

# Officials on track to OK tourist train deal

*Transportation*  
 Agreement at special session today would  
 land county big money for rail purchase

By KURTIS ALEXANDER

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SANTA CRUZ — The Regional Transportation Commission has called a rare special session

today where county transportation leaders are expected to finalize an overdue plan for tourist trains on the North Coast.

The move is significant not

only because it means historically themed trains will run between Santa Cruz and Davenport as soon as next year, but it also qualifies the county for \$10.2 million of state funds for purchasing Union Pacific's 32-mile coastal rail line.

SEE TRAIN ON A2

10-14-10  
**IF YOU GO**

SPECIAL MEETING ON TRAINS

**WHEN:** 2:30 p.m. today

**WHERE:** Regional Transportation Commission, 1523 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz

**DETAILS:** www.sccrtc.org

## TRAIN

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"This is a very important step in our acquisition," said county Supervisor Ellen Pirie, who sits on the Regional Transportation Commission's governing board. "This [acquisition effort] has gone on a really long time. It's important for our transportation future."

County transportation leaders have long sought to buy the rail corridor between Davenport and Watsonville in hope of building a hiking and biking trail along the tracks as well as pursuing passenger train service.

Just this week, though, that effort appeared at risk.

The state money needed to purchase the line is contingent upon the county having a contract in place for passenger service by next month. However, plans for Woodland-based Sierra Northern Railway to run tourist trains on the line, which would allow the county to meet state requirements for passenger service, hadn't progressed as expected.

Last week, the Regional Transportation Commission offered a final plan for Sierra Northern to agree to, and Sierra Northern declined. Commission officials were left wondering whether they would meet the state's funding deadline.

The Regional Transportation Commission and Sierra Northern, however, have been in talks since, and both sides said Wednesday they had reached a new agreement. Today's special meeting will allow the commission's board to give the deal a final blessing — and just in time.

"We would like to get this [contract] done as quickly as possible so we can deliver and execute an agreement with the California Transportation Commission," said Luis Mendez, deputy director for the county Regional Transportation Commission, who scheduled today's session. "We want to give (the state) as much time as possible to make sure everything will be OK for our funding allocation."

The California Transportation Commission is scheduled to allocate the county \$10.2 million — from voter-

approved bonds earmarked for train projects — at its Nov. 3 meeting. The balance of the county's estimated \$14.2 million rail purchase price will come from another pool of state funds.

When the county will actually get the money, part of the state's budgeting process, remains up in the air, however.

The sticking point between the Regional Transportation Commission and Sierra Northern has long been whether other railroad companies should be allowed to run tourist trains on the line, and if so, under what terms.

The 10-year contract agreed to Wednesday gives Sierra Northern exclusive use of the line north of Santa Cruz for three years. In the city, however, where the line is now used by Felton-based Roaring Camp Railroad for an excursion train to the San Lorenzo Valley, the Regional Transportation Commission retains discretion.

Mike Hart, president and CEO of Sierra Northern's parent company Sierra Railroad Co., praised the new deal Wednesday for laying out a clear compromise.

"We wanted to know specifics, not generalities," he said. "Everybody will know in the future exactly what was agreed on."

In addition to running a tourist train, Sierra Northern will manage the line's freight service and maintain the tracks, which the company is currently doing for Union Pacific.

Details of the new tourist train service will be left to Sierra Northern. Company officials have said they'd like to run trains both to the Santa Cruz harbor and to the town of Davenport. Electric and diesel engines are being considered and the cars are expected to be modeled after historic trains.

The Regional Transportation Commission's board appears willing to sign off on the deal reached with Sierra Northern. A previous deal failed last week by just one vote, meaning only one more is needed to secure a contract.

"Staff feels like they've resolved the issues that I and the other board members had," said Pirie, who voted against last week's deal. "If that's the case, we should be ready to go."