

To: Regional Transportation Commission
From: Linda Wilshusen, Executive Director
RE: Summary of Public Comments on Scope of Environmental Review for
Recreational Rail Service

RECOMMENDATIONS

Staff recommends that the Regional Transportation Commission:

1. Accept the summary of comments on the Initial Study for environmental review of the proposed Recreational Rail Service (Attachment 1); and
 2. Direct staff to return to the March RTC meeting with responses to comments, as indicated in Attachment 1, which will not otherwise be addressed in the *EIR*, *Phase 2 Environmental Site Assessment*, or *Acquisition Business Plan*.
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BACKGROUND

In 1999, the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (RTC) decided to pursue acquisition of the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line currently owned by Union Pacific following the *1998 Major Transportation Investment Study* of the Watsonville – Santa Cruz – UCSC corridor. In 2000, the SCCRTC programmed \$10 million in State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) funds for the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line ROW acquisition. The *2001 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP)* includes both acquisition of the rail right-of-way and construction of a coastal pedestrian/bike path as well as various policies to support these and other future rail-related projects. Policies to minimize visitor impacts by using the existing rail line are also included in the *2001 RTP*.

In its ongoing efforts to complete a funding package for the purchase of the rail line, the SCCRTC has maintained communications with the California Transportation Commission on options for using the \$11 million in Proposition 116 funds designated for passenger rail development in Santa Cruz County. On May 1, 2003, the SCCRTC held an evening public hearing, authorized that development of the initial Proposition 116 application include a recreational rail component, and issued a request for proposals for an environmental impact report (EIR) to study recreational passenger rail service between Capitola and Aptos with an extension to Seascape, pursuant to *2001 RTP* policies.

The RTC, in conjunction with environmental review consultants Public Affairs Management (PAM), released an Initial Study for the EIR at the October 16, 2003 Transportation Policy Workshop, starting the 30-day scoping period under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). A widely advertised scoping meeting was held in Aptos on November 6, 2003 to

present the Initial Study and invite public input on the scope of the environmental document. The scoping meeting was well attended and the Commission received a large number of written comments.

At the December, 2003 RTC meeting, Commissioners received a status report regarding the scope of work for the Recreational Rail EIR which also included the full packet of Initial Study comments from the public, groups and agencies. The RTC approved the approach outlined by the consultants in their letter included in that packet: to include a detailed analysis in the EIR per CEQA of Traffic/Safety, Noise, Air Quality and Hazardous Materials. The Commission also considered amendments to the contract for environmental analysis of recreational rail service and approved amending the contract to expand the scope of the aesthetic analysis to include either visual simulations or a demonstration train of the proposed Rail Diesel Car vehicle. Finally, the Commission approved the EIR alternatives: a no build option, an alternative fuel option and a less frequent service option with 5 rather than 9 round trips.

DISCUSSION

Also at the December RTC meeting, the Commission discussed and staff offered to return to the January meeting with a summary list of the comments received during the scoping process categorized by those which will be addressed in the EIR and those which are outside the environmental scope but which will be addressed by the Acquisition *Business Plan*, the *Phase 2 Environmental Site Assessment* (for potentially hazardous materials), or in some other manner. Staff has prepared this list, Attachment 1, including an explanation by the consultants of how the EIR analysis will be performed in accordance with CEQA. Should the Commission wish to have the consultants conduct more detailed analysis, adjustments to the PAM contract and schedule will be necessary. PAM principal Scott Steinwert will attend the Commission meeting to answer questions about CEQA requirements.

As discussed in the December staff report, the Summary notes a number of issues which staff will research and report back to the Commission. These are identified in Attachment 1. Commissioner Pat Spence submitted the attached memo (Attachment 2) which also includes a summary chart of the comments.

Next Stages

The next step is for the consultants to complete the Draft EIR and release it for public comment. It is anticipated that the Draft EIR will be ready in spring of 2004. The *Phase 2 Environmental Site Assessment* is also progressing, but completion timing will depend on when right of entry is received from Union Pacific. Finally, Miller, Owen & Trost have contracted with Systra Consulting to prepare the draft Acquisition *Business Plan*, also due in the spring.

SUMMARY

The environmental scoping process for the RTC-required EIR of proposed Recreational Rail service between Capitola and Aptos with an extension to Seascape generated a large amount of

public input. This staff report responds to Commissioner's request for a summary chart of public comments; the summary identifies how comments will be addressed in the EIR and/or other documents, or if staff will return with a response at a later date.

Attachments:

1. Summary of Comments regarding the Initial Study for proposed Recreational Rail Service
2. December 22, 2003, Memo of Commissioner Pat Spence with Attachments

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