

County gets rolling on rail trail



Sentinel photos by Shmuel Thaler, above, and Bill Lovejoy, below

Cyclists like Brian Tell, above, would be able to continue south from the San Lorenzo River trestle near the Boardwalk all the way through the county to Pajaro on a continuous route along the railroad right of way, at right.

Officials OK spending \$11M on railroad land for bike path

By STETT HOLBROOK
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — County transit officials approved a plan Thursday they hope will one day allow tourists and commuters to park their cars and pedal from one end of the county to the other.

The Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission unanimously approved spending \$10.7 million to buy 30 miles of Union Pacific rail line right of way. The tracks stretch from Davenport to Watsonville Junction in Pajaro.

Although construction of a trail is likely several years off, commissioners said they hope it will eventually give people a transit alternative to traffic-choked Highway 1.

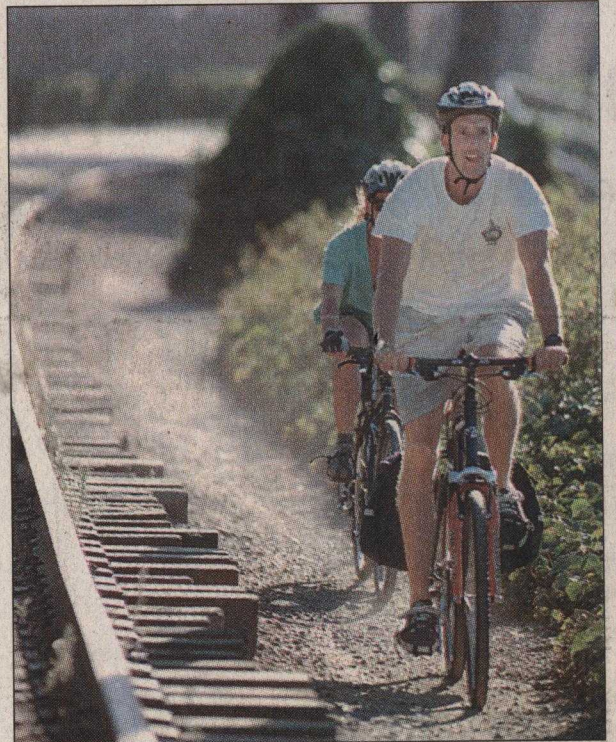
"This is not just something for the Spandex crew," said Dan Alper, bike advocate and co-owner of Charlie Hong Kong restaurant. "This is something for the community."

While the total cost of the right of way is expected to be \$17 million and construction of the cyclist and pedestrian trail could cost another \$30 million, cyclist and alternative-transportation activists hailed the transit panel's decision as an important first step.

"I think it's the best possible use of our resources at this point," cyclist and artist Arena Reed said.

Carlos Garza, a Seabright resident who rides a bike to work at the Long Marine Laboratory at the west end of Santa Cruz, said the trail

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would encourage more people to bike to work. He said he has been hit by cars twice in his 10 years as a bicycle commuter and would welcome a car-free commute.

Josh Hart, spokesman for the Rails to Trails Conservancy, a national non-profit group that pushes for the creation of bike trails along rail lines, said the commission vote mirrors a global trend toward regional bicycle trails and alternative transportation.

"People will use the infrastructure if we build it," he said.

The decision was a victory for the commission, which had been stung by two recent setbacks. In April, Gov. Gray Davis ignored the commission's request for \$25 million for the right of way, and in June the state Transportation Commission declared the county ineligible for \$11 million.

But thanks to flush state coffers, \$8.6 million became available to the county for transportation projects in July. Added to savings from the Mission Street widening project and other cash on hand, the commission has \$10,769,000 available. Commission staff recommended all of the money be put toward acquisition of the right of way,

an agency goal for the past 25 years.

"I think it's a very significant step," Linda Wilshusen, commission executive director, said after Thursday meeting. "I'm very pleased."

Freight service along the rail line would continue with trail construction, but ownership of the right of way would give the transportation commission the option to pursue passenger rail service.

In a letter to the commission, U.S. Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, said he supported the plan and would try to obtain federal money to create a Monterey Bay Sanctuary Trail.

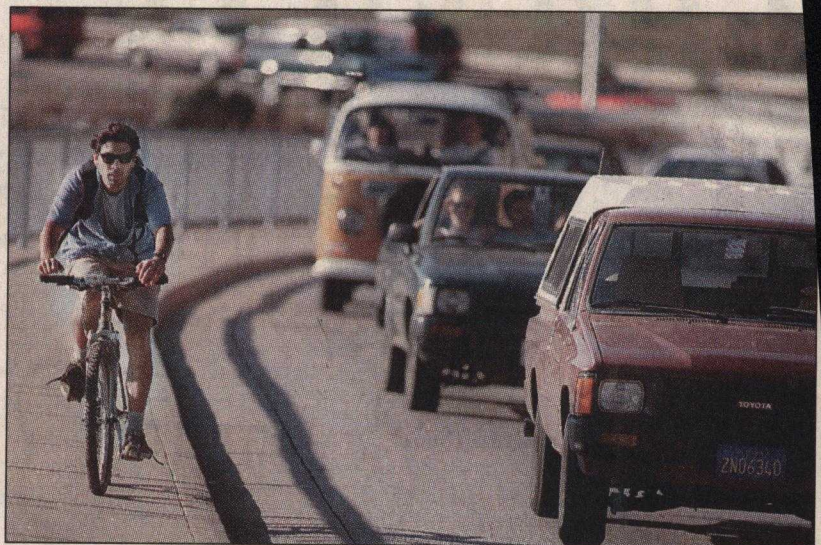
The commission decision will allow agency staffers to begin negotiations with Union Pacific and start an environmental review of the project.

Union Pacific officials in the past said they were unwilling to discuss right-of-way acquisition until the transit agency set aside cash for the purchase.

Union Pacific on Thursday did not return calls to comment.

Commissioners hope their vote will shake out more state and federal dollars for the project.

Responding to some South County residents who urged the commission to allocate some of the money for the repair of Amesti Road, Commissioner Jan Beautz, also a county supervi-



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Carlos Garza, who commutes by bike from the Santa Cruz Eastside to Long Marine Lab, pumps up East Cliff Drive during rush hour on Thursday.

sor, made a motion to put \$8 million toward acquisition of the right of way and the balance for repairs to Amesti and other county road needs.

The motion, which Transportation Commissioner and fellow county Supervisor Jeff Almquist called "craven vote shopping," failed.

Commissioner Tim Fitzmaurice

said the trail would be the only monument he would care to build.

"I think it's going to be one of the best things this commission has accomplished," he said.

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