

Aerial tram deemed best choice

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SANTA CRUZ — An innovative aerial tramway system still is the front-runner as Santa Cruz' first fixed guideway project, but whether the public will accept the idea may be another matter, according to a new report.

A just-released final report by consultants for the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District reinforces the draft report. It concludes that the \$26 million, 3½-mile-long aerial cable tramway system — proposed to glide above traffic around the beach, downtown and UC Santa Cruz areas — was the "highest-scoring alternative." The consultants studied five types of fixed guideways, including monorail and light rail.

A public review period on the two-inch-thick report has now begun. The Transit Board is not expected to decide whether to move forward to the next step until sometime this summer, said Transit District General Manager Scott Galloway.

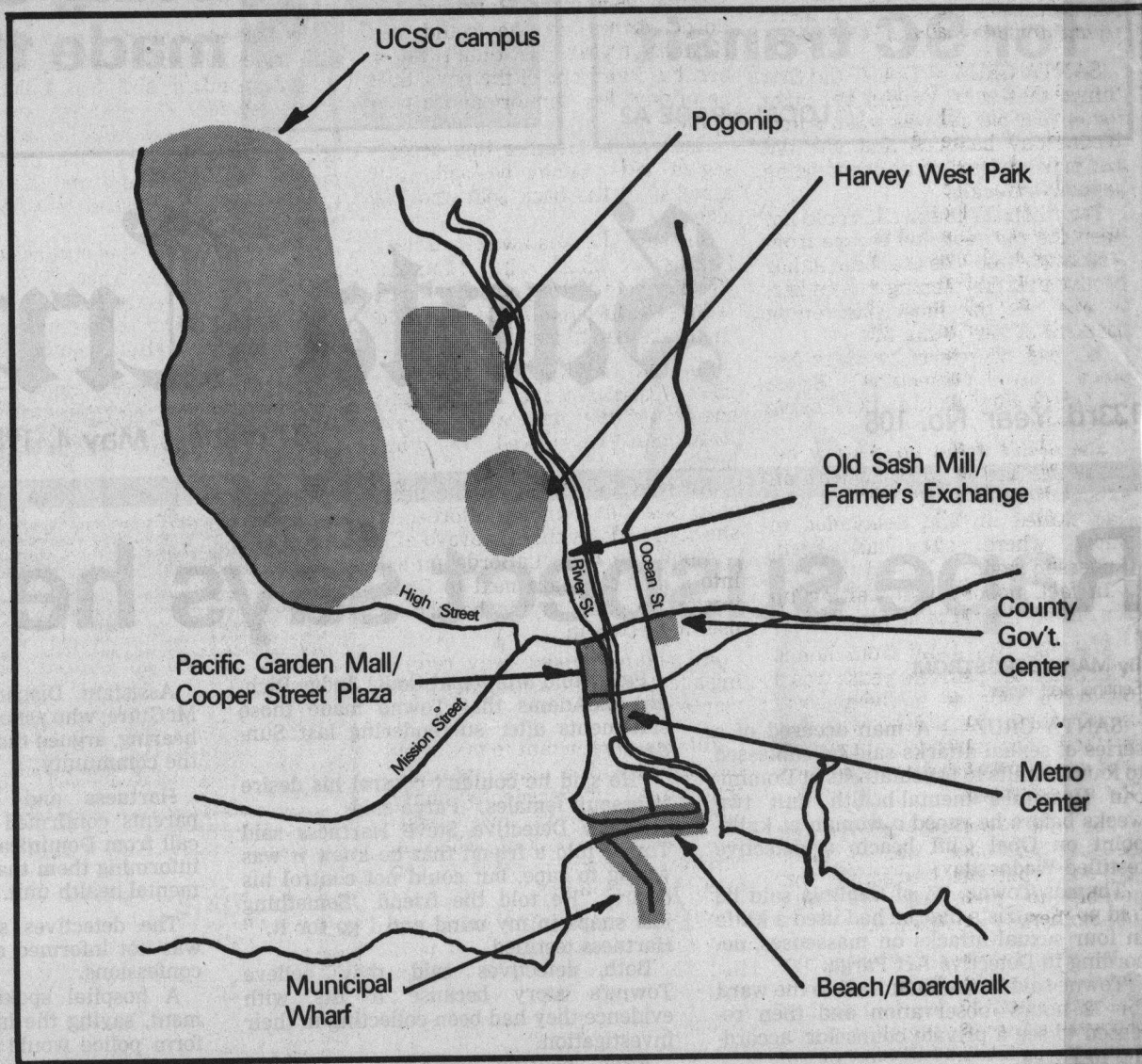
That next two-year, \$300,000 step would involve an alternative analysis and environmental impact assessment for the three mass transit alternatives still in the running. Consultants have recommended that light rail should not be pursued further.

However, the Transit Board has already received negative testimony from employee union representatives who are asking how the district expects to fund this huge future expenditure when it's already \$2.5 million short of the \$17 million it needs to continue bus service at its current level.

Galloway conceded they have a "budget crisis extraordinaire." At the same time, any mass transit system is looked upon as a "long-range project." Federal funding — at up to 50 percent — is available for new mass transit systems that fit Urban Mass Transportation Administration criteria.

In the final report, the consultants are also recommending that wind monitoring equipment be installed along the proposed route. Data on local winds are vital to aerial cable tramway systems, which cannot run when winds get above 45 miles per hour. Preliminary data indicate that winds more than 32 miles per hour occur less than 1 percent of the time.

Galloway described the "driverless" aerial system, which operates with six- to 12-passenger cabins suspended from a single cable by grips, as "glamorous." Should it ever become reality, it would be the



The number of stations on the aerial tramway is undetermined, but the sites above have been discussed as possible stops along the line.

first mass transit system of its kind in the western United States and one of only a handful in the country. A similar system operates in Morgantown, W. Va., between the city and West Virginia University.

Expected annual ridership is approximately three million. The current transit district bus system carries about eight million riders a year.

On the down side, environmental impacts — particularly visual impacts — of aerial cable systems are considerable.

"With regard to visual impacts, the bus — with no fixed guideway towers or stations — would be the best alternative," consultants said. "Aerial cable systems are rated lowest, mainly because of visual impacts from towers and the need for two diagonal crossings of the San Lorenzo River."

In the next study phase, consultants are also recommending that impacts to the San Lorenzo River "be carefully assessed." They said information from the joint District/San Lorenzo River Restoration Committee be used in determining the locations of the towers.

At the same time, consultants point to the success of aerial cable systems in Alpine countries, saying, "Towers do not have to look like towers, but can be imaginatively designed to blend with existing structures."

The consultants tout aerial cable and monorail mass transit alternatives since "Santa Cruz is typical of many communities that lack the high population

density required to support traditional fixed guideway solutions." Cable and monorail systems "may produce a cost effectiveness competitive with that achieved by traditional transit technologies in larger cities," consultants say.

Aerial-system capital costs are much less than other fixed guideway alternatives, they add.

While the proposed aerial tramway is estimated to cost \$26 million, it is estimated another \$26 million is needed for right of way acquisition and construction of related parking facilities.

As far as cost effectiveness, a five-station aerial tramway would cost \$1.43 per new rider. "This compares favorably with other projects funded by the Urban Mass Transportation Administration," say consultants. "It may be seen that despite a peak patronage of less than 1,000 passengers per hour, the Santa Cruz project stacks up very well against other projects, including such high density projects as the Los Angeles subway."

Aerial cable systems "would be the most effective at replacing automobile trips because of their frequent service," consultants add. "A major reason for the effectiveness of cable systems in attracting new riders is the frequent interval between arriving cabins. Even in offpeak periods, the service interval would never exceed one minute in one alternative."

The report estimates that an aerial trip from downtown to the university would take 22 minutes com-

pared to 25 minutes by bus. It is also assumed that increasing traffic congestion would add five minutes to the bus time by year 2005.

Aerial cable systems also compare favorably in regard to safety. "The fatality rate per passenger carried for cable systems is only ... 28 percent that of bus systems," says the report.

System reliability for the Santa Cruz aerial tramway computed to 98.7 percent out of a possible 100. By comparison, the Morgantown West Virginia aerial system "despite early reliability problems" has been between 98.5 and 98.9 percent reliable since 1981.

Copies of the final report are available for public review at the Santa Cruz Public Library. Copies may be purchased for \$18 at Kinko's Graphics, 412 Front St.

The district has spent about \$160,000 so far on the fixed guideway study. Some \$40,000 of that was federally funded.