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Goodbye, Willow Glen Trestle: New pedestrian bridge finally opens to the public.

The pedestrian bridge will connect the Los Gatos Creek Trail to Three Creeks Trail



SAN JOSE – DECEMBER 17: People do some work near the Willow Glen Trestle in San Jose, Calif., on Thursday, Dec. 17, 2020. (Randy Vazquez/ Bay Area News Group) By [MAGGIE ANGST](mailto:mangst@bayareanewsgroup.com) | mangst@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group
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At long last, a modest steel bridge tucked away in San Jose's Willow Glen neighborhood has finally opened to the public, providing a long-sought trail connection for bikers and pedestrians on the west side of the city.

It just took San Jose officials more than half of a decade longer than planned and cost the city about \$860,000 more than initially expected.

The steel structure may not look like much to those unfamiliar with [the drawn-out saga of San Jose's Willow Glen Trestle](#), but its completion marks the end of a seven-year battle between the city and preservationists in which courts and historians debated the merits of razing the now-demolished 99-year-old trestle — a wooden railroad relic that

went over the Los Gatos Creek just east of Lincoln Avenue. All the while, the prefabricated steel bridge had been collecting dust in storage. The newly completed bridge, which officially opened late Tuesday, will serve as a connection between the northern end of the Three Creeks Trail, which currently serves as a natural trail made of compacted dirt, and the paved Los Gatos Creek Trail.

“It’s an exciting time,” said Bill Rankin, president of Save our Trails and the North Willow Glen Neighborhood Association. “This new segment is an important trail connection not just for the city, but for the entire region.”

Later this month, the city parks department hopes to gain the approval of the city council to spend \$1.1 million on paving the .9-mile Three Creeks Trail with asphalt and lining the 12-foot pathway with trees, seating areas and interpretive sites.

Once completed, the Three Creeks Trail is envisioned as an integral segment in a seamless trail system spanning more than 100 miles along three creeks and connecting western and eastern San Jose through the Los Gatos Creek Trail, Guadalupe River Trail and Coyote Creek Trail. Although many other connections must be worked out before that dream is realized, the opening of the new bridge in Willow Glen is a good start, advocates say.

“Each trail connection that is made leads to access to more urban open space that is so important at all times but even more so in these times of COVID, not only for exercise but for the mental health opportunity of getting outside for some fresh air in our urban environment,” Rankin said.

The Willow Glen Trestle, which was torn down earlier this fall and dumped, was built in 1921 to carry trains for the Union Pacific Railroad. In 2011, local government officials brokered a multimillion-dollar deal to purchase the right of way from Union Pacific in an effort to extend the city’s Three Creek Trail and connect it to the Los Gatos Creek Trail.

Some community members and preservationists hoped the city would restore the bridge, citing its historical ties to the city’s agricultural past, and recondition it to a point where it could serve as the connection between the two trails. But in 2014, the city council [voted to demolish the trestle](#) and replace it with a steel bridge, arguing in part that the trestle’s timbers had been soaked in a preservative which was discovered to have toxic properties, posing an environmental danger.

The city’s plans, however, were abruptly halted when the Willow Glen Trestle Conservancy and Friends [filed its first lawsuit](#), setting off a yearslong legal battle complete with court hearings over environmental impact reports, last-minute judicial stays and expired permits and grants that then had to be renewed. The trestle was eventually deemed historic and placed on the California Register of Historical Resources despite city objections, but the legal conflict ended this summer with [the last injunction denied](#) and the [demolition of the railroad’s bridge a done deal](#).

Larry Ames, who led the Willow Glen Trestle Conservancy group, called the opening of the new bridge “bittersweet.”

“I’m glad to see that the trail connection is done, but I’m disappointed that the Trestle could not have been part of it,” Ames said. “It would have been the crown jewel of that trail.”

In the end, the battle over the bridge replacement cost the city and its taxpayers more than just several years without a trail connection.

Over the course of the seven-year legal battle, the price tag for the bridge increased 52% — from the initial \$1.63 million contract awarded to the Goron N. Ball construction company in May 2014 to a final cost of approximately \$2.49 million approved by the city council in November.

San Jose Public Works Director Matt Cano chalked up the elevated costs to rising construction costs, storing the prefabricated bridge for years and additional staff and contractor time, including at least four false-starts in which teams mobilized and then had to stop work due to litigation. The additional costs were paid for through a budget set aside for parks and trail projects within San Jose’s Council District 6, which encompasses Willow Glen and the Rose Garden neighborhoods.

San Jose Councilman Pierluigi Oliverio, who initiated the land purchase and trail extension proposal nearly a decade ago, said it was unfortunate that the trail connection and other projects were delayed, and in turn, became more costly.

“Because of the frivolous litigation, other projects in this district got put to the side and obviously this project is not being delivered on time as expected,” Oliverio said. “Yet, this was the hardest part and we’re just excited to see it completed.”

With the bridge installation completed, some community members are already thinking ahead to their next priorities for trail connections, including tying together a missing segment of the Los Gatos Creek Trail from Meridian Avenue to Lincoln Avenue in Willow Glen — though that concept would require obtaining land for private landowners — and forming a connection from the northern end of the Los Gatos Creek trail to the new Diridon Station and the Guadalupe River Trail system in downtown San Jose.