

Kensington residents seek to improve paths

By Alan Lopez
STAFF WRITER

KENSINGTON - Sandwiched between homes and hidden by trees, pedestrian pathways crisscross Kensington's windy streets, giving residents shortcuts from one part of town to another.

The pathways are paved at some points and marked by wildflowers and landscaping at others. Pedestrians walk down steep homemade wooden steps or tread carefully along buckled cement.

Resident Gloria Morrison's favorite path, and perhaps the most popular one in Kensington is the Ardmore Path, which includes a cement staircase and a metal handrail.

"This is probably the nicest one," said Morrison, wearing a beige cap and sunglasses while walking along the path from Arlington Avenue to Ardmore Road.

Morrison and other Kensington residents want to maintain the paths, but there's one problem: They don't know who owns them.

The county brought Kensington into the county's zone 21 lighting and landscaping district in 1989, taxing residents \$12.10 per parcel for landscaping maintenance on Arlington Avenue and the Colusa Circle.

Morrison said the tax should pay for pathway maintenance, too.

Eric Whan, the county's senior civil engineer, said the 1989 assessment district provided for maintenance of the pathways if money was available.

But the county has never accepted ownership of the paths, Whan said.

"In order for the county to take ownership and maintenance responsibility," said Whan, "the Board of Supervisors would have to go through a formal action to actually accept that right of way for public purposes."

The Board of Supervisors has never taken that action, Whan said.

In response to inquiries about path ownership and maintenance, Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia held an informal meeting Tuesday at his office.

Gioia said residents will look into how Berkeley maintains its own network of paths, and possibly consider an expensive and time-consuming title search to discover original ownership.

He said he suggested that residents work with the Kensington Community Services District, which provides police service in the community, to create a new tax to pay for maintenance.

Residents have been researching the paths for 30 years, though their history goes back much further.

"My understanding is the paths were put in when the community was developed," said resident Lynn Wolter, who is also interested in finding out who owns them. "They were to provide a quick and easy link between homes and a trolley system running up and down Arlington Avenue. The paths were meant to expedite people walking down and catching the train."

That's one theory, though others say the origins remain a mystery.

Following 15 years of research, resident Rosemary Barnwell, now deceased, and members of the Kensington Improvement Club's Beautification Committee produced a map of the paths along with a study of their condition and suitability for walking in 1989.

Their map shows 12 path segments cutting between windy streets. About half of the paths could be walked; others were impassable, according to the map.

Barnwell and the committee also provided recommendations for maintaining the pathways.

Members of local Boy Scout troops used to maintain them, but now adjacent property owners have taken on the duties, said resident Vida Dorroh, who regularly travels the path from York to Arlington avenues.

But some residents are afraid to take care of them because of questions of liability if someone gets hurt, said Morrison.

"I want to resolve the question of liability," Morrison said after Tuesday's meeting, "to hopefully do what we can to improve the paths."

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