

Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission
Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line Acquisition

Fact Sheet

Based on a multi-year study and analysis of the Watsonville to Santa Cruz to UCSC corridor, the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission adopted a program of projects which includes purchase of the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line right-of-way for future additional transportation uses. The rail line parallels Highway 1, extends from Watsonville to Davenport, and passes through many of the county's residential and activity centers. Potential future uses could include passenger service (rail, bus) and a bicycle/pedestrian path adjacent to the rail line. Freight rail service will continue on the line under any scenario. The RTC is planning for a network of bicycle and pedestrian trails, some of which may be located on segments of the rail line right-of-way.

Right-of Way Description

The rail right-of-way proposed for acquisition extends 31.8 miles from Pajaro in Monterey County, to Davenport in north Santa Cruz County (see map on reverse). The right-of-way is generally 50 to 60 feet wide; however, it is wider or narrower in some sections, sometimes due to encroachment by surrounding uses. There are 37 bridges and trestles along the right-of-way, including major crossings of the Pajaro River, Highway 1, Soquel Creek, the Santa Cruz Yacht Harbor and the San Lorenzo River.

Land uses adjacent to the rail line include residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural and park land/open space. The right-of-way traverses the urban core of the county and is immediately adjacent to: downtown Watsonville, Aptos Village, Capitola Village and the Santa Cruz Beach area. Also adjacent to the rail right-of-way are many state/local parks and recreational facilities, including: Manresa State Beach, Seacliff State Beach, New Brighton State Park, Simpkins Swim Center, Santa Cruz Yacht Harbor, Natural Bridges State Park and Wilder Ranch State Park. The rail line provides access to the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary at several key locations.

Cost of Acquisition and Funding

In December 2004, a letter of intent between the rail property owner, Union Pacific, and the RTC was signed with a tentative purchase price of \$19 million for the entire branch line property. The final purchase price will depend on a complete assessment of the condition of the line and negotiations with Union Pacific.

In August 2003, the California Transportation Commission approved \$300,000 in Proposition 116 funds for pre-acquisition activities. An application for the remaining \$10.7 million in Proposition 116 funds to purchase the rail line and make some improvements will be submitted prior to purchasing the rail line. The Commission has also set aside \$10 million in State Transportation Improvement Program funds for the purchase of the rail right-of-way. These funds may or may not be available due to the state funding situation. In November 2005, the Coastal Conservancy approved a reimbursable grant as a back up plan for these funds. In addition, Congressman Sam Farr obtained a \$1.5 million federal earmark for the project in 2003.

Status of Activities

The Commission, with the aid of a consultant, is engaged in active negotiations with Union Pacific. The final purchase price will depend on many factors including the need to cover other cost items within the available funds.

Over the past few years, the RTC has been conducting pre-acquisition activities including appraisals, an assessment of the structures, title review, insurance and environmental site assessments for hazardous materials. In April 2002 the Commission completed environmental review for the acquisition with a negative declaration and a categorical exemption in accordance with state and federal environmental laws. In August 2004, the Commission released the draft Business Plan for the rail line which includes scenarios for a short line operator to take over freight service. In May 2005, the Commission released the preliminary title report for all parcels that compose the rail line right-of-way. In August 2005, the Commission released a structural assessment report of all the structures on the rail line. Based on that report, an additional detailed structural assessment of some structures was completed in June 2006. In addition, the RTC is currently conducting appraisals of the Branch Line right-of-way and improvements, completing the hazardous materials assessment, negotiating legal agreements, and investigating insurance requirements and operating arrangements. Once all of this information is completed, the RTC and the community will decide whether to purchase the rail line. That decision is expected to be made in 2007.

For more information: Please visit the RTC web site: www.sccrtc.org or call (831) 460-3200

