



County of Santa Cruz

COMMISSION ON THE ENVIRONMENT

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October 22, 2015

The Honorable Greg Caput, Chair
Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors
701 Ocean Street, Fifth Floor
Santa Cruz, CA 95060

Subject: Branch Rail Line and Passenger Rail

Dear Chair Caput and Members of the Board:

The Commission on the Environment (COE) has been briefed by the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (RTC) on the Passenger Rail Feasibility Study, and we write to offer our perspectives and recommendations on future use of the Branch Rail Line corridor to improve transportation and environmental quality in the County.

The COE commends RTC staff and its contractors for producing a report that did a good job describing a careful, high-level evaluation of passenger rail and its potential to improve the economy and quality of life in Santa Cruz County while reducing carbon and other pollution. As the report makes clear, many details related to specific schedules, stations, equipment and ridership will need further refinement to determine the most likely costs and benefits to the County.

However, based on the report and our desire to fully carry out the responsibilities of our Commission, the COE recommends that the RTC pursue funding now to conduct the next level of detailed analysis to provide commuter passenger rail service within Santa Cruz County.

The COE supports commuter passenger rail as necessary for the long-term economic viability and environmental quality of the County.

The COE offers the following specific suggestions:

- 1. Preserving the rail line to keep our future transportation options open is good public policy.**
Under no circumstances should the valuable infrastructure of the railroad right-of-way or the rails themselves be compromised.
- 2. Funding of the next-step study for commuter passenger rail should be sought now to determine all of the detailed parameters to move forward with expansion of current seasonal service.**
Funding should be sought now for the next-step investigation of commuter rail service. Urban infill policies mandated by California Senate Bill 375 promote higher density along primary transit

corridors. Until rail is a reality, such policies will not focus along this vital transit corridor, and will thus only increase congestion on secondary roads within the county.

3. The Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail (MBSST) should be built.

Both the MBSST-EIR and the Passenger Rail Feasibility Study state convincingly that building the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail for pedestrian and bicycle use will not interfere with the potential for rail service and visa-versa. The COE believes that all three of these transportation options (walk, bike, rail) will benefit the county. It is exciting that 25% of the MBSST plan has already been funded and will be built within the next few years. The COE recommends that funding be prioritized to build the rest of the pedestrian and bike trail as soon feasible and to continue improving the entire rail corridor toward the expansion of passenger rail beyond the current level of seasonal service.

Bike riders of all ages will gain safe riding alternatives throughout the county if a rail line provides proper bike amenities. Rail provides bike riders with a safe transit option across the county, giving citizens from all parts of the county access to trail systems and bike-to-school/work opportunities.

An important consideration is that 90% of the K-12 public schools are located within close proximity to the rail corridor. The rail-trail could be a valuable “Safe Routes to School” option for many students.

4. Rail service from the Westside to Watsonville is an important goal.

While an adequate characterization of travel patterns in the County is not available due to economic changes since the 2010 census, it is clear that Highway 1 traffic patterns have shifted over the past few years. Before the recession, highway congestion was greatest within a few miles of 41st Avenue. Now the greatest morning northbound congestion has shifted south, frequently beginning near Buena Vista Drive. Vehicles from the Freedom and Watsonville areas enter Highway 1 at Buena Vista and Freedom Blvd., with those onramps adding substantially to congestion that persists northward to Soquel. The same pattern is evident in reverse during afternoons and evenings.

An approach similar to Rail **Alternative G** (using light trains) that provides rail transit for workers commuting between Watsonville and Santa Cruz has the potential to relieve some of this congestion. This is also the most equitable alternative for all County residents, especially low income workers who live in south county but must work in north county.

5. Cost and funding are important in determining if the rail system is reasonable.

Unofficial estimates indicate that there may be on the order of \$250M needed over 20 years for rail costs not covered by current rider fare projections or identified grants. Identified grants (such as Cap and Trade) and as yet unidentified future funding opportunities may be competitive, but they are certain to become more competitive in the future as more communities identify rail as a viable alternative. Investing now in the next-step analysis will position the RTC well to compete for

passenger rail build-out funds because the analysis will provide more accurate cost estimates and other details that are required for procuring competitive grants.

6. Transportation infrastructure is critical for economic vitality.

An efficient and well planned transportation system, including the highest beneficial use of the rail corridor, is essential for building a healthy and sustainable local economy. Specifically, the relationship between transportation planning and the provision of affordable housing for our community's current and future work force is key. Building affordable housing along a main transportation artery such as the rail corridor is something that should be analyzed and seriously discussed as part of envisioning how our community will accommodate growth.

7. The NIMBY argument is not a complete perspective.

The frequently voiced "not in my backyard" argument must be balanced against the "not in my front yard" impacts of increased automobile traffic in neighborhoods and arterials if population growth and a lack of transportation options add more vehicles to the County roads. The "not in my atmosphere" argument must also be considered if transportation alternatives to the automobile are not developed.

8. Light (non-FRA-compliant) rail cars are preferable to heavy locomotives.

Light trains have lower fuel consumption and carbon emissions, and have less neighborhood impact from noise, vibration, crossing times, etc.

9. Comingling commuter rail with freight.

Freight traffic is currently minimal (though the study doesn't state what current usage is), and freight should be accommodated using temporal separation to schedule freight runs at off-commuter hours. Adjustments to freight delivery in Watsonville would involve very short distances, though the details need to be addressed in the next-step analysis.

10. Alternatives for the Boardwalk/Roaring Camp train.

The Boardwalk/Roaring Camp train track overlaps with the branch line for approximately 900 meters and could also be temporally separated from light commuter trains. Alternatively, the Roaring Camp train station could be moved off the commuter rail line by relocating it to the area by Depot Park, relieving congestion around the Boardwalk and making a better tourist connection to downtown businesses.

11. Whether rail will reduce congestion on Hwy 1.

The Feasibility Study does not quantify reduced congestion on Hwy 1, and various comments have suggested it will have little impact. However, if rail can't affect Hwy 1 traffic, and HOV lanes would cost \$600M, then we are at a point where the General Plan must have a greater impact on the amount and location of residential development in the County. Recent studies are available demonstrating that rail and bike options will reduce congestion by changing travel behavior, though it will take time. More freeway lanes simply reinforce car-first thinking and encourage more driving (and carbon pollution), both on Hwy 1 and on residential streets.

According to the RTP, 77% of all vehicle trips are between points within the County, with only 17% going over the hill. So even if the rail system doesn't take Silicon Valley commuters off the road, full rail service between Watsonville and Santa Cruz has the greatest potential to reduce highway congestion and related carbon pollution.

12. Feeder systems should be included in passenger rail planning.

RTC should be engaged in cross-agency, big-picture public transit system planning to create alignment of rail and Metro services and ensure that both transit systems are sustainable. Integration should result in cost savings opportunities for both systems.

Simple feeder systems to move people from the Pacific Ave/Beach Street rail station into downtown Santa Cruz (and similarly in Watsonville and elsewhere) should be included in the rail program. These could include Zip cars, bike rentals/shares/exchanges, simple shuttles to the Metro station and County Building, on-demand-type taxi networks, etc.

Finally, we encourage a broad perspective and long-term approach. Transportation patterns and systems in Santa Cruz County need to change, as is well documented in the Rail Feasibility Study, Sustainable Santa Cruz County Plan, MBSST EIR, Economic Vitality Strategy and Regional Transportation Plan. Carbon emissions are not academic: dealing with sea level rise will be extremely expensive for Santa Cruz County, dwarfing the needed investments in transportation projects that reduce our greenhouse gas emissions.

We encourage investment in building the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail and in conducting the next-step analysis now for expanding passenger rail service. The future of the County's environment and economy depend on both.

Sincerely,

Greg Pepping, Chair
Santa Cruz County Commission on the Environment