

County loses its train of thought on transportation issue

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SOUTHERN PACIFIC RAILROAD closed the popular Los Gatos to Santa Cruz line in 1940, detouring the Suntan Special to Gilroy to enter Santa Cruz from the south. It ended the Suntan Special after 1959 despite high ridership.

Since then, traffic congestion has forced officials to consider increasing Highway 17's capacity or providing transportation alternatives to reduce the number of highway vehicles. Traffic is hard on a town designed as a pedestrian community, where visitors once could arrive by steamship or train with numerous transportation options available from the main depot.

In 1971 the state sought to turn Highway 17 into a Super Highway. The plan was to straighten the road and widen it to 11 lanes: six (expandable to eight) lanes for traffic, plus a median and two shoulders. Massive new cuts through the mountains would measure 700 feet wide at the top. The Super Highway found critics on both sides of the hill.

Lockheed Sunnyvale issued in 1971 a 20-page preliminary report, "Alternatives to Highway 17," advocating restoration of the Suntan Special's mountain rail line. It said 37½ percent of the 26-mile line was still in use — 12 miles of Southern Pacific tracks from the beach to Olympia. About a quarter of the line could be easily repaired or rebuilt, such as the Laurel Canyon trackbed being used as a road. Another quarter needed new construction, with a new line around Glenwood and into Los Gatos. The condition of the tunnels was unknown, for while three still had intact interiors, the tunnel at Zayante had become the Atomic Vaults.

Lockheed proposed forming a Santa Cruz-Santa Clara county transit district for federal funding, making the line operational in three years for \$50 million. This was low, compared to the \$300 million projected to widen Highway 17 (more to replace all overpasses). Railroad author Rick Hamman said a mile of six-lane freeway cov-



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ers 52 acres, while a mile of rail line only needs seven acres and can serve more passengers.

The report received serious consideration, yet failed to halt the state's Super Highway plan. So several thousand county residents lobbied to have Highway 17 removed from the state freeway system, succeeding in 1974. By then, some saw reviving the Suntan Special as a good alternative to cars. Others feared a high-speed commuter rail would merely turn Santa Cruz County into a bedroom community, favoring slower excursion rail only.

But by 1993, some earlier opponents felt circumstances had changed with development safeguards in place, and were willing to re-examine a mountain com-

muter rail. While the study was controversial, its 10-15 year construction schedule to replace missing track reinforced the value of retaining existing county rail lines.

The County Regional Transportation Commission has been collecting information for a county transportation strategy (due out in a few months). In 1996, this included demonstration runs of several light-rail vehicles and a weekend revival of the Suntan Special.

Some options suggested to restore weekend Suntan Special runs in the summer include having Union Pacific lease its line to a local transit authority; or getting the county to buy the line and then leasing it out. Both Amtrak and CalTrain expressed enthusiasm.

Some trackside residents concerned about noise and safety belong to a group called RAILS to oppose any passenger trains in the county. Lloyd Collins on the 1996 Suntan Special said, "Did someone think buying a low-priced home beside the railroad tracks would come without trains? We're not

obliged to go out of business because they moved next door." Others worried \$11 million in rail improvement funds would be lost by ignoring county rail.

We can estimate every 10-car, 500-passenger train is replaced with a mile of cars (325 cars). Replacement bus service adds a diesel engine to every 20 to 40 train passengers, replacing the same train with 13 to 25 buses. It takes up to three diesel trucks to replace each freight car on a train, so a 30-car freight train is replaced with a mile of 90 cargo trucks. So eliminating a rail yard serving seven 10-car passenger trains and 30 cars of freight replaces it with eight miles of traffic, and 10 diesel train engines are replaced with 2,275 cars and 90 diesel trucks, looking for 14 acres of parking.

Redevelopment of the 1894 Washington St. depot site (by Lighthouse Liquors) at first proposed removing rail services for housing. But the updated Beach Area Master Plan accepted in concept a revival of the railyard's historic

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 "Multi-Modal Transit Hub," recalling when rail, trolley, hotel shuttles, bike rentals and taxis made it easy to visit Santa Cruz without a car. However many interests are vying for this site, such as three museums, two parks, two passenger lines, not to mention freight passing through from two lines, and transit services. Museum space could be upstairs in a new, enlarged depot building. But this is the last site in the city that can provide adequate parking and sidings for a viable rail revival.

On Feb. 23, People Power and the Environmental Council will show "Taken For A Ride," the destruction of interurban rail, with a history talk following. It starts at 6:30 p.m. at Patagonia, 415 River St., donations appreciated.

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