

# RAIL-TRAIL DECISION EXPECTED



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

like advocate Micah Posner, right, interrupts Transportation Commissioner Richard de la Paz's Sunday yardwork to lobby his support for the rail-trail plan with a flier made to look like an \$11 million bill, the state money available for the project.

Capitola resident Sue Renner is less than thrilled with the idea of a tourist trolley plying the tracks near her home. She calls the plan fiscally irresponsible, and says the money that the Transportation Commission has saved for the project would be better spent filling potholes.

## Money issues driving trolley debate

by HEATHER BOERNER  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

It comes down to this: After months of heated debate about a possible tourist trolley running from Capitola to Aptos, the county Regional Transportation Commission is set to decide Thursday night whether to keep heading down this road.

The commission will vote whether to proceed with an environmental report on the trolley, proposed to run between Capitola and Aptos with an extension to Seaside. If the commission decides not to, and chooses not to explore a tourist line elsewhere in the county, it must give

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up \$11 million in Proposition 116 funds the state set aside to buy the Union Pacific right of way that runs from Watsonville to Davenport.

Money questions are fueling the debate. Opponents ask whether using the state's \$11 million and \$10 million set aside by the commission to buy the branch line is a prudent investment. Depending on the

speaker, the plan to use the money is a "ruse" or the argument against it is a "red herring."

### Longtime plans

The commission has talked about buying the rail line for years. But last year it devised a plan to establish a tourist train with four poten-

tial routes: Santa Cruz to Davenport, downtown Santa Cruz to the city's Harvey West Neighborhood, Santa Cruz to Capitola or Capitola to Aptos. At a well-attended meeting in the fall, the commission chose Capitola to Aptos.

The commission is comprised of 12 members, including each member of the county Board of Supervisors, representatives of each city in the county, as well as the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District and Caltrans.

So far, the commission has been split on the plan. Capitola repre-

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## Trolley

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sentative Dennis Norton has been one of the plan's most outspoken supporters, while 2nd District Supervisor Ellen Pirie, who represents Mid-County, has said she's worried about continuing to pursue the state money and is interested in finding other ways to fund the purchase.

If the commission buys the line, it also plans to establish a rail-trail that would run the length of the 31-mile Union Pacific line and create a bicycle and pedestrian trail from one end of the county to the other.

The proposal calls for a private company to operate the tourist train in the summer months with no subsidies from the commission.

If the commission decides to drop the Capitola to Aptos line, transportation planner Karena Pushnik said it could still try to buy the rail line with the \$11 million in Prop. 116 funds, by using the state money to put rail on another part of the line, or by using other money to buy it and not employing a train at all.

Bikes vs. potholes

It is not surprising that some of the trolley's greatest proponents are people who favor rail as well as bicycle enthusiasts and activists. They say it's the only way to get a public bike path that spans the county.

The county "can't afford not to do this," said Micah Posner of Friends of the Rail-Trail and People Power.

To that end, Posner and the alternative transportation advocacy group People Power have come up with a faux dollar bill, marked as \$11 million, with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's face on it. Below Schwarzenegger's face reads, "You don't want the money???"

The other side sports a picture of a section of the rail line in Aptos and the words, "The will of the people." The group has gathered about 1,500 signatures from county residents, many from Mid-County, who support the rail purchase. Groups including the Sierra Club support using the money to buy the rail line.

Paul Elerick of the Campaign for Sensible Transportation believes the Prop. 116 funds should be used to purchase the rail line. The other alternatives touted include adding the branch line purchase to the list of projects funded by the sales tax measure county residents will consider in November. That measure, a half-cent sales tax, would pay for the widening of Highway 1 as well as other projects.

"But that doesn't make sense to me," said Elerick, an Aptos resident. "Why throw another \$11 million onto a measure that people wouldn't have to pay otherwise?"

But opponents say, given the current financial picture, it doesn't make sense to spend the \$10 million on a project that isn't absolutely necessary.

Sue Renner, who lives near the proposed train station in Capitola, said people need to break away from the idea that "you have to use Prop. 116 to buy the line, and that means you have to have a train, and that's the only way you'll get the rail-trail." She said that has yet to be proven.

Neil McElwee agreed.

"I think our position is best summed up as you're spending time, effort and money in the wrong place," said McElwee, head of the community group Santa Cruz Coalition Against Recreational Rail. "That money can be better spent filling potholes, building sidewalks. There was a sound wall that was supposed to be built 10 years ago. Where are the bike lanes? In these times of real economic strife, don't

put money where we don't need it."

Pushnik said in order to spend the money on other things, it would take an action of both the county and state transportation commissions.

### Payback question

Another issue is whether, if the tourist train fails, the commission would have to repay the state funds. Last year, Commissioner Jan Beautz sent a letter to the California Transportation Commission, which distributes the money, asking under what conditions the money would have to be repaid.

The local commission has yet to receive the Prop. 116 funds, and if the commission decides not to do any rail on the line, it would not receive the money. If they decide to do rail and the project fails, commissioners such as Beautz and Pirie have gone on the record saying they're worried they'd have to return the funds.

The letter the commission got back from Assistant Deputy Director Kathie Jacobs stated, in part, that the commission requires "projects that consist of state funding to be kept operating for its useful life of the capital equipment, which could be between 40 to 50 years."

That triggered McElwee and others to assert that not only is it frivolous to buy the rail line, but it could actually be fiscally dangerous. They say it could lead to either the county having to sell the line to repay the state or subsidize the rail line with money that would otherwise go to the county's bus system or other transit projects.

McElwee points to a staff report showing the Capitola to Aptos line is not expected to be a big moneymaker. The bigger moneymaker would go from Santa Cruz to Capitola.

But Posner and other supporters of the project call the concern

a "red herring."

"For us to have to pay that money back, the county would have to be in collusion," Posner said. "We'd have to want to give back the money."

He points to the letter from Jacobs, which, in addition to saying the state would like the train to run for 40 years, explains that the state Transportation Commission "typically looks at each particular project at the time we're notified that a project that included state funding will be sold or cease to exist for its intended purpose. At that time, a determination is made regarding whether any payback, if any, would be necessary."

It's unclear whether the state would force the city to pay back the money. Supporters of the Aptos-Capitola train say this proves that the fear over returning the money is just that — an irrational fear.

Elerick said the state has yet to demand a return of Prop. 116 money for any reason.

Jacobs was unavailable for comment Monday.

Phil Dow, who helped write the guidelines for the use of Prop. 116 funds, said he'd be shocked if the state asked for the money back.

"I don't see that anyone has contemplated ever reimbursing anyone for an honest and good faith effort to run rail on the line," said Dow, now head of the Mendocino County Association of Governments. "If they intended to put rail on the line, I don't think they would come down on them. Probably, they'd just want to make sure it was a good purpose."

The meeting will be at 7 p.m. Thursday at the Board of Supervisors chamber, 701 Ocean St., Santa Cruz.

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