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Why Save the Railroad?

Transportation Improvement Plan

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The vision that motivated the purchase of the Union Pacific Railroad's right-of-way from Watsonville to Davenport embraced a multitude of wants: preserving commercial rail access, the property necessary for the Santa Cruz County leg of the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail, visitor-serving excursion trains and other recreational rail programs, rail transit services through areas of residential and employment concentration, connecting local residents to an expanding state rail network, and utility location including building a high-speed internet backbone.

In 2012, after more than a decade of applications, negotiations, analyses, and political angst, the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (SCCRTC) succeeded in acquiring this precious local asset. The next challenges are determining what exactly to do with this right-of-way, when to do those things, and how to pay for them. **Retaining the rail bed and maintaining its infrastructure should be part of this strategy.**

The "playbook" for what to do next with this right-of-way has been written and rewritten for at least a decade. Providing rail service was part of the original planning documents in the 1990s, subsequent studies and SCCRTC transportation strategies, and, finally, the contracts by which the right-of-way was purchased in 2012. At the center of all of these plans was the railroad.

To finalize plans to this right-of-way, the SCCRTC entered into agreements with the California Transportation Commission (which funded the lion's share of the purchase using voter approved funds), with the Federal Surface Transportation Board (that governs and protects the country's rail system), with Iowa Pacific (the rail operator with whom the SCCRTC entered into a ten year contract to

operate and maintain the rail line), and with the five jurisdictions in Santa Cruz that comprise the SCCRTC. All of these agreements promise to maintain the railroad and to continue the use of the corridor as a railroad.*

This fall the SCCRTC is expected to ask voters for a ½ cent sales tax to fund an array of transportation projects – highways, streets and roads within each jurisdiction, pedestrian and bicycle paths and improvements, and support for the paratransit system. Currently, a small slice of the proceeds from that 30-year revenue measure have been earmarked for making best use of the rail elements of the right-of-way.

Of course, there continues to be debate about how these funds should be divided-up among the various categories and how they should be used, with every constituency interested in getting a bigger share of the pie. Some want more for the highway, some more for Metro services, some more for trails and pedestrian projects, etc. Because the measure requires a 2/3rds majority, all are included in a single measure that, according to a poll of likely voters, stands a very good chance of meeting enough of the various priorities of enough of the electorate to clear that very high electoral bar.

Resistance to funding rail maintenance, services, and development flows from a variety of personal interests and judgments of some voters. In part, it comes from voters whose property borders the rail right-of-way and who would prefer it not be used by trains. In part, the resistance comes from those who would prefer that the money be spent on projects that they think are more likely to better serve their immediate needs – streets, roads, Metro, bike paths, etc. The resistance of others flows from skepticism that rail uses will optimize the productivity of transportation funds.

The 30 Year Horizon

When the Transportation Funding Task Force was studying needs and funding solutions to improve transportation in Santa Cruz County – now a decade ago – the estimated cost of making the planned improvements to add a continuous lane on Highway 1 was \$600 million; the cost a decade later is undoubtedly more. The plan would have added not only “auxiliary lanes” that connect ingress ramps to egress ramps (these lanes which look like a third lane until you get to the exit), but also created a full third lane to be designated High Occupancy Vehicle or “HOV” during high traffic periods.

Unfortunately, the modest amounts of federal and state highway funding that were available a decade ago for such projects are now down to a trickle. More than ever before they require significant local investment both before and during a project to attract supplemental state/federal funding. In fact, the state transportation funds are so constrained that its administrators have not only canceled all promised local funding (STIP), for the next two years, but are also retracting funds already promised to our county.

Under current and foreseeable future funding, even if all of the proposed ½ cent sales tax proceeds of about \$450million were dedicated to Highway 1 widening, our County could do little more than build auxiliary lanes to improve Highway 1 over the next thirty years – and to do that would still require state and/or federal road funds. (The proposed funding measure does allocate about 25% of total funding to completion of three auxiliary lanes.) Without a transformational change in state/national transportation funding there are no foreseeable resources sufficient to construct a third (HOV) lane in addition to the completion of the auxiliary lanes.

What will our transportation needs be in 30 years? AMBAG's 20-year projections (to 2035) estimate the county population will increase 15% -- another 35,000 residents. Just as compelling are AMBAG's 20-year job projections that estimate an increase of 20,917 jobs – 19% growth. This does not bode well for our already-impacted Highway 1.

Our “north-south” transportation problems are compounded by housing prices. Most of the housing affordable to service workers – retailers, tourism, teachers, law enforcement, health-care staff, etc. – is in mid- and south-county. Much of the employment is in north-county. It also seems likely that the number of in-commuters, especially from north Monterey County will continue to grow, further straining Highway 1.

Is commute-rail an answer to this problem? The prudent response is, “We don't know yet.” That is certainly what the rail study recently completed for the SCCRTC suggested. In fact, this has been the answer in virtually every study and plan regarding the rail line. But each of those studies has provided encouragement to hold on to the rail option.

Each of these studies has incrementally developed and focused our thinking about our economically-viable rail options, especially as traffic conditions continue to worsen, land becomes more valuable, and travel time and predictability remains a high priority for individuals and businesses.

However, as the state has shifted funding away from capacity-increasing highway projects in favor of transportation system preservation and transportation efficiencies (particularly including rail projects), the likelihood of improving transportation capacity in Santa Cruz County may well shift to rail.

What is next? We assume more market analysis matching demographic and economic needs with possible rail opportunities; more detailed analysis of costs and operations economics; updated information about emerging quiet and clean rail vehicle technologies; planning regarding linkage of the rail to related transportation systems such as Metro, bicycle and pedestrian travel, and automobiles; and, system requirements including infrastructure such as stations and parking. In short the details necessary for an effective business plan.

SCCRTC will also be monitoring the success of other smaller-population-area rail investments and the direction and pace of invention and improvement in rail and other “fixed-guideway” systems especially regarding smaller electric self-propelled vehicles rather than larger diesel engine driven systems.

So, while we don't yet know what such a rail transit system would look like, we can certainly foresee the risks of abandoning our local rail opportunity. There are only two relatively direct, unimpeded transportation right-of-ways connecting Santa Cruz and Watsonville – Highway 1 and the rail line.

The cost of creating another right-of-way through eminent domain processes is both politically unthinkable and economically beyond our means. Given increases in the cost of land, even the relatively limited land acquisitions necessary to widen Highway 1 beyond auxiliary lane widths, may already be beyond our financial reach.

Transportation demand will continue to increase as California's coastal population continues to grow.

Perhaps, funding for significant expansion of Highway 1 will become available in the future. Perhaps “personal rapid transit” systems will become feasible. Perhaps work patterns will shift to home-office concentration reducing commute traffic. Perhaps other solutions will save us. Perhaps... and, perhaps not.

Those who would remove the rail are asking Santa Cruz County residents to go “all in” on a hand that won’t be dealt to us for at least a decade. This makes no sense. History has shown us that once it’s gone, it’s gone forever. Local examples include the railway over the hill connecting Santa Cruz to the Bay Area or the railway formerly in the Window to the Bay in Monterey.

To fail to take prudent steps to preserve existing rail assets and explore this transportation option would be, simply, foolish. Our economic vitality and our quality of life depend upon efficient, effective and reliable transportation. Rail is likely an important element of that system and, at a minimum, an option we can’t risk abandoning today.

*If SCCRTC did an about-face on retaining the rail bed they would have to modify these agreements. This would necessarily begin in an EIR and then expensive and likely-lengthy negotiations with no guaranty of success.