

Hwy. 17 rail plan loses steam

By DENISE FRANKLIN
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Supervisor Fred Keeley compares a future Highway 17 to the Golden Gate Bridge — without the toll booths.

Friday, sitting as a member of a joint board of Santa Clara and Santa Cruz county officials who are looking into a rail line over the Highway 17 corridor, Keeley will recommend against any further study of rail service.

Instead, the San Lorenzo Valley supervisor prefers expanded bus service between Santa Cruz and Santa Clara counties and construction of truck climbing lanes to ease congestion on the mountainous four-lane highway.

He's against building a toll plaza and charging up to \$8 one way to help pay for a railroad. Such a system was suggested as one way to pay for a rail system in a \$100,000 study commissioned by both counties.

"Setting aside the toll booth side of this, which I do not support, we have a situation like San Francisco and Marin where people live in one county and work in another," Keeley said. "They have the Golden Gate Bridge; we have Highway 17.

"When they decided to increase the capacity of the bridge, they decided to go into the bus and ferry busi-

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— Supervisor Fred Keeley

ness.

"Rather than widening Highway 17, we can expand the bus system and build those truck climbing lanes to achieve much less congestion and air pollution and increase the efficiency. We can do a lot for our community at very little cost."

The rail study by De Leuw, Cather & Co. estimated a rail line would cost up to \$642 million to build and up to \$9.6 million a year to operate to carry 4,360 passengers back and forth daily.

But expanded bus service and truck climbing lanes also will cost money — money that is dwindling as the state and federal governments continue cutting back.

Expanded bus service will require purchasing additional buses and building park and ride lots, according to Scott Galloway, general manager of the Santa Cruz County Metropolitan Transit District.

Fares collected by the existing over-the-hill bus ser-

vice between Santa Cruz and downtown San Jose pay for half its cost, Galloway said. The Metro and Santa Clara County Transit jointly operate the service through a contract with West Valley Charter.

The transit district is struggling for funds, Galloway said. The system receives a half-cent from the local sales tax and some federal and state funds, all which have dropped in recent years. It also gets some sales tax dollars through the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission.

And a mile-long stretch of a truck climbing lane would cost \$5 million, according to Linda Wilshusen of the Regional Transportation Commission. The state Department of Transportation puts such lanes at the bottom of its priority list, Wilshusen said.

But Keeley is optimistic funding can be found. He called for greater lobbying of the state Legislature, more help from area legislative representatives, and creative ways of financing.

For example, he noted, the two counties could look into the possibility of getting federal congestion pricing funds. Up to \$15 million is available for projects that decrease congestion. Local communities are required to put up 20 percent of the cost.

Keeley is not alone in his objection to a rail line. A subcommittee, made up of Santa Cruz and Santa Clara county transportation officials, is recommending to the joint board Friday that the studies should end.

The meeting is at 7 p.m. at the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors chamber, 701 Ocean St., Santa Cruz.



Keeley