

Weekend rail service plan put on hold

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SANTA CRUZ — The first victim in the aftermath of a series of open houses to look at transportation alternatives may be the weekend train that would bring tourists from the Bay Area through Watsonville and into Santa Cruz. An oversight committee set up by the County Transportation Commission voted five to three to put an environmental impact report (EIR) on the rail right of way on hold for six months. The report would have to be completed before the tracks can be upgraded to support the train, and would cost \$500,000.

Watsonville City Councilman and committee member Oscar Rios told his colleagues he supported moving forward with the EIR, and said the group should not abandon the idea of using the rail right of way at this time.

The committee's recommendation will go to the transportation commission for their consideration next month.

The weekend rail option had the least amount of support among those attending the open houses. The train alternative received only five percent of the support of the 250 people that attended open houses in Watsonville, Aptos, and Santa Cruz.

The fight to halt using the funds was led by Supervisors Walt Symons and Jan Beautz, the two members of the Board of Supervisors opposed to any rail use. Beautz told her colleagues, "it's like telling the public we don't care what you think... This is very premature."

The two supervisors picked up

the support of Scotts Valley Mayor Bart Cavallero, who is also commission chairman. "I agree it would be premature to spend (the cash) now," he said.

Executive Director Linda Wilshusen told the group her staff is still considering input on intercity rail. She said there is a possibility the funds for the EIR could be lost. The committee suggested Wilshusen find a project where the funds can be used so they can be held by the commission.

While the project could come back, the committee will recommend the staff make a change in direction and consider other alternatives. The weekend train service will remain part of the plan and will be reviewed again in six months.

The committee was told by Mike Singer, who along with his wife Janet found flaws in the highway section of the Major Transportation Investment Study, that their study still contains numerous errors. "The presence of these errors is highly significant if the MTIS (Major Transportation Investment Study) data is to be used now for a broader purpose," he said. He urged the group to consider developing a true Long Range Transportation Study, with new and more accurate data on highway development, and expanding the local bus system.

Singer said care should be taken to correct the "misinformation" about highways put out during the open houses, adding "it would be a significant failure of the process if the commission, having knowledge of the errors, fails to report the most accurate results available for consideration by the community in

making informed decisions."

Among the latest set of errors reportedly uncovered by the Singers was a section that said auto travel time to and from downtown Watsonville would be improved by all of the transit alternatives. "None of the transit alternatives improve auto travel times to downtown Watsonville," he said.

The major mistake that still remains in the report, according to Singer, is the travel time on Highway One if it's widened to six lanes. Singer said the trip from Santa Cruz to Capitola would be eight minutes faster on average according to the mathematical formulas used by the consultants. Committee members did not respond to the Singers' letter.

The committee did express praise for their staff for the way they worked with the public during the open houses. They also praised the group for the displays they set up and the way they got the public involved in the process. The staff said only 30 people showed up in Watsonville, as opposed to 100 in Aptos, and 110 in Santa Cruz. Rios said information was not widely distributed in the Watsonville area about the open house held at the Senior Center. "People were expecting boring speeches," Rios said.

Rios also said residents of Watsonville are among the highest transit users in the county. He said the community had just gone through an election, and were not prepared for the open house. He said he made several phone calls on the day of the meeting hoping more people would show.