



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

The Sun Tan Special takes a break at the Boardwalk Saturday.

From San Jose to Santa Cruz, train ride lives up to its name

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ON BOARD THE SUN TAN SPECIAL — Mari Alsip, a former Southern Pacific Railroad employee, said it best.

"Trains make people smile, and I saw a lot of smiles today," she said as the historic Sun Tan Special train slowed to a stop at the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk Saturday as the Santa Cruz High School Band played spirited welcoming music.

After 34 years, rail service returned to Santa Cruz — at least for a day — with the arrival of a five-car Amtrak Superliner and a eight-car CalTrain carrying 1,250 passengers.

The last time the Sun Tan Special came to Santa Cruz from the Bay Area was in 1959. Judging from the overwhelming response of train riders and people lining the route from Watsonville

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to Santa Cruz on the sunshine-laden day, summer weekend recreational train service could be a real possibility as soon as 1998, supporters say.

"One train every 34 years is not acceptable service," said Gil Mallery, president of Amtrak West. "The spirit and reception along the line shows we can make this a reality."

That may be whistle-blowing good news for riders like UC Santa Cruz fundraiser Dan Aldrich of Santa Cruz. "I saw scenery I had never seen before. It's the only way to go," he said, gazing out to

the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary as the Amtrak train neared Capitola. "Those cars were so spacious," he continued. "You know, I'm going to look into taking a train trip." John Collins, who works for Goodwill Industries in Santa Cruz, put an economic spin on Saturday's historical event. "This is a tremendous opportunity for the community, not only for the Beach Boardwalk to bring tourists to town, but for small business as well," he said, waving to onlookers as the train wended its way near Aptos. The whole idea makes good economic sense, he said.

Saturday's rail event had a festive mood from the time passengers began arriving at San Jose's Diridon Station as early as 7:30 a.m. The 70-mile excursion began as the first train departed at 8:45

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Sun Tan Special

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a.m. and the other at 9:30 a.m. The route went south to Gilroy, along the Pajaro River and through the agricultural fields to Watsonville before heading north along the Monterey Bay on the Santa Cruz branch line normally used for freight service.

Docents barked out instructions and pointed riders in the right direction of their trains. Many riders donned their rail-riding-best attire: from Southern Pacific hats to Sun Tan Special souvenir T-shirts. Riders got to experience a variety of entertainment on board right from their seats, as well.

The Amtrak train — 802 East — departed at 8:46 a.m. and made the first of its two “whistle” stops at the Watsonville Junction at 9:49 a.m. Watsonville City Councilman Oscar Rios and U.S. Rep. Sam Farr (D-Carmel Valley), made brief remarks before conductors yelled “All Aboard” to get the excursion moving again.

The train wound north north after leaving the junction, but slowed to a speed of no more than 10 miles an hour because of the poor condition of the road bed and the lack of an automatic signal system to warn of on-coming trains from the opposite direction.

The slower-paced journey was a delight for passengers, many saying they enjoyed seeing the coun-

tryside they normally never get to see.

Arrival at Aptos Village for the second “whistle stop” to commemorate the 120th anniversary of rail service was 15 minutes late. It could have been two hours late, and no one would have cared.

From Aptos to the Beach Boardwalk, a journey that took almost one hour, more and more people appeared along the route, on their decks, in their backyards, and especially at street crossings. Many of the enthusiasts waved at the train, shouted “Bring Back the Sun Tan,” and took pictures of the passing bi-level train. The turnout, by and large along the route, was very supportive, similar to that of the passengers who got tickets as sponsors or who had paid \$36 for the round-trip from San Jose to Santa Cruz and back.

Some people who live along the tracks have voiced their opposition to reviving service, but their protest Saturday was limited to handing out fliers. The Right-of-Way Alternatives in Local Suburbs, or RAILS, said the trains will bring noise and pollution to those who live along the tracks.

The CalTrain arrived around 1:20 p.m. and returned to San Jose late in the afternoon.

There was a Rail Fair Saturday, and both the Amtrak and CalTrain were open for tours. The Amtrak train will be open today from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. before departing at 4 p.m.