

A Look At Bus Problem —And What New Transit Plan Would Accomplish

This is the first in a series of three articles examining the need for formation of a transit district in the Santa Cruz area.

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Santa Cruz, Capitola and the county board of supervisors all have now tentatively agreed to the terms and language of a state legislature bill which would enable the formation of a transit district in Santa Cruz and the surrounding area.

It appears, then, that voters in the not too distant future will be faced with the decision of whether or not to approve the district.

This series of articles will represent an effort to inform the voting public of what, precisely, a transit district is, why it is necessary if Santa Cruz is to have continued commuter transit service, and what it will cost.

In simplest terms, the district is necessary because people don't ride buses as much as they used to. So few ride them, in fact, that bus systems can no longer be operated by private owners, except in certain rare instances, on a profitable basis.

The number of persons riding municipal buses has declined steadily since the days of World War II. A bus committee studying the local problem submitted a report which read, "... bus lines nationally are losing passengers at a rate of 6 per cent per year, and the rate of decline is not expected to change.

"As a result, 199 private bus lines have gone out of business in the past decade and 270 were purchased by public bodies. If a community wishes to continue a transit operation that is operating at a deficit, it

must be prepared to subsidize the system."

Santa Cruz, Capitola and the county are doing just that right now to the tune of \$1000 per month. The money goes to the existing bus system owned by Chester Smith, since Smith has shown that he would have to operate at a deficit without it.

Santa Cruz pays \$550, the county \$350, and Capitola \$100. These figures are based on the fact that the buses travel 299 miles each day in this city, 99 miles in the county and 31 miles in Capitola.

But a report prepared by the Santa Cruz city staff indicates that a subsidy alone is not a good long range solution to the problem.

It precludes the use of federal funds in the project, takes money out of the sponsoring agencies' general funds, and provides for no control over the system's operation.

Why bother, then, if nobody wants to ride the buses anyway?

The fact is, that, like it or not, a great many persons have no other choice. A Public Utilities Commission study shows that these persons, primarily the elderly and low income groups, are the largest users of the buses.

In fact, the PUC noted, the decline in number of riders may not continue in Santa Cruz as it has across the country because of this city's large proportion of retired persons.

The PUC survey shows that approximately 1500 to 2000 persons use the buses in Santa Cruz — about 550 per day. The average passenger rides the bus two times a week.

Tomorrow's article will detail a number of the alternate procedures open to Santa Cruz in maintaining a commuter transit system.