

Transportation leaders land \$14M deal to buy rail line

Supporters see step toward alternative transportation

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SANTA CRUZ — County transportation leaders agreed Thursday to pay \$14.2 million for the 32-mile Union Pacific rail line that runs along the coast from Davenport to Watsonville.

The goal is to turn the scenic rail line into a hiking and biking trail with passenger train service, though construction of such a project is several years away.

The deal is \$5 million less than the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission offered for the train tracks in 2005 before backing out upon discovering the aging railroad bridges require significant repairs and upgrades that would cost millions.

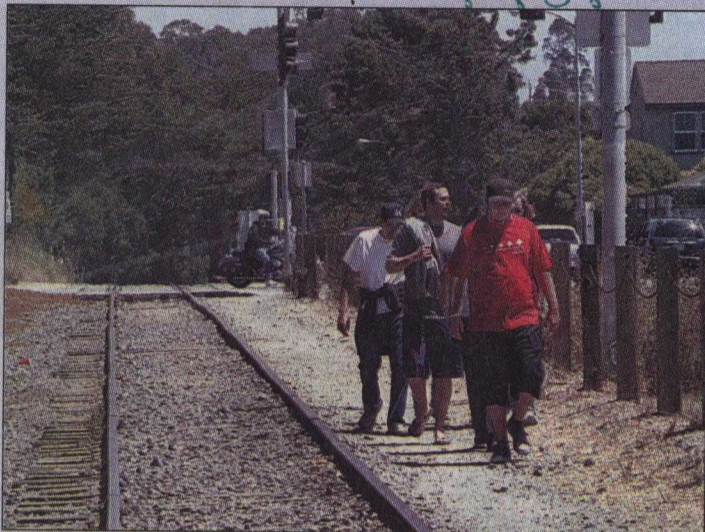
In reaching Thursday's

deal, commissioners say Union Pacific agreed to drop its price. Union Pacific will continue running trains on the tracks through Santa Cruz County — about three times a week — until the purchase is finalized.

"This rail line is a tremendous asset for our community as a transportation corridor," Karena Pushnik of the transportation commission said. "It's a very under-utilized corridor, and this is a huge opportunity for our generation and future generations."

Negotiations between the transportation commission and Union Pacific started in 2001, but slowed in 2005 as the commission pulled back its offer of \$19 million after a report from San Jose-

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A rail-trail across the county may become a reality now that the Regional Transportation Commission of Santa Cruz County has agreed to pay Union Pacific \$14.2 million for 32 miles of railroad track between Davenport and Watsonville.



Photos by Dan Coyro, illustration by Anthony L. Solis

Rail

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based consultant Biggs Cardosa Associates Inc. showed repairing and maintaining the rail line's 29 bridges could cost at least \$4 million, and an appraiser hired by the transportation commission claimed the property wasn't worth \$19 million.

Biggs Cardosa also said it would cost another \$9.6 million to make each bridge earthquake-safe.

However, the only bridge planned for seismic improvements is the San Lorenzo River trestle, which suffered damage during the 1989 Loma Prieta

earthquake, the commission's Executive Director George Dondero said.

Rail company officials declined to explain what prompted them to drop the price, only that they are willing to sell the property for the sake of the community and the company had begun to worry about liability associated with people walking on or near the tracks.

"We are going to be taking a little bit of a hit," Union Pacific spokeswoman Zoe Richmond said. "But there's a lot of issues with trespassing, which was a big concern for our folks. Someone could get seriously hurt or killed. We're happy to finally come to an agreement."

Supporters of bringing the

rail line under public control say it allows the county to take a step toward creating a landmark alternative transportation project that would be scenic and safe for bikers and walkers.

"Who wouldn't want to ride their bike along the cliffs at New Brighton Beach?" bike advocate Piet Canin asked. "This has the potential to bring huge benefits to Santa Cruz in terms of commuting to work and school and green tourism."

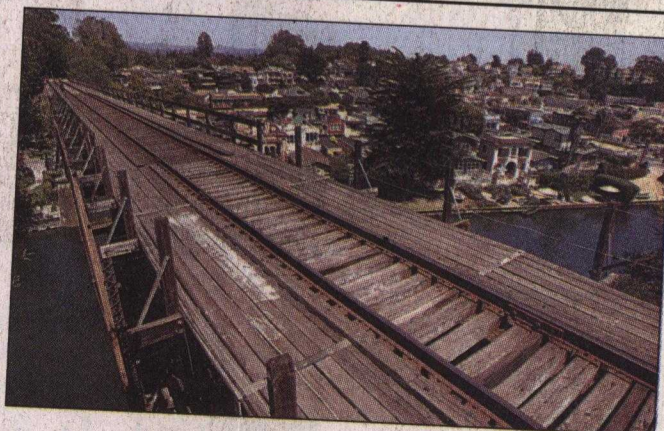
Commissioner Randy Johnson said public ownership of the rail line should allow more people to enjoy new options for recreation near the coast.

"This gives people access to one of the greatest natural resources we have," Johnson said.

The commission has set aside about \$22 million for the purchase of the train tracks from state and federal grants. About \$10 million comes from Proposition 116 funds, and \$11 million from state transportation improvement funds.

Under the latest agreement, the transportation commission will complete all of the remaining due diligence work, including an environmental site assessment, appraisals, lease investigation, and business and management plan before finalizing the purchase — something they hope to complete by the end of the year.

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Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Union Pacific tracks spanning Soquel Creek and Capitola Village are part of the deal offered by the Regional Transportation Commission of Santa Cruz County to pay Union Pacific \$14.2 million for 32 miles of railroad track between Davenport and Watsonville.