

REDWOOD PATHWAYS STRATEGY: AN ACTION PLAN FOR TRAIL DEVELOPMENT



CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

Imagine a chain of bustling communities, linked by a two lane roadway. Surrounded by green, forest-covered mountains with clear blue rivers, these communities thrive. Residents work in the forests and local mills and in communities' centers which provide needed goods and services for locals as well as catering to the many tourists who meander through. Tourism is vital, and tourists travel slowly through the area on their way between San Francisco and points north. Vehicles move slowly on the winding roadway, and stops are frequent.

Many tourists are traveling to the area to hunt or fish, or just relax and take in the majestic trees and scenery within newly-designated Humboldt Redwoods State Park. Roadside communities are dotted with grand hotels, country stores, filling stations, and hunting lodges. City folk travel here for adventure, a sense of the last frontier, and to see the mighty Redwoods. It is the hey-day of the southern Humboldt area and the communities along the "Redwood Highway", are booming. It is 1955.

Today, most of these communities struggle to hang on. Stores and filling stations are closed, many of the inns and lodges have been boarded up or converted to other uses. Tourists speeding along the four lane highway see little of the small, rural towns, stopping mostly at roadside attractions on their way to other areas.



A vehicle travels the Redwood Highway circa 1920's.

ORIGIN OF THE AVENUE TRAIL CONCEPT

During the year 2000 update of the Avenue of the Giants' Community Plan by the County of Humboldt, the Avenue communities expressed substantial interest in establishing an "Avenue-wide, multi-use pathway." A "multi-use trail along the Avenue" would connect local communities, and also link existing recreational opportunities such as trails, campgrounds, river access points, and visitor centers. Residents clearly stated that such a trail is vitally needed to provide safer facilities for area residents, as well as a basis for stimulating and expanding existing visitor related tourism in the area.

Concurrent with the County's Community Plan Update process, the US Forest Service Rural Community Assistance Grants Program (USFS RCA) funded a 'community visioning project' in the Avenue of the Giants area. This process worked with the 'official' Plan Update process by getting more community residents involved. Residents input regarding their vision for the community became the basis for land use and policy decisions in the Community Plan.

The USFS RCA funding also provided professional, technical support to community members interested in pursuing ways to implement their "visions." From these efforts sprang the "Avenue Trails Committee," a group of residents from several Avenue of the Giants communities who began to meet regularly to promote and further develop the "Avenue Trail" idea. Technical support was provided by the Natural Resources Services division of Redwood Community Action Agency, a Eureka-based non profit organization. The Avenue Trails Committee, or ATC, met twice monthly for over a year, developing goals and materials related to trail development along the 32 mile long Avenue of the Giants. Materials were presented to the County of Humboldt during the Community Plan Update's public hearings, to the State Parks during public meetings for the Humboldt Redwoods State Park Master Plan, and to Caltrans, which manages Route 254.

The resultant Community Plan, section 4300 Trails, "is supportive of the trail concept", while leaving the specific details for achieving a trail unspecified. The plan also "encourages inclusion of the concept in the State Park management plan," as the pathway would most likely be situated on State Park property, as well as limited areas of private property. This may require the dedication of trail easements on private properties." Plan Policies related to the Avenue Trail concept include:

1. The County should encourage the Humboldt Redwoods State Park and Caltrans to consider and plan for a trail parallel to the Avenue consistent with Park mandates, community values, and the State Streets and Highways Code.
2. The County shall participate in State Park and Caltrans planning processes to encourage an appropriate trail system and other issues of interest to the communities.
3. Once a conceptual trail route is designated, the County shall seek dedication of easements where necessary. A dedication of easements in new subdivisions shall be required where development may interfere with potential use of the pathway.
4. The County shall encourage safe, efficient and practical trails providing access to the region's natural resources and expand upon the County Trails Plan of 1979.
5. The County shall encourage provision and maintenance of trails to and along the Eel River.
6. The County shall actively seek Federal and State funding, including grant funding, for trails and rest stops.

By the time that the ATC made presentations to the County, State Parks, and Caltrans, funding for technical support had long since been expended. The group, with motivation and enthusiasm but without guidance, began to meet less regularly. Quarterly meetings generally enabled residents to keep the trail idea active, maintain support, and discuss fund raising ideas to provide additional technical assistance.

Staff at NRS also continued to seek backing for the effort, eventually expanding that original effort along the 32 mile Avenue of the Giants to include an additional 41 miles of frontage roads and route 271 to the south within the Redwood Pathways Implementation Strategy Project.

THE REDWOOD PATHWAYS PROJECT

The “Redwood Pathway Implementation Strategy” is a project that grew from the two priorities identified by local residents during the Avenue of the Giants Community Plan and Visioning processes. Those priorities were 1) stimulating the local economy and 2) the development of an interconnected trail network.



The beautiful Eel River as seen through the Redwoods along the Avenue of the Giants.

Natural Resources Services sought and was awarded grant funds by two sources: the USFS Rural Communities Assistance Program and the Humboldt County Transportation Planning Funds. Each source has a different focus—the USFS Rural Communities Assistance Program focus is stimulating local economies and the Humboldt County Transportation Planning Funds focus on transportation (in this case for non motorized users like bicyclists, equestrians and pedestrians.) Together, the two programs are well suited to address the community’s stated concerns.

The project was designed to achieve these goals by assessing the overall feasibility of a separated “multi-use trail along the Avenue.” The Redwood Pathways Project then addressed the community concerns by assessing and guiding regional trail-related improvements to make local communities safer for pedestrians, equestrians, and cyclists **and** which, when completed, will stimulate local economies by providing increased recreational and scenic opportunities for visitors.

The Redwood Pathways project was sensitive to the efforts already underway to accomplish trail development and economic stimulation in the area. The project team worked with interested community residents to **continue** where previous planning efforts left off—taking previously suggested trail ideas, adding new ideas and expanding the area being considered, and developing an **implementation strategy** to guide local organizations, regional, state, and federal agencies in their efforts to plan future trail-related improvements. In addition, two proposed “priority improvements” were selected for the Redwood Pathways team to initiate

the process with land managers and for which the team developed further guidelines and initial designs, called “project plan packages.”

The project area, nearly 75 miles in length, follows the Redwood Highway corridor between Stafford and Leggett. Because NRS is based in Eureka, local representatives were sought to become part of the project team, bringing local knowledge and priorities to the fore front of project efforts. The two local representatives participated in all aspects of the project, receiving both on-the-job training in trail planning and development and more formal training through the Cascadia Leadership Training Program. It is the long-term hope that this combination of on-the-job experience and leadership skills building will empower local residents to continue trail planning and development efforts after the term of the Redwood Pathways project.

Ultimately, the long-term vision for a “Redwood Pathway” became a series of continuous multi-use pathways along the corridor. This “ultimate pathway” will bring economic development to the region by enhancing opportunities for enjoyment of the region’s nationally recognized resources.

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