by mile, a landmark trail linking all the Bay Area comes together

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The plan is ambitious: a 550-mile-long trail for hikers, horse riders and bicyclists, complete with campsites, scenic vistas, mountain ranges and forests.

It's still unknown to many of the Bay Area's 7 million residents.

But the Bay Area Ridge Trail, begun as a far-off dream by a few parks lovers more than 20 years ago, is slowly taking shape.

The project aims to connect and preserve a vast corridor of wildness in one of America's most populous regions, from the Wine Country to Silicon Valley, from the East Bay hills to the ridgelines of the Santa Cruz Mountains — a 21st-century Pacific Crest Trail for urban residents who spend so much of their lives in traffic and in front of computers.

"These

long-distance trails help capture our imaginations," said Janet McBride, executive director of the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, a San Francisco nonprofit coordinating the project.

"Trails link communities," she said. "They provide opportunities for health and fitness. They create open space corridors for wildlife, provide a place where all ages — kids, families, friends — can experience nature and, by learning about nature, want to protect it."

While thousands of Bay Area families are heading outdoors as spring turns to summer, the ridge trail's planners will be cutting ribbon Saturday on the latest section, a 1.5-mile path at Fernandez Ranch, a 702-acre preserve near Martinez, once slated for subdivisions, where oak

trees grace rolling hills.

The event will boost the ridge trail's completed segments to 326 miles.

With 10 to 15 miles being opened a year, finishing the entire route is still a long way off. Then again, it took 60 years to finish the West's most famous hiking trail, the Pacific Crest Trail, 2,650 miles from Mexico to Canada.

"We've been working on the Bay Area Ridge Trail for one generation," McBride said. "We hope to finish it in the next so today's toddlers can walk the full loop when they're in their 20s."

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Large segments are complete already.

Marked with blue signs, the trail takes in stunning views of the Golden Gate Bridge from the Marin Headlands; San Mateo County forests above Crystal Springs Reservoir; bucolic former ranch lands on the slopes of Mount Hamilton; and the necklace of East Bay parks from Mission Peak to the Carquinez Strait.

It also includes many of the Bay Area's most venerable parks — the Presidio in San Francisco, Alum Rock in San Jose and Tilden in the Berkeley Hills. The trail passes Jack London's grave in Sonoma County, John Muir's orchards in Martinez, the cinnabar mines of New Almaden in South San Jose. It skirts past the summer home of 19th-century cattle baron Henry Miller near Gilroy, and Sweeney Ridge near Pacifica, where in 1769 Spanish explorer Gaspar de Portola first set eyes on San Francisco Bay.

But finishing the ambitious project may prove more difficult than its progress so far.

Nearly every mile of the finished trail is on public land acquired by agencies such as the National Park Service, the East Bay Regional Park District, the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, the Marin County Open Space District, and the Santa Clara County Parks and Recreation Department.

Tough challenges

Many of the remaining gaps are on private property. Few farmers, vintners or ranchers are eager to allow the public to walk across their private land.

"There's fire danger. There's trash. You know how people are," said Don Silacci, a cattle rancher who

owns 1,480 acres in the hills near Gilroy. "Some hike in and they don't carry it out. Every rancher I've ever talked to, they're just not interested."

Park managers in the two counties with the lowest percentage of completed ridge trail — Santa Clara and Napa — both are struggling with ways to connect gaps through farmland. Both counties also were late in creating open space agencies to buy land for parks.

So while Marin County has 85 percent of the trail completed, Contra Costa 77 percent and San Mateo County 68 percent, Santa Clara and Napa have only completed 38 and 24 percent, respectively.

"Most of the miles in Napa I wouldn't really call ridge trail," said John Woodbury, general manager of the Napa County Regional Park and Open Space District. "They're just along the side of the road to get through the valley. It's not a wilderness experience. The main reason Napa has so little is that it has almost no public open space."

In the 1970s, more than half of Napa County residents lived in the country, Woodbury said.

"There weren't a lot of fences. People used to be able to ride across Napa Valley on their horse and no one cared," he said. "Now 80 percent of the people live in cities."

In 2006, voters set up an open space district in Napa, but little progress has been made crossing vineyards with new trail. Now planners are considering shifting the entire route there further north from Yountville to Calistoga to take in more public land, such as Robert Louis Stevenson State Park.

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A following grows

As the ridge trail has grown, so have the ranks of those eagerly embracing it.

One enthusiast is Hugo Garcia of Fremont, a 42-year-old geophysicist who works at Chevron in San Ramon. A few years ago, at one of the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District's preserves in San Mateo County, he saw a ridge trail sign.

"I started to become curious. I began doing the research," he said.

Garcia decided to hike the whole thing. Today he posts updates on meetup.com, a social networking website, announcing which segment he plans to hike and inviting all comers.

Since his first hike Nov. 1, 2008, when only seven people showed up to walk in the rain from the Presidio across the Golden Gate Bridge into the Marin Headlands, Garcia has completed 64 hikes with 1,292 different people.

This month, he finished the last segment as part of a 13-mile hike that began east of Hayward at Don Castro Regional Recreation Area.

"It sounds kind of corny or goofy, but I started this for the pursuit of beauty, and to discover a sense of home," Garcia said. "Hiking the Bay Area Ridge Trail definitely increases your appreciation for the beauty of the Bay Area and gives you a bigger context for where you live."

Garcia plans to take a month off, then start again.

Birth of the trail

The idea for a vast recreational loop around the Bay Area was born in the visions of a few hardy hikers. But it took William Penn Mott Jr., a former general manager of the East Bay Regional Park District, to make it happen. In 1987, Mott, as President Ronald Reagan's national parks director, provided advice and funding to help organize the trail.

"When he got to East Bay regional parks in the 1960s, my dad's office was on the ridgeline overlooking the bay," recalled his son, John Mott. "He could see there was a mass of humanity in the Bay Area, and this ridgeline provided the source of inspiration people would need to help make their lives more livable. As long as you have a trail around the ridgeline, he said, people will support it."

Still, squabbles persist. Although 70 percent of the completed trail is open to bicyclists, hikers and horses, mountain bikers have pushed East Bay parks for more access. Some public lands have no ridge trail, like Milagra Ridge near Pacifica, where federal authorities fret about endangered red-legged frogs. Another trail, the Bay Trail, coming together around the bay's shoreline, is often confused with the ridge trail.

Trail planners say the full loop will be 550 miles. But because some segments are too narrow, winding or steep for horses and bikes, parallel trails will need to be built, bringing the total to accommodate all users to an estimated 610 miles.

The ridge trail's backers continue to piece their project together, mile by mile, like builders of the great European cathedrals, knowing they may never live to see its completion but feeling confident future generations will.

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"This is right out our back doors. The scenery is fantastic," said Jean Rusmore, 89, of Palo Alto, who wrote "Bay Area Ridge Trail: The Official Guide." "I love standing up on the ridge and looking out to the ocean and the bay and breathing in the fresh air, and enjoying the sunshine. There's something about being able to do it that is refreshing and life-sustaining."

Contact Paul Rogers at 408-920-5045.

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For more on the Bay Area Ridge Trail, go to www.ridgetrail.org.

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