

Traffic plan flops

Problems spike recommendations

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SANTA CRUZ — A recommendation to build a bus-bikeway-rail from system proved so unpopular among transportation officials that they decided not to air the proposal and other alternative plans in public — at least not yet.

The Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission voted Thursday to postpone some 28 meetings scheduled to be held over the next several months to gather public comment on its "Major Transportation Investment Study."

Instead, commissioners voted 7-3 to ask the Rail Oversight Committee for recommendations for a more feasible, scaled down plan to relieve traffic congestion.

"The commission does not want to go to the public with a plan we are unhappy with," said Mardi Wormhoudt, Santa Cruz County Supervisor who sits on the commission.

Consultants completing a three-year analysis of ways to relieve traffic congestion between Santa Cruz and Watsonville had recommended a combined bus and bikeway between Park Avenue in Capitola and Natural Bridges weekend train service along the existing Union Pacific rail line between Santa Cruz and San Jose, via the rail line through Pajaro and Gilroy.

The busway system would not be in operation until 2006. But, in the near term, the consultants propose that recreational rail service be test marketed and that preliminary engineering and environmental studies be done for the busway.

Consultants said they picked it because it would provide a flexible new means of east-west travel as an alternative to Highway 1 and other congested parallel local roads. It also is in keeping with the region's commitment to alternatives to automobile travel, said consultants.

And, unlike the widening of Highway 1 or commuter train service, consultants concluded, the busway-weekend rail system is financially feasible with a quarter-cent sales tax increase.

They acknowledged however, that their recommendation has problems: There is no financially feasible way to do it without an increase in sales taxes. Even then, it was not going to have much effect on traffic congestion, and was the least cost efficient of eight alternatives studied.

Consultant Jeff Damon, who helped prepare the \$790,000 study, admitted that his recommendation had been met with dislike by just about everyone. The commissioners readily agreed.

Wormhoudt said Damon was "brave" even to recommend a solution that had the "worst cost ratio to take people where they don't want to go at the highest cost per rider."

Nor were two-thirds of the voters likely to approve a sales tax increase for "where you're saying it's the best of bad alternatives," said Wormhoudt.

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"I feel like Alice in Wonderland," said Celia Scott, Santa Cruz City Council member and an alternate on the commission. "Every alternate is too expensive, not going to solve

the problem, and yet we're going to spend two months talking about it."

Why the bike-busway-rail option was even recommended was "mystifying to most of us," said Scott Kennedy, a commission and Santa Cruz City Council member.

An alternative to add bus and car-pool lanes on Highway 1 was not recommended by the consultants, who said it would cost \$280 million and \$32 million a year to maintain.

A half-cent increase in the sales tax wouldn't pay it.