

## OJAI VALLEY TRAIL

### COUNTY OF VENTURA - PARKS DEPARTMENT

In 1981, the County of Ventura purchased a 9.5 mile abandoned Southern Pacific Railway right-of-way for future development into a bicycle and equestrian trail. The grade was gradual and the railbed was set back enough from the main highway to provide safety from motor vehicles.

Pedestrians, cyclists, and equestrians previously used the shoulder of Highway 33, the major thoroughfare into the Ojai Valley. This busy two lane road was the scene of numerous accidents involving vehicles and the types of recreationalists previously mentioned.

The challenge the County of Ventura faced was how to make the trail a reality at a time when money was scarce. The Ventura County Parks Department operates out of an Enterprise Fund and does not receive any General Fund contributions. At the time, the California Transportation Department was planning to put a bicycle lane along the other side of Highway 33 to protect cyclists from the increasing traffic congestion. The County convinced CalTrans that bicyclists would be even safer riding along the railway trail, and CalTrans

agreed to put its bike path money into the County's project. Funding to construct the equestrian portion of the Trail came from various funding sources, such as State Bond Grants and State Highway Grants.

The Ojai Valley Trail, as this unique facility is named, is a multifaceted resource that presents opportunities for equestrian, pedestrian, jogging, and bicycling activities. Extending approximately 9.5 miles, the trail links Foster County Regional Park at the southern terminus to Soule County Park, located in the Ojai Valley. The trail traverses varying landscape and land use conditions as it extends along the Ventura River and then moves in a northeasterly direction toward the City of Ojai.

Considerable attention was given to criteria and standards which maximize inherent recreational opportunities and promote a safe and attractive user experience. The design criteria used to develop the Trail Master Plan evolved from discussions with staff, maintenance personnel, and interested citizens. The trail consists of a minimum 10-foot width asphalt paved path accommodating pedestrians and bicyclists, and another minimum of 10-foot wood chip covered path for equestrian use. These two paths are separated by a 4-foot high wood rail fence.

A private consulting firm was hired to develop the Conceptual Plan, which was presented to numerous groups for review and approval. The local unincorporated communities that the Trail passed through, the Ojai City Council, and the County of Ventura's Planning Commission, Recreation Advisory Commission, and Board of Supervisors,

all contributed to the review process. After the Board of Supervisors gave approval, an engineering firm designed the Trail, and a construction firm received the bid to construct this facility.

The Ojai Valley Trail has proved to be one of Ventura County's most popular facilities. It has been recognized with awards from the National Association of Counties, The Ojai Valley Chamber of Commerce, and the Associated General Contractors of California. It also was featured in the November 1988 issue of Sunset Magazine.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

State Highway 33 into the Ojai Valley, located in northern Ventura County, is a very busy and dangerous two-lane road which has been the scene, over the years, of many tragic accidents involving pedestrians, equestrians, joggers and cyclists who had to use the shoulder of the Highway to get to their destinations.

In 1981, the County of Ventura purchased a 9.5 mile abandoned Southern Pacific Railway right-of-way for future development into a multi-use recreational trail facility to provide a safe route into the Ojai Valley.

This innovative facility was built in four phases beginning in 1983 and completed six years later in 1989. It consists of a 10 foot wide asphalt paved path for pedestrians, joggers, and bicyclists, and another 10 foot wide wood chip path for equestrians. These two paths are separated by a four foot high wood rail fence.

The total cost for the acquisition, design and construction of the Ojai Valley Trail was 2.3 million dollars. Funding for the project came from a Land and Water Conservation grant, a Roberti-Z'berg Park grant, Calstip, Caltrans Bike Lane Account, 1980, 1984, and 1986 State Park Bonds, 1986 and 1987 SB 821 funds, local Quimby funds, and various County of Ventura Recreational Trust Accounts.

The Ojai Valley Trail has rapidly become one of Ventura County's most popular recreational facilities. The Trail has received fairly extensive media coverage from local newspapers, Sunset Magazine, the nationally distributed Sourceletter and the Rails to Trails Conservancy's Trailblazer. It has also received awards from the National Association of Counties, Ojai Valley Chamber of Commerce, Associated General Contractors of California, and the prestigious 1989 Excellence in Transportation Award by the California State Department of Transportation.

## II. COUNTY OR DEPARTMENT ROLE

The challenge the County of Ventura faced was how to make the trail a reality during a time when money was scarce. The Ventura County Parks Department operates its regional parks on an Enterprise Fund basis and does not receive any General Fund contributions. Therefore, if this facility was to become a reality, the Department would have to find its own funding sources other than the County General Fund. Many hours were spent by staff researching various funding sources such as state and federal grants. After a concerted effort, sufficient funding was eventually received to design, engineer, and construct the Ojai Valley Trail.

At the time the County was attempting to solve the Highway 33 problem, the California Department of Transportation was planning to put a bicycle lane along the other side of Highway 33 to protect cyclists from the increasing traffic congestion. The County convinced CalTrans that bicyclists would be even safer riding along the railway trail and CalTrans eventually agreed to put its bike path money into the County's project.

The Ventura County Board of Supervisors played a critically important role in promoting and supporting the concept of a multi-use recreational trail. During a time when funding was scarce, the Board supported the project by approving grant applications and making numerous lobbying trips to Sacramento. Members of the Board of Supervisors constantly requested and received status reports on this project to keep their constituents updated on the development of the Ojai Valley Trail.

Funding for the acquisition, design, and construction of the Ojai Valley Trail came from various federal, state and local funding sources totaling 2.3 million dollars.

FEDERAL LAND & WATER CONSERVATION FUNDS	\$453,000
ROBERTI-Z'BERG PARK GRANT	\$147,189
CALTRANS STIP	\$437,295
CALTRANS BLA	\$180,000
STATE PARK BOND 1980	\$ 90,514
STATE PARK BOND 1984	\$199,200
STATE PARK BOND 1986	\$177,000
COUNTY OF VENTURA ENTERPRISE FUND	\$334,504
SOULE TRUST FUND	\$ 77,000
QUIMBY	\$ 25,000
SB 821 BIKE LANE FUNDS 1986	\$ 85,000
SB 821 BIKE LANE FUNDS 1987	\$ 95,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$2,300,702</b>

#### IV. RESULTS

The development of the Ojai Valley Trail has been a tremendous asset to the citizens of Ventura County as well as to many visitors from other counties. No accidents have been reported on Highway 33 involving users who previously were forced to use the shoulder of the highway for lack of a better route. The trail has provided a safe alternate route into the Ojai Valley for pedestrians, equestrians, joggers, and cyclists. These users can now enjoy their leisure recreational activities without the previous fear of vehicular traffic.

The County of Ventura has received numerous comments from users of the Ojai Valley Trail expressing their appreciation and satisfaction of this facility. Following are examples of compliments we have received.

"The constant use of the Trail amazes me as there is never, and I repeat, never a time that I drive along Highway 33 that I don't see hikers, bicycle riders, joggers and horseback riders on the Trail." Mr. John Martin, Director, Ojai Recreation Department.

"As a twelve year resident of Ojai Valley, my family has enjoyed greatly the ability to be able to walk and ride our bicycles to any destination in the Valley. The Trail, one of the most delightful of Ojai's assets, has provided us with a safe, picturesque way to get around town. I never worry about the safety of my two teenage daughters when I know they are able to ride the Trail." Mrs. Nancy H. Jioras.

"I recently had the pleasure of riding horseback on this Trail with some friends. Riding from Casitas Springs to Ojai and back was a wonderful and memorable excursion. We thank you and your department for a commendable achievement." Ms. Linda Palmer, Santa Monica Mountains Trails Council.

"Our family uses the Ojai Valley Trail and just had the opportunity to use the new section. Excellent! We would love to see more bike trails separated from the traffic." Ms. Gibson.

"Really enjoyed the Trail. SUPER!!" Mr. Gerald Holman.

"We used the new bike path to Ojai and it was excellent." Ms. Karen McDougal.

"We enjoyed using this new Trail and are delighted to see this development for hikers and bikers. More please!" Ms. Arline Sincoff.

"We parked at Foster Park and rode your bike trail. That was the BEST! The area it was built in, the scenery, everything was perfect! Thank you!" Ms Gayle Brown.

#### IV. RESULTS

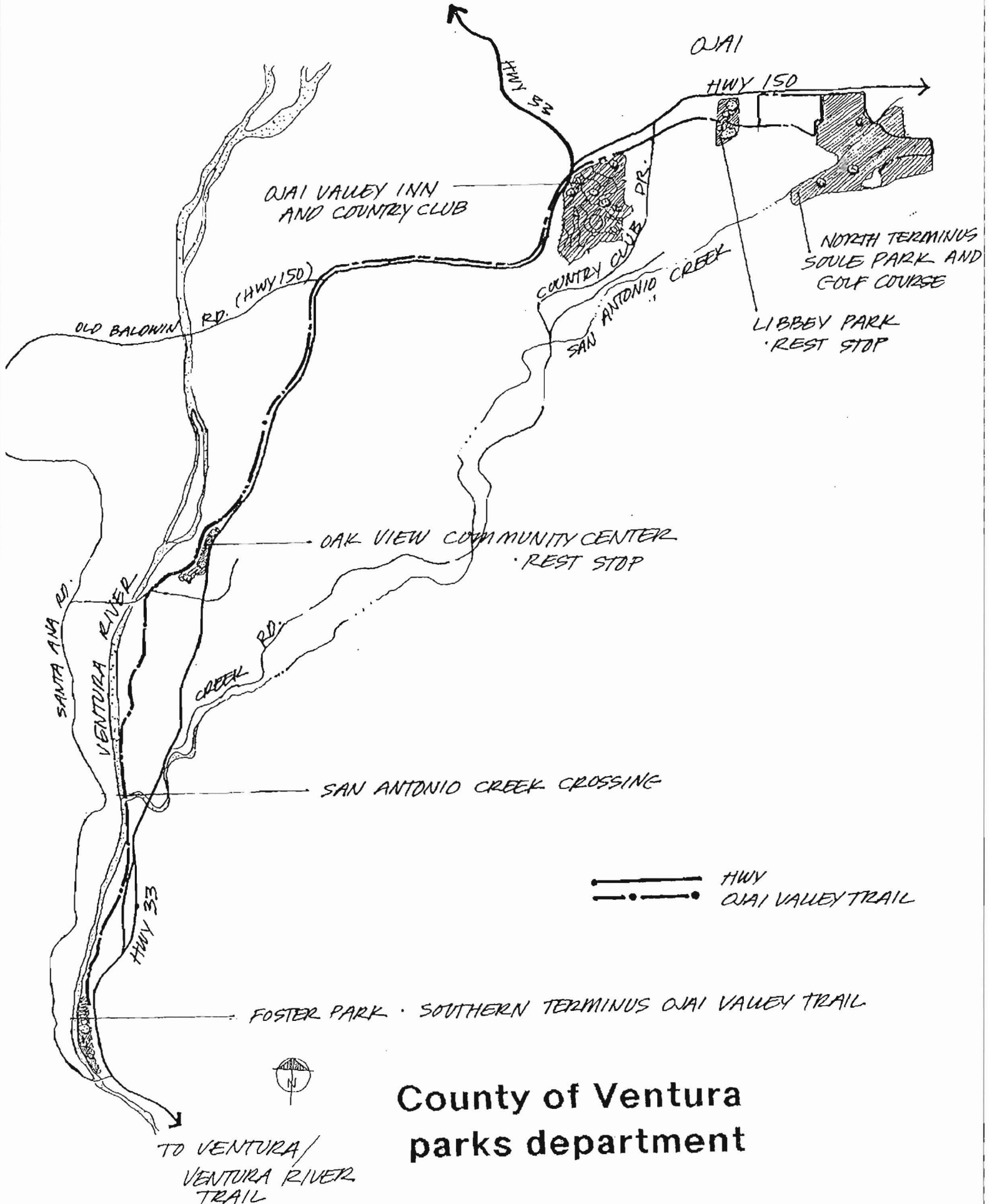
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"Love the Trail. A wonderful asset. Have enjoyed bike trails coast to coast and this one is one of the best." B.C. Snyder.

"Although the final segment of the Trail has just recently been completed, it has quickly earned a treasured place in any listing of the wonders of Ventura County." Ventura County Star Free Press.

This project can be adapted and developed by other counties. We have received numerous requests for design specifications from all levels of government agencies throughout the nation, as well as from the Rails to Trails Conservancy in Washington, D.C., which sent its Director of Programs, Mr. Peter Harnick, to Ventura to view the Trail. He remarked that it is the only one of its kind in the nation and will be using it as a model for future developments.

# ojai valley trail



County of Ventura  
parks department



## The Ojai Valley Trail

**T**o some, Ventura County, Calif. has it all—pounding Pacific surf below a ring of rugged mountains, an easy-going climate, the endless profusion of vegetation, and all this only an hour by freeway (at least in off-peak hours) from the bright lights of Los Angeles.

In fact, so many people are heading for Ventura County that its fruit orchards are giving way to suburban houses, and its rural road system is groaning under ever-heavier loads.

One of the early casualties of Ventura's disappearing orange industry was the minor Southern Pacific rail spur on which citrus had been transported from Ojai down the hill to the main line at Ventura.

Abandoned in the late 1960s, only the lower end of the line, near the ocean, was broken up and sold. Fortunately, a decade later the corridor was still contiguous when Tom Volk, the dynamic then-director of Ventura County Parks, had a vision that the route could serve as a safe, off-street route for equestrians, cyclists and walkers and that it could also provide vital open space for a county parks agency reeling under the impact of rocketing land prices.

This year Volk's vision will become reality: the Ojai Valley Trail is slated to be completed and dedicated in November.

"It's been a real pleasant project to work on—I wish all my work was as satisfying," smiles Andy Oshita, the trail's manager. "Around here everyone has either a horse or a bike, and it's reduced the danger for them."

The specific danger was narrow, hilly Highway 33 which has become jammed with traffic in recent years and which the rail line parallels, sometimes directly alongside, sometimes out of eyesight and earshot. Beyond safety, the trail is also perfectly suited to



Equestrians provided the impetus for the Ojai Valley Trail, but the rest of the community has come along for the ride. (photo courtesy Ventura County Parks)

recreation because it links two major county parks.

In many respects the Ojai Valley Trail is the most sophisticated of California's 22 rail-trails. Although not the longest, it is the only one with two parallel treadways—*asphalt for cyclists and a dirt-and-wood chip surface for horses*—separated by an attractive wooden rail fence. It's also the only one which more than pays its annual upkeep costs from leasing underground space to a gas pipeline company and other utilities.

It is the equestrian community which provided the impetus for the trail and which is its main political strength. Ojai Valley's wood chip horse trail surface, for instance, was carefully chosen by an advisory committee which balanced the advantages (dust suppression) and the drawbacks (injury to sensitive hooves) and discovered the optimum solution (small chips from specially dried soft wood). And this trail must be the only one in the nation where a pedestrian button to activate a traffic signal is located high enough for an equestrian to reach without dismounting!

But it is the utility network underneath that is the financial salvation of Ojai Valley Trail. Since the Parks Department receives no

tax support from Ventura County and must pay for all its facilities through self-generated income, the system is normally forced to rely on user-fee-oriented parks like marinas, pools and golf courses. A trail, with scores of access points, is difficult to collect fees on and probably would not have been developed without its "underground economy."

"We'll spend about \$25,000 a year maintaining the Ojai Trail once it's complete," explains Oshita. "But we bring in over \$36,000 a year from the utility leases along and across it."

Creating the trail was not cheap, partly because of high land prices (\$800,000 for 9.5 miles) and partly because the county wanted a top-of-the-line facility. Fortunately, because of its location and use the Ojai Trail was eligible for funds from both state parks (for recreation) and state transportation (for bicycle safety).

The \$2.3 million price tag has been well worth it—the Ojai Valley Trail has already won four state and national awards, with another going to the contractor who built it. Moreover, use is heavy, not only by horses and bikes but by everyone else, from mothers pushing strollers to a group of visually impaired youngsters to handicapped persons in electric wheelchairs.

Interestingly, the trail concept was widely supported from the moment it was proposed. Even the neighbors—often a source of opposition—were in favor because they saw a patrolled park as a way of ending the illegal motorbike use of the abandoned rail line. All of which bodes well for a possible extension of the route, both south along a levee to the ocean, and northeast into the mountains.

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