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## Despite development, area has active riders groups, miles of trails

By Jennifer K Mahal  
UNION-TRIBUNE

March 13, 2008

BONITA – The two-lane country road that once led into Bonita may now be a four-lane city street, but horseback riders still mosey along its roadside trails. Yellow equestrian crossing signs dot the area. The traffic signal at Central Avenue and Bonita Road has two crosswalk buttons, one of which is at horse height.

The steady creep of city life into this once-rural unincorporated community – bordered by state Highway 54 on the north, Telegraph Canyon on the south, Madre Grande mountain in the east and Interstate 805 to the west – hasn't diminished its residents' passion for horses.

That passion can be seen in the Bonita Valley Horsemen's monthly trail patrols and cleanups, in the community activism of Sunnyside Equestrians for Safety, in the riding lessons offered at stables like Sweetwater Farms and in the Sunnyside Saddle Club's horse shows.

The club, which was established in 1961, hosts shows at its arena next to Rohr Park on the first Sunday of the month from April to November. Equestrians compete nonprofessionally in more than 30 classes, including jumping and several forms of dressage, where horses are guided by riders through a complex series of maneuvers.

"When you ride, you're one with your horse. Once the bug bites, it doesn't usually leave," said Debbie Basaba, 55, who shows her two Appaloosas, which she bought on the Internet from Mississippi a few years ago.

The bug bit Basaba early. Her grandparents owned a stable in National City, "where Target is now." Basaba can remember riding as a child from her parents' house near Castle Park High School to Otay Lakes without going on any streets.

Roberta Jackson, co-owner of 13-acre Sweetwater Farms, has similar memories of the community's rural



FRED GREAVES

Julia Basaba worked to put a bridle on Hershey in Bonita. Debbie Basaba (below), who is Julia's mother, took Hershey for a ride. The steady creep of city life into this once-rural unincorporated community hasn't diminished its residents' passion for horses. No one is sure how many horses are in Bonita, but the number could be as high as 1,000.



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past. Wildlife, including deer, dotted the hills instead of houses.

"If there were cars, you knew who they were," Jackson said of riding in the 1970s. "You'd wave to them."

Though times have changed, she notes that her farm is busy on most days. Sweetwater Farms, which hosts 80 horses, offers lessons and trail rides for beginners to advanced equestrians.

"We go on pieces of the same trails that I used to ride on when I was a kid," Jackson said.

Jackson and others credit Bonita Valley Horsemen for keeping Bonita's trails open and usable. Since 1975, the group has worked with county officials – especially Supervisor Greg Cox, who represents the area – and developers to maintain and grow the trail system.

"You can go to Jamul, you can go to Ramona, and they have a lot of open land, but it's all privately owned," said Mark Kukuchek, trails representative for Bonita Valley Horsemen. "We have more open land here usable as a trail because it was set aside as public trails."

There are more than 30 miles of multiuse trails in Bonita. Joggers, bicyclists, hikers and people walking their dogs share many of the paths with equestrians, including the loops around the Bonita and Chula Vista golf courses and the 10 miles of trails in the 540-acre Sweetwater Regional Park.

Kukuchek noted that some hikers and mountain bikers join Bonita Valley Horsemen in their trail cleanups and meetings.

"Our motto is, 'Trails today for tomorrow,'" said Andrea Goyette, incoming president of the group.

When the state Route 125 toll road was built, bisecting part of Bonita and cutting off a number of paths, Bonita Valley Horsemen helped negotiate trail mitigation from South Bay Express, the company that built the road. The company and the county haven't finished creating all of the new paths, but a 270-foot equestrian bridge reconnecting riders to the Summit Campground area is complete.

That bridge, east of Conduit Road and north of San Miguel Road in Sweetwater Regional Park, is the reason Sunnyside Equestrians for Safety exists. The group was formed in 2006 over concerns that the steep incline of the bridge could lead to horses slipping and

#### DETAILS

##### To see horses:

Sunnyside Saddle Club 2008 Opening Show

**When:** 8:30 a.m. April 13

**Where:** Sunnyside Saddle Club Arena, Rohr Park, 4700 Sweetwater Road, Bonita

**Cost:** Free

##### More information:

[sunnysidesaddleclub.org](http://sunnysidesaddleclub.org)

##### To ride horses:

**What:** Trail rides

**When:** Tuesdays through Sundays

**Where:** Sweetwater Farms, 3051 Equitation Lane, Bonita

**Cost:** \$40 an hour

**Phone:** (619) 252-5544

##### To keep horses safe:

**What:** Bonita Valley Horsemen's talk on disaster preparedness for equestrians

**When:** 7 p.m. tomorrow

**Where:** Bonita Museum and Cultural Center, 4355 Bonita Road, Bonita

**Cost:** Free

**More information:** [bonitatrails.org](http://bonitatrails.org)

being injured.

South Bay Express retrofitted the bridge with half-inch-thick SoftStall mats in February, and Sunnyside Equestrians for Safety has moved on to other issues, including aggressive dogs and increased motorbike use on the trails.

There have been three dog attacks on horses and their riders in the past six months, said Virginia Stewart, president of the group.

“I think that's a result of urbanization, because the more people there are in Bonita, the more there are on the trails,” said Stewart, who has lived in Bonita since the 1980s but has been riding only for the past five years.

Dogs in county parks must, by law, be on a leash. Motorbikes are also banned from the county parks' trails. Their presence can spook horses.

Sunnyside Equestrians for Safety is working to have park rangers issue citations to dog owners who don't comply with the leash law and to motorbike riders.

Many local properties are zoned for keeping horses. Several of the housing tracts of the 1960s, '70s and '80s, including Bonita Downs and Bonita Highlands, were built with horse ownership in mind.

But some people say fewer homeowners are choosing to keep their horses at home.

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Stewart, who is also president of the Bonita Highlands homeowners association, said she doesn't know of anyone currently in her tract with a horse in their backyard. However, she knows several people who board their mounts at nearby stables.

It's unclear how many horses live in Bonita. At least 17 stables of varying sizes are scattered around, each with anywhere from six to 100 animals. Add to that the horses tucked away in private backyards and there could be anywhere from a few hundred to about 1,000.

“There are passionate horse people in this community,” said Jackson, whose farm is close to Westfield Plaza Bonita. “I think it's always going to be a horse community.”

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■ Jennifer K Mahal is a freelance writer based in San Diego.

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