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February 8, 2007

Santa Cruz pushes pedal on new BMX park

By Shanna McCord

Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Get ready to strap on a helmet and practice the bunny hop. A bicycle motocross park is headed for Santa Cruz.

Efforts are under way to turn an underused city parking lot on Laurel Street Extension, behind Wheel Works near the San Lorenzo River, into a BMX playground with ramps, jumps and obstacles for bicyclists to do tricks and catch some air.

"A lot of kids in this town don't skate, but they ride bikes," said Jarrod Allen, a professional BMX rider in Capitola. "We get kicked out of skate parks because it's illegal to ride there. We get tickets from police for doing tricks on the street. There's nowhere to ride"

The vision for a bike park is a joint effort between the city Parks and

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Recreation Department and a few residents and local businesses.

As the city winds down construction on its \$1.5 million skate park at Mike Fox Park on San Lorenzo Boulevard, the skate park near the Municipal Wharf known as the Fun Spot will be dismantled. Bike enthusiasts are hoping to move the Fun Spot's wood skate ramps a few streets to the narrow parking lot on Laurel Street Extension and put them to use for bikes.

To move and refurbish the ramps and build a fence to enclose the 6,000-square-foot bike park is estimated to cost up to \$30,000, Parks Director Dannettee Shoemaker said.

The city plans to provide only the old ramps and space for the park. All funds to pay for the park's construction will have to be raised from private sources.

Berri Michel, owner of The Bicycle Trip on Soquel Avenue, said she's agreed to donate \$25,000 to help the park get off the ground.

Michel said she's enthusiastic about the park because it's a great way to steer young people toward healthy activities.

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"It's something legal and safe for kids to do," she said. "It's a way to keep kids riding bikes, so there's a health factor, too"

City officials said while planning the new skate park during the past two years, they often heard from BMX riders about the desire for a park.

"We've been hearing from the bike folks, 'When are we going to get our park?' " Shoemaker said. "We haven't had an answer until now"

The city's Downtown and Parks and Recreation commissions recently signed off on the plan, allowing the Laurel Street Extension parking lot to be used for a bike park for up to three years.

The plan must still receive approval for special-use and design permits from the city Planning Commission, which is tentatively scheduled to meet March 15.

BMX riding has grown in popularity since the 1970s, so much so it will be added as an event to the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

"There's a lot of kids and a lot of potential for something like this," Allen said. "It's been a long time coming"

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