

County, train company ink deal

Contract allows
transportation agency
to qualify for rail
acquisition funds

By KURTIS ALEXANDER

kalexander@santacruzsentinel.com

SANTA CRUZ — County transportation leaders Thursday reached another milestone in their long-running effort to buy Union Pacific's 32-mile coastal rail line.

The Regional Transportation Commission inked a deal with Sierra Northern Railway to run tourist trains on the line, a service required of the county to get state money to make the rail purchase.

"There's a lot of good things that can come of this," said county Supervisor and Transportation Commissioner Tony Campos, who envisions a recreational trail along the tracks and eventually expanded passenger service.

"One day you'll see people catching a train to go to Cabrillo College or come up from Watsonville," he said.

The agreement reached Thursday calls on Sierra Northern to start a tourist train between Santa Cruz and Davenport as well as manage freight service and perform upkeep of the line once the county owns it. The Woodland-based company is already handling freight and maintenance for Union Pacific.

Thursday's agreement also means the Regional Transportation Commission has met requirements for \$10.2 million of state funding. Next month, the California Transportation Commission is expected to allocate the money, which is earmarked specifically for train projects and, in this case, for the county's \$14.2 million rail purchase.

The balance of the rail cost is expected to come from another pot of state funds.

"We've been waiting a long time for this," said Bruce Sawhill, chairman of Friends of the Rail Trail, which supports the county's vision of a trail along the line.

Sawhill, like others who attended Thursday's special session of the Regional Transportation Commission, was cautious in his optimism, however. Pursuit of the publicly owned rail line has been marked by twists and turns and more than a decade of effort.

"When the check clears, that's

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when we'll have the party," Sawhill said.

Even this week's deal with Sierra Northern presented a potential disaster. The two parties struggled to reach an agreement, taking months longer than expected. Meanwhile, the county's Nov. 3

deadline to get a contract to the state for a train was rapidly approaching.

The biggest hang-up in agreeing to the 10-year deal was whether other railroad companies could run tourist trains on the line and under what conditions. The Regional Transportation Commission agreed to give Sierra Northern exclusivity for three years, though the county retains some discretion.

Felton-based Roaring Camp Railroad can continue its train between the Boardwalk and San Lorenzo Valley.

While the state funds for the rail purchase are scheduled to be allocated next month, when they'll be sent out remains a function of the state's uncertain finances.

The commission's vote Thursday to sign a contract with Sierra Northern was 10 to 2.

Cliff Walters, general man-

ager of Sierra Northern, applauded the decision.

"There's so many incredible possibilities with this (rail) corridor," Walters said.

Sierra Northern said a pilot train might be running from near the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf to Four Mile Beach as soon as May.

The details of the long-term service will be determined by the company at a later point.