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New Santa Cruz pedestrian bridge to be finished by end of year

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SANTA CRUZ -- Riding a bike or walking across town is about to get a little easier as work on a new pedestrian/bike bridge over the San Lorenzo River next to Highway 1 nears completion.

The bridge creates a link between Ocean Street and the Gateway Shopping Center.

The \$2.6 million span, with two concrete columns placed in the river to hold up the 300-foot-long steel bridge, is scheduled to be finished by Christmas, if the dry weather holds out, Santa Cruz Public Works officials said Friday.

"It helps tie together the river levee system and foster more legitimate traffic to this area of the river levee," city engineer Joshua Spangrud said. "I've seen a lot of people cross over the Highway 1 bridge, which is dangerous and illegal."

The only other pedestrian bridge over the river is at San Lorenzo Park. It was built in the 1960s.

The center truss of the new bridge, delivered to Santa Cruz from the Colorado manufacturer on Friday, is expected to be bolted to a previously installed truss today.

In the next couple of weeks, concrete will be poured on the bridge deck and small lights will be installed along the footing of the deck, Spangrud said.

The city's original plan, first talked about around 2000, was to build a bridge that spanned the river without any columns to hold it up in the middle. But engineering and construction costs for such a bridge were roughly \$5 million, double what Santa Cruz officials had budgeted.

Instead of scrapping the bridge, a group from the Public Works Commission, the Arts Commission and the River Arts Committee came up with a cheaper design that still satisfied the community in terms of aesthetics and low environmental impact.

Regular cyclists say the bridge will serve a great public need, and could act as a catalyst to encourage more people to get out of their cars in favor of biking and walking.

"People will walk or ride if they have a place to do it," Micah Posner of the bike advocacy group People Power said. "This is the most underserved spot on the river for cyclists. I see this as part of the city's effort to slowly develop an alternative transportation network, which is great news."

Funding for the bridge came from various local and state sources, including \$700,000 from the state Riverways Committee, \$600,000 from state air quality officials, \$150,000 from the city Redevelopment Agency and \$150,000 in local traffic impact fees.

The city's plans to improve pedestrian and bicycle access near the levee don't end with the new bridge.

The levee path will be extended to run under the Highway 1 bridge, allowing people easier passage to Harvey West and the Tannery Arts Center, which is currently under construction.

Work on extending the levee path is expected to begin next summer.

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