

# Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line purchase approved

Plans include improvements, maintenance deal, freight services, dinner train, possible transportation options

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SACRAMENTO — The purchase of the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line was approved Wednesday by the California Transportation Commission, allowing the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission to finalize the deal

on the 32-mile corridor with Union Pacific Railroad.

The purchase had been held up because of confusion that ensued over two different appraisals differing by more than \$2 million. After the cost of purchase and upkeep of the line was originally appraised at more than \$14 million, a second

appraisal closer to \$12 million was made. California Transportation Commissioners negotiated a \$400,000 price decrease from Union Pacific on Wednesday and the final purchase was approved at \$14.2 million with a commitment to make \$5 million in improvements.

"This expansion of our re-

gion's transportation system will facilitate increased mobility options and generate positive economic impacts," Regional Transportation Commissioner Mark Stone said in a press release. "I'm proud to be a part of this historic undertaking that will have far-reaching benefits for current and future genera-

tions."

Stone and fellow commissioner John Leopold both traveled to Sacramento to speak to lawmakers about the project.

"The acquisition of the Branch Rail Line assures us of pursuing transportation options for the community that can meet greenhouse gas emis-

sion and fossil fuel reduction goals, as well as new ways to meet the transportation needs of businesses, residents, and visitors alike," Leopold stated.

The SCCRTC had been working toward the acquisition for the past 10 years and

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submitted the final purchase documents in May. The CTC approved the deal in June contingent upon the RTC meeting six conditions: execute an agreement between the RTC and the operator, Sierra Northern Railway; commit to initiating recreational passenger rail service; commit to continuing its freight rail service; take responsibility for hazardous-waste cleanup; commit to reimburse the CTC should the RTC cease to use the line as promised; and explain the methodology for the appraised value of the property.

The appraisal had been the lone condition stalling the agreement. Santa Cruz County has already made a three-year agreement with Sierra Northern to perform maintenance on the line, conduct freight service and operate a dinner train from Santa Cruz to Davenport. County leaders hope to expand passenger service all the way to Watsonville, but at the very least will have a trail for bicyclists and pedestrians along the line. County Supervisor Ellen Pirie said even if there are no immediate plans for service to south Santa Cruz County, it will prove beneficial down the line.

"For me, it's about holding the rail line for the future and future generations will decide how we use it exactly," she said. "But I think that preserving that corridor that directly connects North and South County will prove to be one the best moves that the RTC ever has made."

Funding for the purchase of the line and improvements to it come from Proposition 116, the State Transportation Improvement Program, and a \$1.5 million federal earmark secured by Congressman Sam Farr, D-Carmel. Proposition 116 was approved by voters in 1990 and designated \$11 million for rail projects in Santa Cruz County. Ten million dollars in STIP funds were designated for the project in 2000.

The next steps for the project include finalizing purchase documents, completing the escrow process, purchasing the necessary insurance policies and submitting the required railway application to the federal Surface Transportation Board.