

Alternative Could Eliminate Aptos to Capitola Tourist Train

Existing Big Trees Railroad May Allow County Transportation Commission to Access State Rail Funds for Right-of-Way Purchase

by Michael Thomas

Toot, toot. A resolution to the debate slowing the Santa Cruz County Transportation Commission's purchase of the rail right-of-way owned by Union Pacific may have just arrived. An 11th hour compromise proposal may settle the future of a much-debated tourist trolley from Aptos to Capitola, while allowing the Commission to access State funds for the purchase of the Union Pacific rail corridor.

RTC Commissioner and Santa Cruz County Supervisor Jan Beautz has suggested that the existing Big Trees and Pacific Railroad, which rolls on about one mile of the 32-mile corridor, could be used to qualify for Proposition 116 funds. The voter approved proposition requires that the money be used to establish passenger train service.

That means the proposed tourist train from Capitola to Aptos wouldn't be necessary — a proposal that has angered some Aptos residents living along the rail lines and inspired much controversy about the financial viability of a tourist trolley.

The Commission, which has been deeply divided on both Highway 1 widening and the rail project, offered virtually unanimous support for seeking the State's approval of the alternative.

The idea for using Big Trees to access the State funds was first suggested two years ago by Cliff Walters, the company's Government Relations spokesperson. Walters is also the engineer on the existing train, which runs from the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk to Felton's Roaring



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Camp.

"We like [the idea] because it would bring some improvements to our railroad and the railroad in Santa Cruz County," Walters said.

Hiking, Biking Trail the Real Goal

At some point in the future, a passenger train running through Santa Cruz County may be economically viable. But it's the more immediate prospect of a hiking and biking trail along the Union Pacific-owned tracks that has County officials pursuing a public purchase of the rail corridor.

Last fall, UP and the Regional Transportation Commission (RTC) agreed to a tentative price of \$19 million for the 32-mile corridor. The negotiated price is good for the next year. To make that deadline, the County is aiming

to apply next month for the release of about \$11 million in State Proposition 116 funds to help pay for the purchase.

Already, \$300,000 has been released from the Prop. 116 funds to pay for an environmental review and business plan for the proposed tourist trolley.

RTC Commissioner and Capitola Council member Dennis Norton has been an advocate for the tourist train. He expressed doubt about whether the California Transportation Commission would release the funds based on a plan that doesn't create new passenger rail service. But if it works, he's in favor of it.

"I want the purchase of the corridor," Norton said. "That's the prize. It would actually open up the possibility of doing small trolley service anywhere on the line."

But Beautz said she reviewed some other Prop 116 funded projects and saw signs of flexibility in what the State will approve.

"There have been some fairly minimal things that have been done to get the funding. One was down in Ventura: a train they used for making movies or something," she said.

And there are a slew of advantages to swapping the tourist train for Big Trees. Many have questioned whether the tourist train would be profitable. The RTC's consultant authored a business plan that showed it just barely making a profit under private operation.

From the beginning, Big Trees has said that it would like to run the trolley.

"You can't have too many trains out there," Walters said.

But even he has concerns about its viability.

"There are so many unknowns and we are not sure about the financial viability of it," he said. "It doesn't really go anywhere. It doesn't really have a destination."

On the other hand, the Big Trees train links two big attractions — the Boardwalk and the massive redwoods. The first tourist train steamed up the hill from the beach in 1875, and the current train has been running successfully since 1985.

Thus it's unlikely that the Big Trees railroad would fold and put the County in the awkward position of having to reimburse the State for Prop 116 money. Some fear that could happen with the Aptos tourist train.

In a letter to the RTC, Beautz noted that the latest alternative would create no new traffic in track sections proposed for the rail trail. It would satisfy neighbors vehemently opposed to additional train service in their backyards and eliminate the possibility of a lawsuit she thinks Aptos residents might file if the train were formally proposed there.

Big Trees Seeks Track Improvements

Beautz pointed out that the new plan could provide cash for improvements at Depot Park in Santa Cruz. Walters said he would like to see a replica train station constructed at the newly rebuilt park.

But he's also suggesting that the RTC use about a \$1 million in funds from Prop 116 to make improvements to the uphill stretch of the tracks, which would not be publicly owned.

TOURIST TRAIN

continued from page 12

"We have some issues in the winter time where the track, because it's in a canyon, it needs ballasting, some ties, things like that," he said.

He also suggested that some funds could be used to add a passing track in Santa Cruz and finish construction of an existing siding.

He said that using public funds for improvements to private railways has become common, since various government funds are geared to improving rail infrastructure, most of which is privately owned in the United States.

Big Trees would also get the stability of a long term lease on the portion of tracks it uses in Santa Cruz. In the past, the company has signed annual agreements with Union Pacific, but would get a long-term use agreement from the RTC.

State transportation staffers are researching whether this latest option qualifies for Prop 116 funding and local officials have received some feedback amen-

able to the idea. Still, the final decision will fall to the California Transportation Commission.

In the meantime, the RTC is proceeding with review of the Environmental Impact Report for the Aptos tourist train.

If the Big Trees option doesn't work out, the RTC may submit a Prop 116 funding request based on the tourist trolley as early as next month.

Capitola council member and Commissioner Norton said, "As

a commissioner, I am not in favor of scrapping either the business plan or the EIR. It's still possible that it would go in."

When would that be? Norton said that if Big Trees can qualify the County for receipt of Prop 116 funds, then there wouldn't be any hurry to establish trolley surface in Santa Cruz County.

"We don't have to make a decision in our lifetime," he added. "Our kids can decide what they want to do with it." □

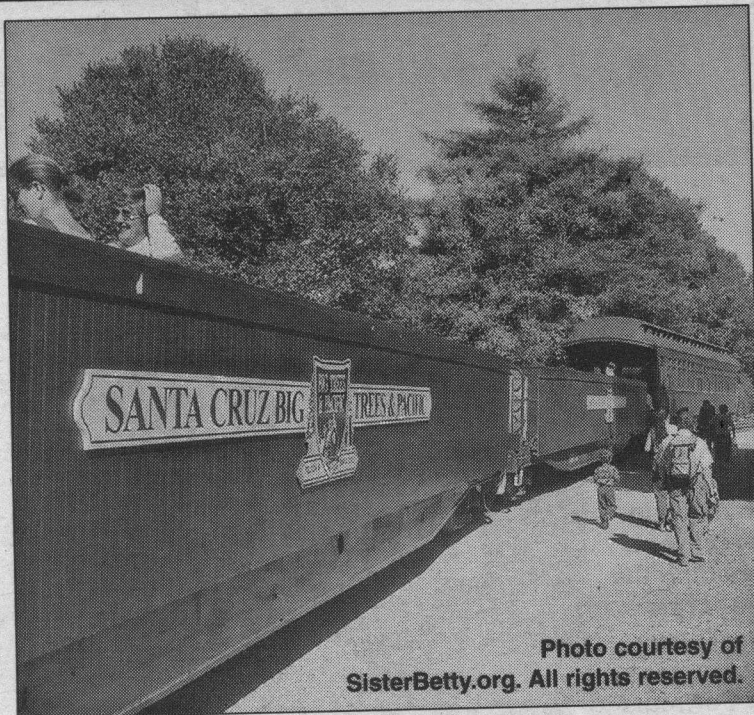


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