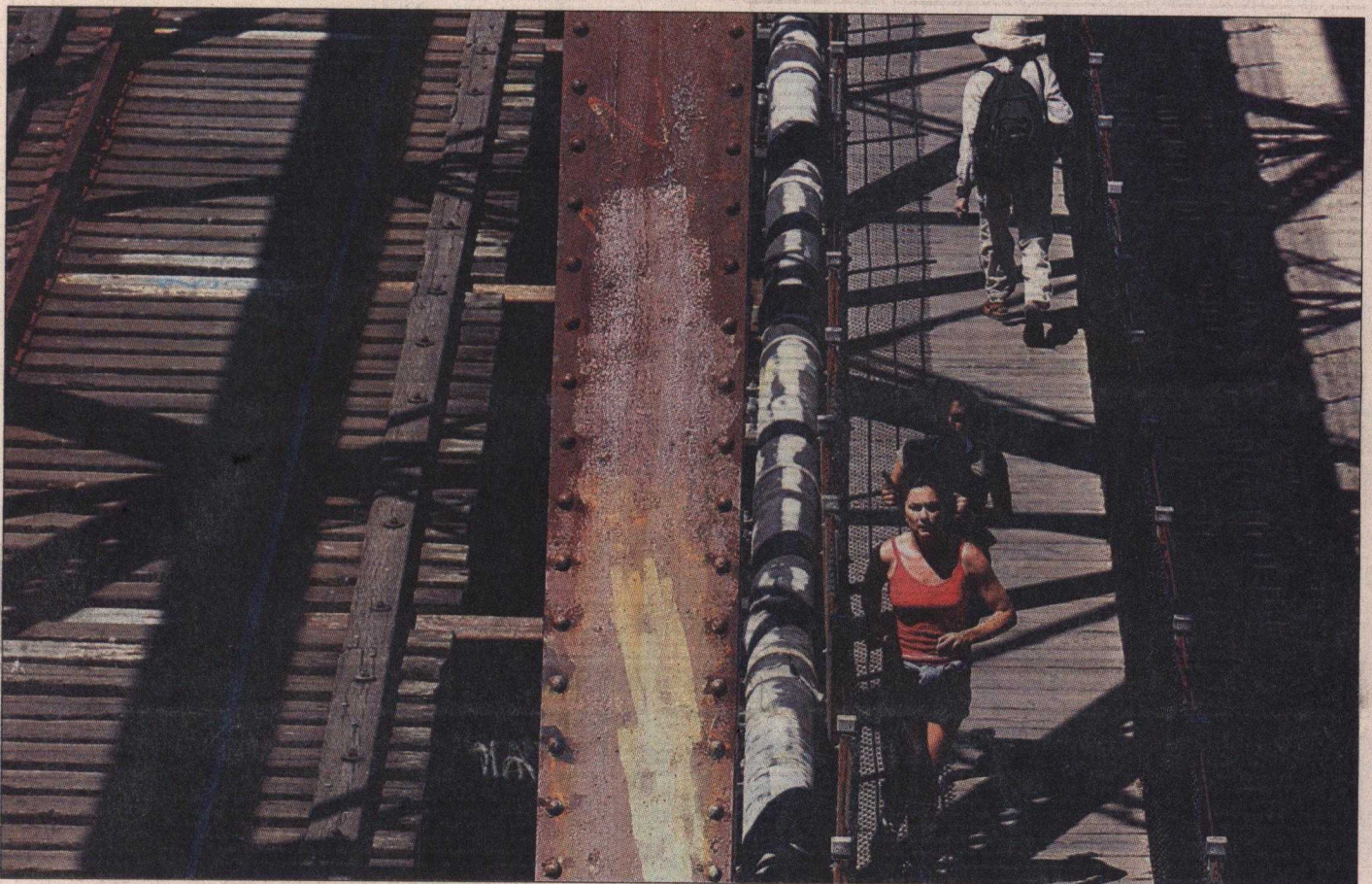


State clears way for rail purchase



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL FILE

A Union Pacific train travels through La Selva Beach as it heads south through Santa Cruz County toward Pajaro in 2009.



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

The San Lorenzo River trestle is a popular pedestrian and cyclist option for getting across town.

California Transportation Commission approves \$10.2 million for long-delayed project

By J.M. BROWN

Transportation - 2000
jbrown@santacruzsentinel.com

SACRAMENTO — The California Transportation Commission unanimously approved the Santa Cruz Branch Line project Wednesday, agreeing to grant \$10.2 million for the long-delayed acquisition of 32 miles of rail line from Watsonville to Davenport.

Earning the commission's approval to acquire the rail line for eventual passenger and recreational service was especially critical Wednesday because Proposition 116 funds would have expired at the end of the day. With the new fis-

PROJECT DETAILS SANTA CRUZ BRANCH LINE

For more information about the Santa Cruz Branch Line or other projects, visit the Regional Transportation Commission's website at sccrtc.org or call 460-3200.

cal year starting today, the Legislature could have grabbed the money for other transportation projects.

"It was a nail-biter," said Bruce Sawhill, who was among about 20 coun-

ty residents who traveled to Sacramento by Amtrak train to attend the hearing. "This is just the beginning. There is a lot more yet to happen."

The county's Regional Transportation Commission overcame a push from the state panel's staff to delay the vote until several conditions are met. The commission wants the RTC to sign a passenger service agreement with Sierra Northern Railway, further document the appraised value of the rail line, and pass resolutions to initiate further recreational use and continue freight service.

RAIL

Continued from A1

County officials assured state commissioners that they are close to reaching a deal with Sierra Northern and that they would meet the other conditions by early August, in time for the commission's Aug. 11 meeting. That was good enough for Commissioner Carl Guardino, president and CEO of the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, who made the motion to approve funding.

During a break in the proceedings, the Los Gatos resident said he was familiar with the project's nine-year history and felt it was important to move forward before the eligibility for the money for Proposition 116, a rail and mass transit grant program passed by voters in 1990, reached its 20-year expiration date.

Guardino said he believes buying the rail line and establishing passenger service are strong economic and environmental investments that will provide a real alternative to moving people and goods along traffic-choked Highway 1.

"You have to start somewhere," Guardino said. "This is a viable start that is economically feasible."

It's unclear when exactly the RTC will get the Proposition 116 money if it meets all the requirements by Aug. 11. The money is set aside, but the state budget battle over how to reduce a \$19 billion state deficit could affect the availability of transportation funding.

The \$10.2 million in Proposition 116

funds represents the balance of \$11 million originally targeted for Santa Cruz County transportation projects, \$800,000 of which has already been allocated for costs associated with working to acquire the rail line from Union Pacific.

The total estimated cost of the project is \$23.5 million, which includes the \$14.2 million rail line purchase, improvement costs and pre-construction expenses. In addition to the Proposition 116 funds, the RTC will receive \$10 million in State Transportation Improvement Program funds set aside a decade ago, \$1.5 million in federal funds and money from other sources.

The RTC's vice chairman, county Supervisor Mark Stone, said getting the state commission's support was critical even if it's uncertain exactly when the funding will materialize.

"This was a huge step," said Stone, one of several local officials to address the commission.

State Sen. Joe Simitian and Assemblyman Bill Monning sent last-minute letters to be read at the hearing in support of the project, and officials from the Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce and Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk also championed the plan.

No one spoke against it, but opponents have said they are worried the rail service will be a waste of money. Some have criticized the current proposal from Sierra Northern to run a dinner train from Santa Cruz to Davenport, even though supporters say the service is but a preview of the expanded passenger and recreational service to come.

Wearing white-and-blue striped railroad caps, county residents packed into two rows in the hearing room to stand in support of the project. Many are in favor of eventually adding a pedestrian or bicycle trail alongside the rail line, but officials were careful to let the state commissioners know they are focused on creating a passenger rail service.

Aware of the rail trail plans, Commissioner James Ghielmetti of Signature Properties in Pleasanton said, "Proposition 116 was meant for rail — not for bicycle trails and paths. I don't want a bait-and-switch going on to allocate the funds and buy this only to find out several years later that we don't have a rail project."

"We want to use this rail corridor as a rail corridor," Stone assured commissioners.

Because the county is hemmed in by the mountains and the ocean, RTC's executive director, George Dondero, told commissioners that, although highway expansion is under way in Santa Cruz County, "preserving this rail line would provide the only viable alternative to Highway 1."

Dondero said there are some federal funds set aside to cover the estimated \$500,000 cost of studying the inclusion of a trail along portions of the rail line — a trail that would link up with other Monterey Bay trails. After the study, the RTC would have to approve the installation of the trail network.

Sawhill, who chairs the Friends of the Rail Trail project, said the plans would "take a bunch of money and a bunch of political will, but we're willing to put in the time."