

Rail corridor acquisition celebration set

Line stretches from
Watsonville to Davenport

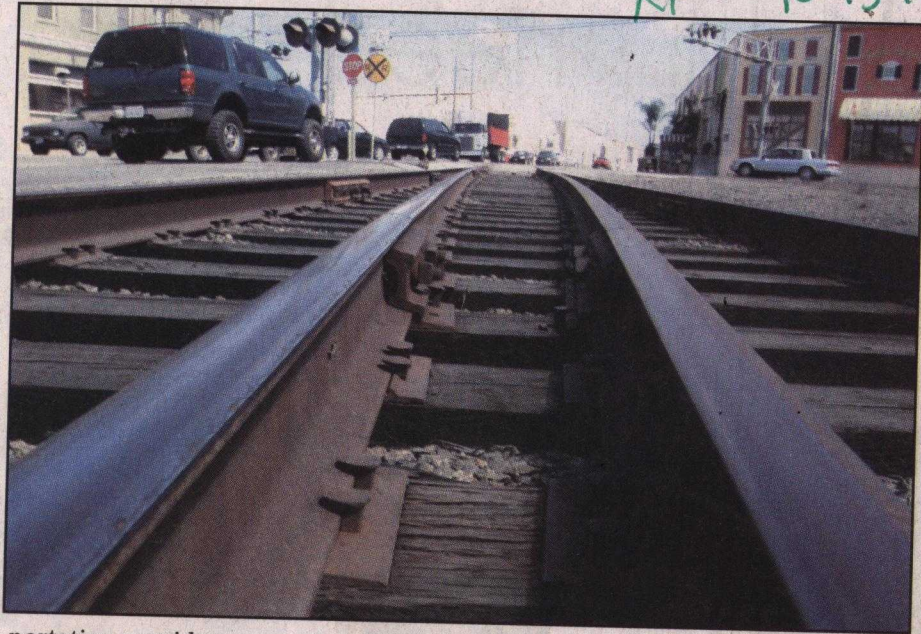
By TARMO HANNULA
OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

WATSONVILLE — The Regional Transportation Commission for Santa Cruz County and Union Pacific announced Friday that they have completed transfer of the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line from private to public ownership for \$14.2 million.

Most of the funding was secured by the RTC from Proposition 116 bond funds approved by both a majority of Californians and Santa Cruz County voters in 1990.

"The purchase is a triple-win for the community, Union Pacific and Iowa Pacific Holdings," said Karena Pushnik, senior transportation planner and public education coordinator.

The 32-mile continuous trans-



Rail tracks run down the center of Walker Street in Watsonville.

Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian file

portation corridor spans the county and runs parallel to the Highway 1 corridor, offering potential for a vital mobility link for residents and visitors alike,

Pushnik said.

A community celebration is scheduled for Nov. 17 where a number of festivities will take place along the rail line. More

details will be posted on the RTC website as they become available.

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Union Pacific, a transportation-services provider in the United States, recognized the sale of the rail line as an opportunity to continue serving the needs of existing customers, while supporting the region's overarching transportation goals. UP serves hundreds of customers on the West Coast today through the operational efficiency of more than 3,200 miles of railroad track in California.

Iowa Pacific Holdings, based in Chicago, has seven other short line railroads with operations in Oregon, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Illinois and New York State.

Ed Ellis, president of Iowa Pacific, said "This is our first experience in northern California, and we are looking forward to working with the RTC, Union Pacific, shippers, and local communities to develop and expand both freight and passenger services provided by the Santa Cruz and Monterey Bay Railway."

Congressman Sam Farr was instrumental in securing federal funds, which were a key piece of this extraordinarily complex transaction, more than 10 years in the making.

As included in the negotiated agreement approved in 2012 between the RTC and Union Pacific, the purchase includes \$5.3 million in funding set aside to upgrade a number of

structures on the line. The RTC will proceed with work on both timber and steel trestles over the next year.

Uses of the rail corridor include continued freight rail primarily for agriculture and building materials and seasonal passenger rail service in the short term. These two uses augment the county's primary tax base, thereby contributing toward vital services for residents, Pushnik said. In the medium and longer term, a variety of transportation uses will be considered such as a bicycle and pedestrian trail adjacent to the tracks where it can be accommodated safely within the corridor and rail passenger services.

The Nov. 17 celebration will feature whistle stops in Watsonville, Capitola, Live Oak and the west side of Santa Cruz.

"Watsonville is the start of this important corridor and a key point along the way," Pushnik said. "Watsonville has the potential to be a very important crossroads for possible connection with other train services."

The first whistle stop will be at the former Watsonville Junction on Walker Street at Main Street starting about 9 a.m.

The rail corridor passes within one mile of 50 percent of the county's population, more than 80 parks and 25 schools.

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For more information, visit the SCCRTC website at www.sccrtc.org or call 460-3200.