

Leaders OK 32-mile rail line purchase

Unanimous agreement on
\$14.2M deal ends 20-year pursuit

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SANTA CRUZ — County transportation leaders voted unanimously to buy the 32-mile rail line between Pajaro and Davenport on Thursday, culminating years of negotiations with plans to secure the corridor for public use.

"I left the house this morning and I told my wife I had to go to work and buy a railway. It seemed like I was in a movie or something," said Neal Coonerty, a Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission member and county supervisor. "This is acquiring a major asset for the good of our community."

The commission's decision caps more than five years of wrangling with the Santa Cruz Branch rail line property owner Union Pacific after entering escrow in 2004. The commission first considered buying the line two decades ago.

Commissioners agreed to buy the line for \$14.2

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million, with an additional \$5 million set aside for necessary repairs. The money will come from voter-approved state bonds set aside for rail projects, and other state transportation money.

The decision paves the way for a dinner train from Santa Cruz to Davenport and possibly a trail alongside the tracks.

Following a public hearing with nearly 200 people last month, Thursday's

final discussion drew a sparse crowd. Five people commented on the proposed purchase; all but one spoke in favor of it.

"I really feel like I'm present at a historic moment today," said Santa Cruz resident Jack Nelson.

Bill Selvidge of Santa Cruz was the lone voice of opposition, arguing that California transportation money could be best spent somewhere else.

"The state does not have enough money to keep its beautiful parks open. This is where the best hiking can occur," Selvidge said.

Also in the commission's

agreement were plans to continue the line's existing freight train service and add a passenger train from Santa Cruz to Davenport. Short-line operator Sierra Northern Railway already has announced plans for a dinner train between the two towns.

While an anticipated hiking and biking path were not promised in the purchase, the commission has long indicated that a path eventually could be built alongside the rails.

Commissioners now must go to the California Transportation Commission and request delivery of the long-

promised money to finish the rail line purchase. Some have expressed concern that, in the down economy, the state may be unable to give the cash as planned.

But that was not the topic of discussion on Thursday, as a group of beaming commissioners marveled at their unanimous decision.

"If I remember my history correctly, back in 1803, Thomas Jefferson made the Louisiana Purchase for about \$15 million," said Commissioner and Scotts Valley City Councilman Randy Johnson. "That turned out pretty well."