

Improving bike-pedestrian safety in South County

by Ramona Turner

WATSONVILLE — A bicycle- and pedestrian-safety advocacy group is seeking to make cycling and walking to school as popular, and safe, as they are healthy and enjoyable.

The group, which is working to secure a \$100,000 transportation grant from the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, is charged with setting up a South County-based traffic safety coalition.

"This gives us the opportunity to do good things," said Sandra Coley of the Pajaro Valley Transportation Management Association.

The two-year project comes as Watsonville carries the burden of being named worst in the state for pedestrian injuries and/or fatalities among children age 15 and under in a 2007 ranking by the Office of Traffic Safety. The state agency compared Watsonville to 106 other California cities of similar population size -- 50,000 to 100,000. That same year, the city had the fourth highest proportion of pedestrian injuries and/or fatalities.

While there are fewer cyclists and cycling accidents in Watsonville than in the rest of the county, when there is a crash, it's often the cyclist's fault because he was illegally riding on the sidewalk, said Watsonville police officer Rus Orlandos. What's more, "no one wears a helmet," he said.

The bicycle-pedestrian task force is a subgroup of the larger Santa Cruz-based Community Traffic Safety Coalition. Having the grant will improve the coalition's ability to tackle Watsonville's road-related issues.

"It was difficult to do with little money to pay for staff time," said Katie LeBaron of the county Health Services Agency, which started the coalition in the late 1990s.

But the grant hasn't been awarded yet. It's contingent upon the group creating a work plan, which will be presented to the RTC next month, LeBaron said.

At a brainstorming session Wednesday, the group said it wanted to focus on hosting pedestrian- and bicycle-safety workshops for children and their parents, creating and distributing public service announcements through the media and work with the city to get its bicycle plan updated.

The bike lane update is already under way, said Maria Rodriguez, the city's principal engineer. It should be ready to be reviewed by the RTC's bicycle committee this fall.

The task force will meet again July 22 to formalize the project list before meeting with the RTC.