

UCSC-Watsonville rail plan draws mixed reviews

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A proposal to build a passenger rail system from UC-Santa Cruz to Watsonville got mixed reviews yesterday afternoon at the first of two public hearings on a new study.

Most of the concerns expressed yesterday concerning a rail system, using the existing Southern Pacific right-of-way between Watsonville and downtown Santa Cruz, and then an aerial tramway or cog railway up to UCSC, involved the issue of noise and other impacts the system would have on neighboring residents and their property values.

Some audience members lauded the idea of an alternative to cars and buses, saying it would be an instant success if built in Santa Cruz County.

The Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission has been studying the possibility of

using the existing rail corridor from Watsonville and Santa Cruz as a route for a passenger rail system that might someday carry 21,000 commuters and tourists daily.

It will probably take 10 years to turn the dream into a reality, said Linda Wilshusen, executive director of the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission.

Parsons and Brinkerhoff, a San Francisco consulting firm, has been studying six options, which would be four different rail scenarios, one that simply adds more buses to the county's mass transportation fleet and a "do-nothing" alternative.

The most attractive alternative seems to involve running diesel or electric-powered cog rail cars between Watsonville and UCSC. On the flat terrain between Watsonville and Santa Cruz, the special rail cars would operate in a

manner similar to BART or Santa Clara Light Rail systems. But on the steep hills up to UCSC, a cog system — a gear that pulls a car up a slotted track — would raise the cars up to the hilltop campus.

Another scenario would use electric-powered light rail vehicles between Aptos and Santa Cruz's Harvey West Park, and then an aerial gondola up to the campus.

Two other systems discussed would run between Santa Cruz and Aptos with bus links to the hilltop campus.

At peak operation, trains would run every 15 minutes between Santa Cruz and Aptos and at 30 minute intervals into Watsonville.

None of the alternatives are cheap. The least expensive — simply expanding the present bus system — would cost about \$38 million for new equipment, plus another \$74 million in highway improvements. The most expensive

would be the Santa Cruz-Watsonville connection with a cog rail line to UCSC. It would cost \$242 million including \$74 million in highway improvements and \$30 million in right-of-way and other land acquisition costs.

But as the Federal Transportation Administration measures the cost-effectiveness of proposed mass transportation projects in deciding which ones should be partially financed with federal dollars, the cog rail link is the most attractive.

It has the potential of attracting many more riders than any of its competitors — 282,384 annually, giving it a cost-effective index of \$6.73 per rider. The next closest is the rail link from Aptos to Harvey West Park at \$95.73 per rider.

Consultant Jerry Cauthen, of Parsons-Brinkerhoff, said the Santa Cruz County price tag, while high, is cheap compared to the

proposed BART extension to the San Francisco airport, which would cost \$100 million a mile, or the cost of the new Highway 85 freeway link in the Santa Clara Valley at \$44 million a mile.

Cauthen said the next step will be to submit the study results to the federal government. If they accept it, they will fund another study to further refine the costs and ridership of the alternatives — including a detailed analysis of the present bus system and how it would mesh with the proposed rail system.

If it is ever built, the county would have to purchase the existing Southern Pacific right-of-way. Wilshusen said talks have been held with Southern Pacific about financing an appraisal of the SP property.

Opposition to the plan came from two areas: the cost of the plan, and property owners who

live near the Southern Pacific tracks who are leery about seeing the rail traffic increase from three round-trip freight train trips a week to passenger-rail service that could run every 15 minutes daily.

One Capitola resident told the audience she and her husband had moved to their Prospect Avenue home, which overlooks the rail line, from Orinda to get away from BART and the heavy traffic congestion and noise there.

Others echoed that argument, saying their quiet homes would be constantly invaded by the noise of the diesel-powered rail cars.

Others argued that "we needed it 10 years ago, not 10 years from now."

The proposal drew a negative reaction from Aptos resident Doug McConnell, representing the Aptos Council of Improvement Associations. "Frankly, we don't see this train thing helping the Aptos area much," McConnell said.