

Santa Cruz Railroading at a Crossroads

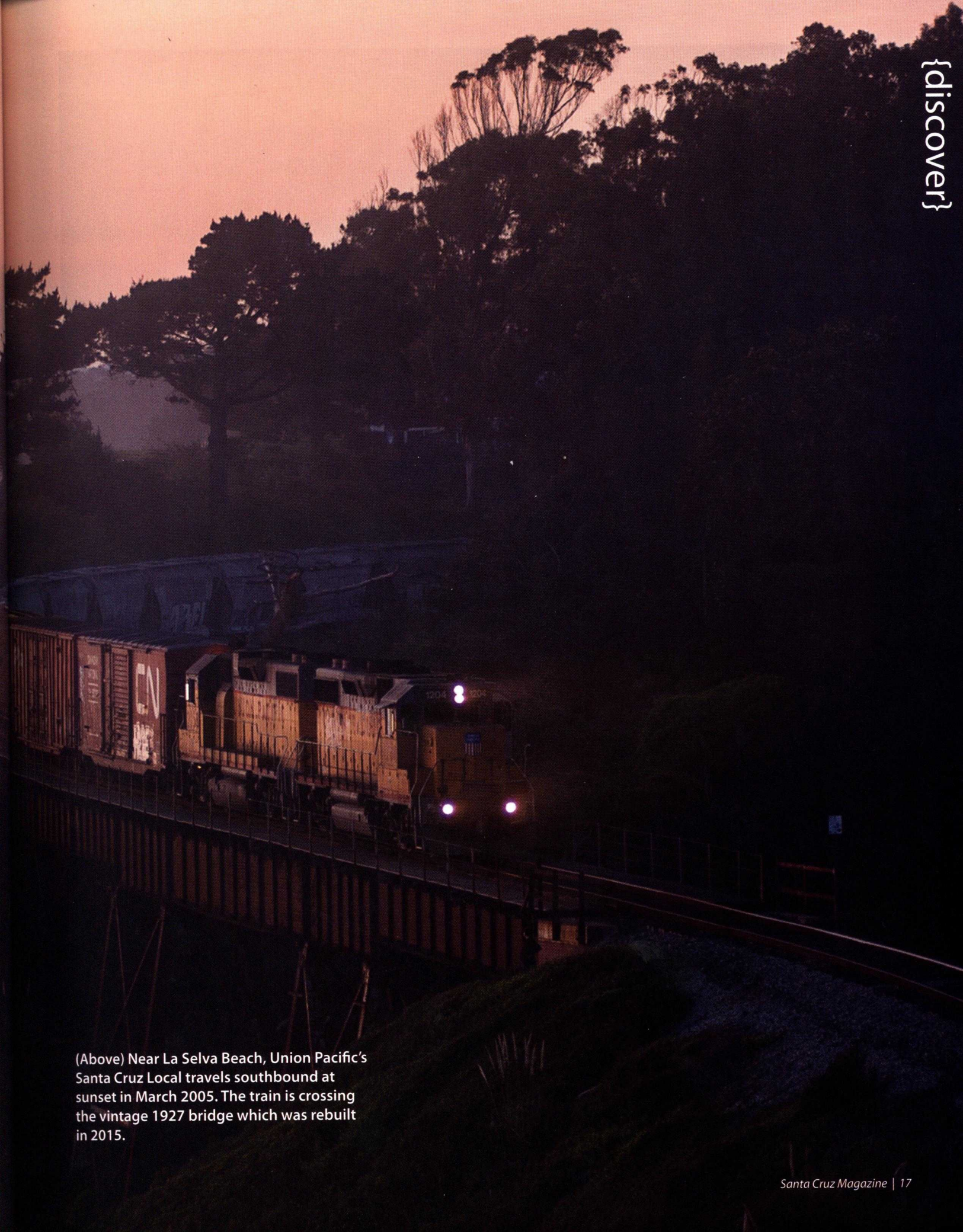
Exploring the options for Santa Cruz's rail line

By Elrond Lawrence

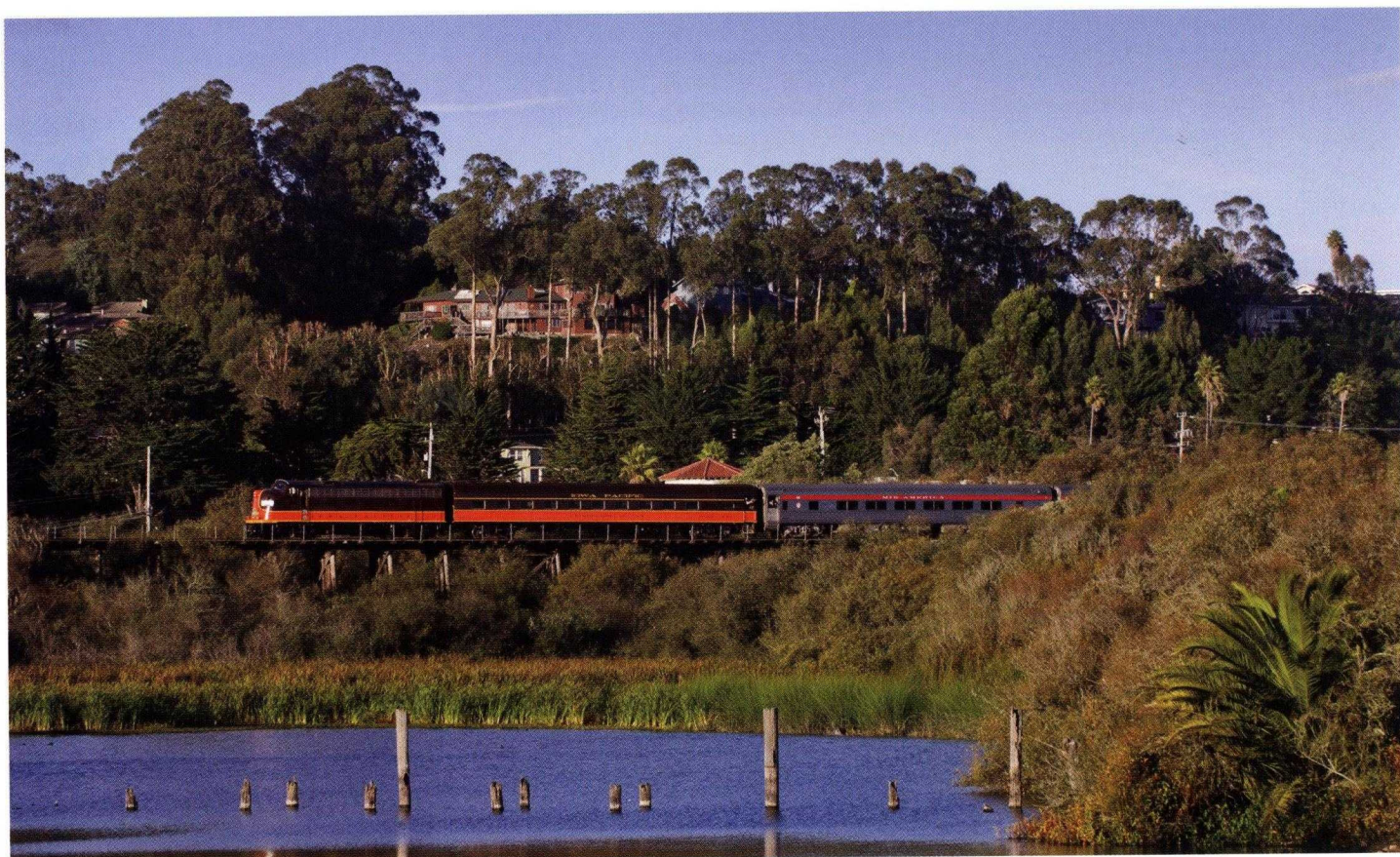
From steam-powered lumber trains to the "Santan Special," Santa Cruz County has enjoyed a rich and colorful railroad history since 1876, when the rails put Santa Cruz on the map and established the region as a hot market for lumber, agriculture, and tourism.

Like tentacles, the earliest rail lines stretched from Santa Cruz south to Watsonville, north to Davenport, and east to San Jose. Built by smaller pioneering railroads — the startups of their time — the small rail lines were quickly absorbed by the powerful Southern Pacific Railroad, which itself fell to the mighty Union Pacific at the close of the 20th century. Today, Roaring Camp Railroads carries tourists and locals between Felton and the Santa Cruz Boardwalk; Union Pacific abandoned its 32-mile route to Davenport and is now operated by the Santa Cruz & Monterey Bay Railway.

PHOTOGRAPHS ELROND LAWRENCE



(Above) Near La Selva Beach, Union Pacific's Santa Cruz Local travels southbound at sunset in March 2005. The train is crossing the vintage 1927 bridge which was rebuilt in 2015.



(Above) The Santa Cruz & Monterey Railway makes its 2012 debut trip near Antonelli Pond in Santa Cruz.

The coastal line dates back to 1873, when the Santa Cruz Railroad began building a narrow-gauge railroad from Pajaro (near Watsonville) to Santa Cruz, with plans to extend the line north to Davenport. On May 7, 1876, the dream was realized when the first passenger train steamed from Pajaro to Watsonville, Aptos, Camp Capitola, and finally Santa Cruz. By the end of its first year, the Santa Cruz Railroad had expanded its equipment roster and was running two daily mixed passenger and freight trains. The Santa Cruz and Felton Railroad was shipping timber from Felton to the SCRR, where it was handed off to Southern Pacific at Pajaro. Southern Pacific ultimately gained control of the Santa Cruz line and converted it to broad gauge in late 1883.

In August 1907, the Coast Line Railroad completed its northern route from Santa Cruz to Davenport, home to the new Santa Cruz Portland Cement Company. Despite the presence of early competitors — the Ocean Shore Railroad and the South Pacific Coast Railroad from San Jose to Santa Cruz via Felton — the route from Pajaro to Davenport survived and thrived under Southern Pacific ownership. When the rail company closed its route to San Jose via Felton (Roaring Camp operates

part of that line today), the popular “Suntan Special” excursions from San Francisco were moved to the Watsonville route until the last run in 1959.

Even after Union Pacific merged with Southern Pacific in 1996, it continued freight service to the Cemex cement plant in Davenport. But faced with the closure of the plant and the loss of the line’s biggest customer, Union Pacific ran its last train to Santa Cruz in 2009 and sold the line to the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (SCCRTC) in October 2012. The commission chose Iowa Pacific Holdings to become the new common carrier, operating through the newly-incorporated Santa Cruz & Monterey Bay Railway.

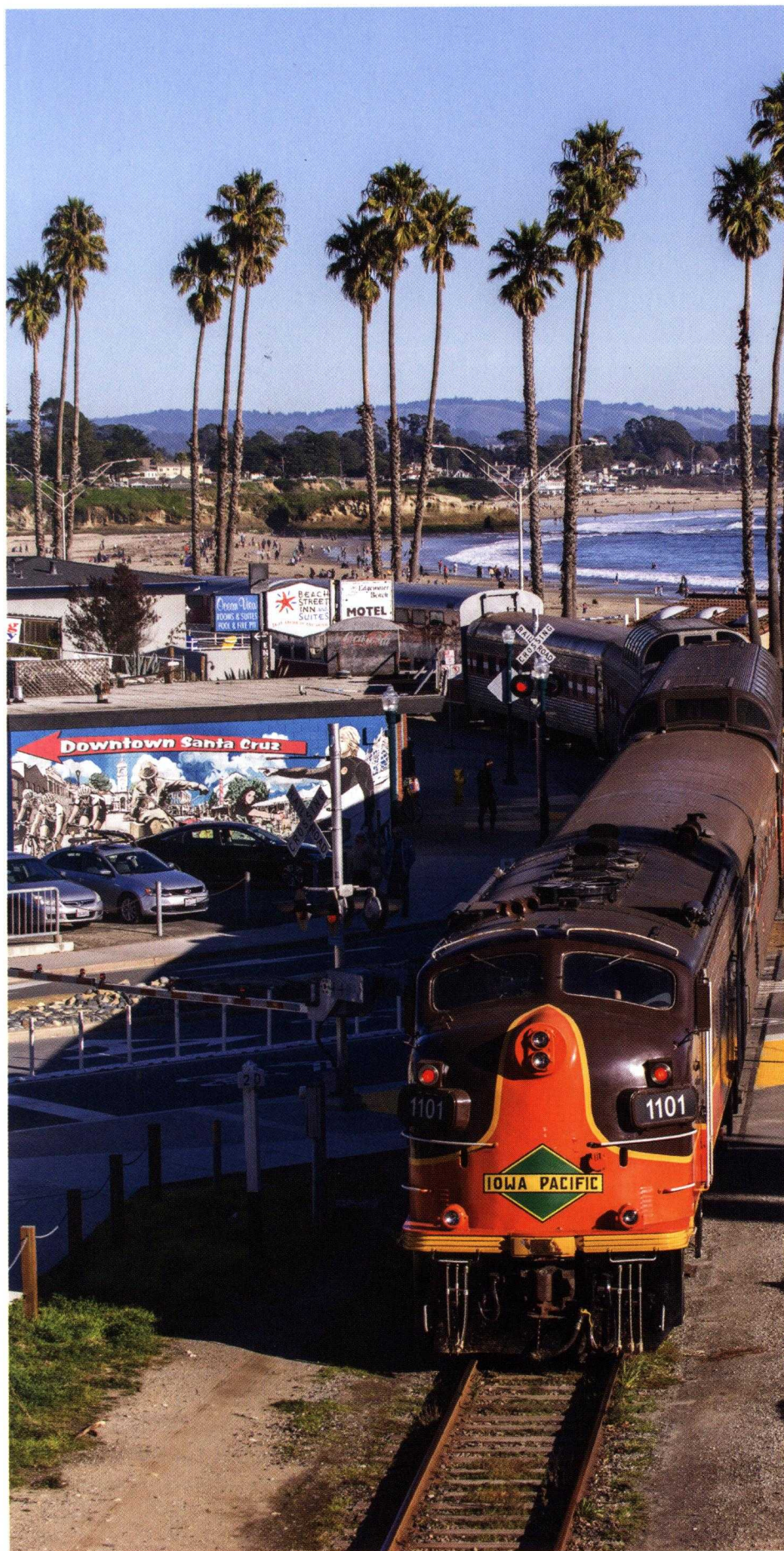
In November 2012, rain drenched the railway’s splashy debut as a colorful ribbon-cutting passenger train rolled from Watsonville to Santa Cruz. Huge crowds braved the weather to greet the train, led by two streamlined “F-unit” locomotives. Upon reaching Santa Cruz, the skies cleared and free round-trip excursions were offered to Wilder Ranch and back. Spirits were high as the new railway kicked off regular operations with a popular “Train to Christmas Town” that ran through December. At the same time, freight

operations began in the Watsonville area. Railway officials announced ambitious plans, including an eventual dinner train and regular passenger service that would ease traffic congestion along the Highway 1 corridor.

While freight business increased in Watsonville, however, an antiquated rail trestle at La Selva Beach was declared unsafe and the railroad was severed. Work began in 2014 to replace the 1927 bridge and the next two holiday trains ran out of Watsonville through Harkins Slough. A new trestle opened to a cheering crowd in February of 2015 as a vintage streamliner crossed the rebuilt span. Finally, the line was re-opened and holiday trains returned to Santa Cruz.

Fast forward to today, and the dreams of 2012 are in limbo. Flooding in January and February 2017 washed out a portion of the line in the Gallighan Slough area, so this year’s holiday train has been cancelled. Once again, much of the 32-mile line can’t be accessed. Worse, Iowa Pacific is now more than \$53,000 in debt to the transportation commission,

(Next page) Leaving the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk along Beach Street, the Polar Express heads north.



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(Above) In 2013, with the Santa Cruz Mountains as backdrop, "The Train to Christmas Town" crosses Watsonville's Harkins Slough.

with outstanding bills dating to March. The debts are unpaid royalties from the 2016 holiday train that carried the "Polar Express" name, and fees for the storage of rail cars in Watsonville.

"We don't know fully what the situation is with Iowa Pacific," said Luis Mendez, deputy director of the commission. "There were high hopes and promises made." The commission "went through a rigorous process of selecting a rail operator and Iowa Pacific looked good," he added. "They had the financial resources to do what they said they could do. Things have obviously changed for them."

Iowa Pacific is in the midst of a ten-year contract with SCCRTC to operate the line, according to Kevin Busath, Iowa Pacific's vice president of strategic planning.

"We intend to honor that contract," said Busath, who noted that the company sees "substantial potential for tourist-oriented rail service," but that is a "long-term project."

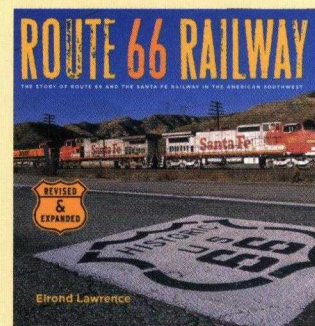
If Iowa Pacific can't solve its financial problems, Mendez says that the commission has already been contacted by "five or six" other rail operators who are interested. Short term, SCCRTC is working to repair the wash-out damage, although Mendez notes that a

timeline for completion is not set.

The commission has also begun a Unified Corridor Study to determine the best options – or combination of options – to meet the transportation needs of Santa Cruz County residents. Highway 1, a surface street route, and the rail corridor are existing parallel options. Also moving forward is the Santa Cruz County Rail & Trail project, designed to provide a car-free, scenic route for biking, walking, and wheelchair use alongside the coastal rail line. Funding is largely secured, and 13 of the planned 32 miles are currently being developed. The nonprofit Friends of the Rail & Trail, working in partnership with SCCRTC, hope to see the entire trail built within 10 years.

Separately, a small group of activists has called for removing the entire rail line and replacing it with a trail. However, Mendez points to larger rail projects at the statewide level, such as expanded passenger service to Salinas via Pajaro and the high-speed rail project that would stop in Gilroy – which would create vital connections to the local rail line. "It's short-sighted to eliminate a potential travel corridor for the community," he adds.

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