

Herhold: Opening up a key piece of the Bay Trail

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In the end, it was just snipping a bolt, opening a gate, pulling back a fence. No pavement, no big signs, no lights. Just an opening to a dirt track that has been there for years, used by the occasional duck hunter. The 2.4-mile Moffett Field segment of the Bay Trail would not have registered on Mr. Roadshow's radar.

It was still an achievement. It has taken six years to complete the key piece of the bicycle and pedestrian trail linking East Palo Alto with Alviso. Six years of talks involving what U.S. Rep. Anna Eshoo, D-Palo Alto, acknowledged was an alphabet soup of government agencies.

Six years of jockeying for what was ultimately 200 linear feet of trail, property owned by Cargill Salt and finally donated to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. It was a transaction that made the collapse of the Berlin Wall look like tinkering with LEGO pieces.

"Trust me when I tell you this was not easy," said Pat Mapelli, a real property manager for Cargill. "It was just a complicated little project. Once you got the boxes checked, it moved quickly. But that wasn't until about four months ago."

Once the talking was done and the politicians had finished lauding one another before noon Monday,

about 85 bicyclists poured through the opening on the eastern end of the trail, near the Moffett Field Golf Course. A couple dozen pedestrians followed.

Filling a gap

To bicyclists --

and I'm one of them -- the trail is a big deal. It fills a gap on the long route along the bay. Instead of having to head south of 101, and then cut back north around Moffett Field, a bicyclist can now take the scenic route along the bay.

"This is a great addition," said Chuck Fry, a bicyclist from Sunnyvale who confesses to liking to ride on dirt. "We've needed this opened up for years. It'll make a great fall, summer or anytime ride."

There were a few folks, of course, who didn't realize the trail would be unpaved. "We were misinformed," said Dave Stein, a Mountain View bicyclist who wore a wry grin. "Three miles of unpaved road is not a lot of fun. But I still think it's a very good thing."

The back story tells you something about our current state of paralysis in government and law: Six years ago, the federal government signed a memorandum of understanding with the idea of opening the trail.

The year before, Cargill Salt had sold the biggest piece of the trail to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which has put up signs telling people how to spot wildlife. A nub of 16 acres remained that covered the western 200 feet of the trail, near the Sunnyvale border.

Originally, Cargill hoped to sell the

property to NASA, which owns the land to the south, across a drainage channel. After some talks, NASA

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finally told Cargill it didn't have the money. In 2007, Cargill's Mapelli then persuaded his bosses to donate it to NASA.

New bike trail opens

A 2.4-mile path opened Monday near Moffett Field, linking bike and pedestrian trails from East Palo Alto to San Jose.



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In the end, it's a modest trail, easier to navigate on the western end, near Shoreline Park, than on the side closer to Sunnyvale. But the views are magnificent, both of the bay and of Moffett Field's Hangar One. I made a round trip in about 22 minutes on my trusty, 30-year-old warrior, my Nishiki 10-speed road bike.

The trail should have been opened years ago. And yes, it's still just dirt. But the promise is what matters. Once the trail is used, it will have a constituency. And that constituency will improve the track in the long run. Call it a victory for patience and the good guys.

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Moffett legacy

Even that wasn't easy. The deal was made more difficult by the remnants of Moffett Field pollution and the number of federal agencies involved. The Navy cleaned the drainage channel in 2005, but effluent pipes remain nearby. Without public ownership, Cargill didn't want to open the gates because of liability fears.

Once the donation was agreed upon, the deal had to go through title search and attorneys. It was sent to NASA headquarters, then the Department of Justice, then back to local authorities. A committee spearheaded by ex-Sunnyvale Mayor Julia Miller met at the Rengstorff House to push the deal forward.



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