

Transportation agency rejects proposed bus way

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SANTA CRUZ— After five years and \$790,000, the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission made it clear they do not like the recommendations of their Parsons/Brinkerhoff Major Transportation Investment study. The conclusion came after a two-hour presentation Thursday night at the Government Center in downtown Santa Cruz.

The commission agreed on a 7-3 vote to scrap a proposed set of public meetings for the time being, and turn the whole process back to the

Rail Oversight Committee, the group that has been overseeing the current study. Twenty-nine meetings that had been scheduled over the next three months were canceled.

Commissioner Scott Kennedy of Santa Cruz said the study gave the commission valuable data, but the recommendations provided little flexibility. "We should say, 'Good-night, Parsons,' and shelve this," he said.

Commissioners made it clear they do not like the proposed "busway" that would parallel the

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railroad tracks between Capitola and Santa Cruz. Consultant Jeff Damon, who made the presentation on behalf of Parsons/Brinkerhoff, agreed the proposal would be costly, but said it would open up another East-West corridor that is badly needed in the community.

It was apparent early in the meeting the study was in trouble when Damon said to the commission that "no one seems to like it." As the meeting progressed, it was obvious he was right.

At one point, Damon said that tourist traffic should be taken care of by "alternative transportation," but his remark did not bring any responses from the commission.

Santa Cruz County Supervisor Walt Symons said he doubted if the tax consultants said was necessary would get the two-thirds vote required from the public. He noted the consultants appeared to be recommending \$15 million be spent on the weekend train service before the voters are even asked to increase their taxes for transportation services.

Damon said if the community is looking for recreation alternatives, that's what they will have to spend to get it.

Both Symons and fellow Supervisor Jan Beautz both pushed to get the road system back in shape as their top priority, and move forward with a program to take care of traffic congestion.

Beautz said the congested Highway 1 corridor in Santa Cruz and Capitola is forcing more traffic into surrounding neighborhoods.

Commissioners made a number of points on where they stand on the numerous recommendations put forward by the consultants — a number of them, mostly from the city of Santa Cruz, made it clear they believe some type of affordable rail transit could be developed in the community.

Commissioner Ron Graves said at the end of the meeting that if the tracks were ever abandoned, he would like to see the right of way set up for bicyclists and pedestrians.

The consultants indicated the

major drive for rail transit was brought about by UCSC and city officials. The university would like to have their campus linked to the city with tracks, but consultants did not recommend the rail alternatives because of the high costs.

Toward the end of the meeting, Kennedy concluded there should be two basic programs: the first, for auto transportation, and the second for rail. Beautz said the proposal for increased bus alternatives should also be discussed.

Damon told commissioners that some of the alternatives they recommended would require anywhere from a quarter-cent to half-cent increase in the local sales tax in order to get the funds necessary to develop the program.

The consultants assume neither the state nor federal government would put up funding for county transportation, and according to the study, most of the rail alternatives would require larger tax increases.

Santa Cruz area commissioners also expressed concern about the growth and development assumptions made by the consultants. Commission Executive Director Linda Wilshusen said the train would not require a tax — a statement that went unchallenged — and told commissioners they could set up any type of alternative they desired and still use the data developed for the study.

Symons said he doubted if the motoring public will attend many of the canceled meetings about the transportation system during the next three months, anyway. Instead, he predicted, they would be heard from when a vote is required for a tax.

Commissioner Mardi Wormhoudt made the motion to scrap the public meetings after many commissioners voiced concerns that the study did not provide decent alternatives and that to have meetings without some type of program to discuss would not be a good idea.

Wormhoudt's motion was challenged by Wilshusen, who urged the commission the meetings on schedule.

"The commission does not want to go to the public with a plan they are not happy with," Wormhoudt said.