

Gondolas on the Horizon

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12-23-87 SUN

The vision of small, gondola-like cabins floating up the Pogonip loaded with students and flying down to the beach crowded with tourists is probably just a dream, according to Scott Galloway, Santa Cruz Transit District general manager. However, bigger suspended "cable buses," holding about 20 passengers each, remain one of the many possible transit systems in Santa Cruz's future.

The present traffic shambles on Mission Street, the Boardwalk crowds in summer and the impending university enrollment increase prompted the county in 1985 to take advantage of federal funding available to study mass transit alternatives.

The Concept Feasibility Study, completed in 1986, was the first phase of three and looked at available fixed guideway technologies and possible routes in the county. Fixed guideway is a bureaucratic term referring to any transit running on tracks like a traditional train, a light rail system (San Jose), BART, a monorail (Disneyland), or pulled by cable like a peplemover, gondola or trolley.

The gondola was just one idea kicked around by consultant Lea Elliot McGean, from Washington, D.C. But the idea not only received favorable press and raised eyebrows by people who wondered if it was too quaint to be feasible, but also induced a university class to focus on the vision for a research project.

Luke Adams, Stevenson college apprentice teacher, says he's seen

gondola systems work as mass transit in Morgantown, West Virginia, and believes the county administrators lack the imagination necessary to accommodate the growing traffic problems.

The threat of an eastern access to the university through the Pogonip, protected by the city only until 1990, looms before environmentalists, but Adams says his interest in the gondolas is more economic than environmental.

A turnpike through the Pogonip "would require extensive grading," Adams said. "The road would have to twist and turn like a snake, winding its way through. It would cost about two or three times as much as a gondola," which he estimates would cost \$72 million.

Including the cost of road construction, "which would encourage growth," Adams said that a highway would necessitate improvements on connecting roads and additional parking spaces on campus. "It's economic stupidity to build a road that's going to cost so much more."

Although the traffic congestion promises to worsen, Galloway says so far the city has only committed to completing the three studies, which should result in either the construction of an entirely new transit system or an upgraded bus system.

The second phase, also conducted by McGean, is presently looking at alignments, ridership and funding sources. It should be completed in spring. County Supervisor and Trans-

portation Commissioner Joe Cucchiara said that this is the phase in which all the questions are posed and that it's too early for answers.

The most likely corridors will run from the university through downtown to the beach in Santa Cruz because these pose a "perfect match" for students and tourists who ride at different times of the day. Peripheral corridors, which could extend to Watsonville, Felton and Davenport, aren't expected to draw enough passengers to be cost effective at the start.

One of the obvious benefits to a light rail or cable system, besides its relatively inexpensive cost of construction, is its ability to accommodate passenger increases at a low cost. Presently, the county spends about \$2 million each year on buses around the university alone. In order to double the forces to handle increased enrollment, the cost would have to double as well. But once a guideway is constructed, it is much less expensive, according to Galloway, to increase the passenger load.

"A fixed guideway could be a wonderful economic benefit to the community," Galloway said. "We're trying to see if we have a concept here that's worth being fully developed."

Phase three, scheduled to begin sometime after October, 1988, will receive two years of outside funding, but could be completed before then. It includes a draft environmental impact report and an impact analysis. •