

Introduction

Milestone 4 Overview

In spring 2025, the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (RTC) launched Milestone 4 of the Zero Emission Passenger Rail and Trail Project's (ZEPRT) Project Concept Report development. Milestone 4 engagement activities focused on sharing updates and gathering input for development of the project concept, including the conceptual rail and trail alignment, ridership projections, station locations and design, operations, and project costs estimates. Engagement conducted in the spring included information sharing and feedback solicitation for inclusion in the Draft Project Concept.



Workshop attendees reviewing West Side Santa Cruz maps

On June 12, the project's Milestone 4 virtual open house was launched, followed by the July 31 release of the Draft Project Concept Report. Engagement over the summer focused on providing information about the draft project concept, offering opportunities for the public to ask questions of the project team and collecting community input on the Draft Project Concept Report.

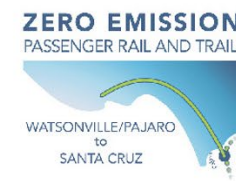
Engagement and Outreach Activities:

- March 4: Capitola Town Hall
- Informational Community Sessions:
 - March 12 – Railroad Bridge Infrastructure
 - April 1 – Conceptual Alignment and Operations
 - June 9 – Ridership Projections and Cost Estimates
 - July 22 – Conceptual Station Design
- Community Events:
 - April 22 – Earth Day Event, Cabrillo College Aptos Campus
 - April 23 – Earth Day Event, Cabrillo College Watsonville Campus
 - April 27 – Watsonville's Earth Day Event
 - May 21 – Rail Trail Segment 7 Phase II Ribbon Cutting, Santa Cruz
 - June 27 – Watsonville Farmers Market
 - July 30 – Highway 1 Auxiliary Lane and Bus-on-Shoulder Project Ribbon Cutting, Santa Cruz
 - Aug. 5 – City of Watsonville National Night Out
 - Aug. 9 – Watsonville Back to School Barbeque and Resource Fair

Public Engagement Summary

Zero Emission Passenger Rail and Trail

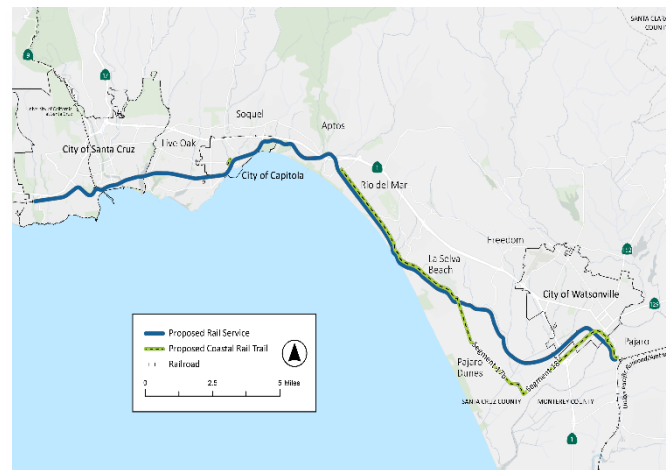
Milestone 4: March - August 2025



- Aug. 16 – Comunidad en Movimiento - Semillas de Bienestar, Watsonville
- Community Workshops
 - May 12 – Walker Street Stakeholder Meeting, Watsonville
 - May 12 – Community Workshop, Watsonville
 - May 14 – Community Workshop, Santa Cruz
- RTC Commission Meetings:
 - June 12 – Presentation
 - Aug. 7 – Presentation and Public Hearing
- June 12 - Aug. 22 – Virtual Open House
- July 31 – Draft Project Concept Report Release
- June 23 - Aug. 5 – In-Person and Virtual Office Hours
- March - Aug. – Various stakeholder and partner agency briefings/presentations

Project Overview

RTC is proposing a new high-capacity passenger rail service and stations on the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line (Branch Line), which is a continuous transportation corridor spanning approximately 32 miles of Santa Cruz County. The study area includes 22 miles of the Branch Line right-of-way (ROW) from the City of Santa Cruz in the north, to Pajaro just south of Watsonville. The Branch Line runs parallel to the often-congested Highway 1 and connects to regional and state rail lines in Pajaro and Monterey County.



Map of conceptual rail and trail alignments

In 2012, RTC acquired the Branch Line and made it publicly owned. RTC has an agreement with a short-line rail operator that provides freight service along the Branch Line. In 2015, RTC finished the Rail Transit Feasibility Study, analyzing various public transportation scenarios based on community input. They assessed ridership, costs, vehicle technologies, funding, integration with other corridors, and connectivity to other services. Feasible options for further analysis and construction were identified. In 2021, the Transit Corridor Alternatives Analysis & Rail Network Integration Study (TCAA/RNIS) evaluated rail transit feasibility on the same line. It established the project's Purpose and Need with input from agencies, officials and the public. The study identified an Electric Passenger Rail as the preferred option, aligning with the goals of improving the economy, equity, and the environment in Santa Cruz County.

Milestone 4 Outreach & Events

Engagement outreach and opportunities during Milestone 4 included varied opportunities that offered community members numerous in-person and virtual opportunities to engage with project team

members and provide feedback. Similarly, RTC increased outreach using paid social and digital advertising and Spanish-language radio ads to build awareness and participation at this important project milestone.

Public Awareness and Notification Campaign

RTC implemented the below multilingual promotional campaign to drive further awareness and participation of the various engagement activities being offered to the public during Milestone 4.

- **Email Notifications:** Seventeen (17) email notifications were distributed by RTC to the project's email distribution list on Mar. 11, Mar 21, Mar. 24, April 1, April 28, May 5, June 2, June 10, June 12, June 17, July 8, July 14, July 25, July 31 (two emails distributed), Aug. 5, and Aug. 13. See Appendix A: Public Engagement Materials.
- **Paid Advertisements:**
 - **Radio Spots:** Twenty-eight (28) Spanish-language advertisements ran on two separate radios channels, 102.5 KDON-FM and La Tricolor 99.5 (KLOK-FM) twice a day for a week on each channel from July 28 to Aug. 3. A total of 43,026 impressions were received on the 102.5 KDON-FM channel ("impressions" indicates how many individuals heard the ad when it aired) and a total of 34,000 impressions were received on La Tricolor 99.5 (KLOK-FM) radio station.
 - **Publications:**
 - **Newsletter Ads:** Two newsletter ads ran in *The Pajaronian* and *Lookout Santa Cruz* publications and were distributed on Aug. 1 to promote the project's August Office Hours.
 - **Digital Ads:** Two sidebar digital ads were also displayed on *The Pajaronian* and *Lookout Santa Cruz* publications from July 18 to Aug. 15. The digital ad was used to promote the August Office Hours (July 18 to Aug. 15) and the Virtual Open House (Aug. 4 to Aug. 15). See Appendix A: Public Engagement Materials.
- **Media Relations:** Two news releases were distributed to local Santa Cruz County media outlets to promote the in-person community workshops (May 5) and summer engagement activities (June 12).
- **Mailers:** 1,216 postcards were mailed to Watsonville, Santa Cruz and Walker Street stakeholders to provide details and encourage participation in one of the three community workshops held in May. Mailers were distributed to addresses located within 300 feet of the proposed project in these areas (See Appendix A: Public Engagement Materials):
 - 450 recipients received the Watsonville Community Workshop mailer
 - 92 Walker Street businesses/stakeholders received the Stakeholder Meeting mailer
 - 674 recipients received the Santa Cruz Community Workshop mailer
- **Organic & Paid Social Media:** A total of 65 organic and paid posts ran on RTC's accounts across multiple social media platforms in July and August to promote Milestone 4 activities, **yielding over 180,000 impressions** (number of times ad/post is seen by online user) and **reaching over 60,000 individuals**.

- 62 organic posts on Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and Nextdoor.
- Three (3) paid advertisements on Facebook and Instagram (See Appendix A: Public Engagement Materials).
- **Flyers:** Five (5) flyers were distributed to the public: one for the Walker Street Stakeholder Meeting, one each for the Watsonville and Santa Cruz Community Workshops, and two for the Draft Project Concept Report. See Appendix A: Public Engagement Materials.

Stakeholder and Partner Agency Outreach

Between March and August, the ZEPRT project team held briefings and presentations with the stakeholders and partner agencies listed below to share updates and seek feedback.

- California Coastal Commission
- City of Santa Cruz
- City of Watsonville
- Various Special Interest Groups
- RTC Bicycle Advisory Committee
- RTC Elderly and Disabled Transportation Advisory Committee
- RTC Interagency Technical Advisory Committee
- Santa Cruz, Big Trees and Pacific Railway (Roaring Camp)
- County of Santa Cruz
- Santa Cruz Metro
- The Seaside Company

Commission Working Groups:

At the March 20, 2025, meeting, RTC Commissioners voted to form two working groups for the purpose of understanding and resolving key project alignment challenges, specifically in the Watsonville and Santa Cruz areas, in order to further advance the Project Concept. The two working groups met regularly from late March through May, which also often included site visits to provide a firsthand view of proposed locations for the rail and trail alignments and coordination with local stakeholders. Details of the two working groups included:

- **South County Working Group**
 - Commissioners: DeSerpa, Hernandez, Montesino, and Quiroz-Carter
 - Focus: Developing preferred rail and trail alignments through downtown Watsonville as well as the trail segment 17-19 alignments (San Andreas to W. Beach Street), considered proposed downtown station locations, and location of the trail bridge over the Pajaro River.
- **North County Working Group**
 - Commissioners: Keeley, Koenig, Martinez, and Schiffrin (alternate)
 - Focus: Understanding proposed at-grade and elevated alignment options on Beach Street in Santa Cruz including operational and regulatory constraints, considering proposed station locations in the city of Santa Cruz, and sought stakeholder feedback to identify challenges, opportunities, and solutions.

Informational Community Sessions

Four Informational Community Sessions were held (in addition to three sessions held during Milestone 3 in 2024) to share topic-specific updates and answer questions from the public. Sessions were held in the evenings, from 3:30-5 p.m. or 6-7:15 p.m. in a hybrid format. Participants were invited to either view the

session virtually via Zoom or in-person from RTC's conference room in Santa Cruz. Each session included live Spanish interpretation and was recorded and posted on the ZEPRT project webpage at sccrtc.org/zeprt. Approximately 250 individuals participated in the four Informational Community Sessions.

- March 12 – Railroad Bridge Infrastructure
- April 1 – Conceptual Alignment and Operations
- June 9 – Ridership Projections and Cost Estimates
- July 22 – Conceptual Station Design

Community Workshops

Two interactive, in-person Community Workshops were held in May in Watsonville and Santa Cruz and an additional Stakeholder Meeting held in Watsonville. Materials were provided in both English and Spanish, and all events included Spanish interpreters, board exhibits, maps, surveys and presentations.

The Walker Street Stakeholder Meeting took place on May 12 from 2-3:30 p.m. in Watsonville's Civic Plaza Community Room and approximately six stakeholders attended. The Watsonville Community Workshop followed the Stakeholder meeting and resulted in approximately 40 attendees. Both events included a presentation that provided a project overview, Milestones 1-3 engagement summary, information on the ZEPRT project's compatibility with Watsonville's General Plan 2050, and project concept and alignment considerations. Interactive activities focused on the rail and trail alignments with large format maps displaying Watsonville station location options as well as rail and trail alignment options. Community members were encouraged to provide comments on the maps and fill out a Watsonville-specific survey. A copy of the presentation, board exhibits, and survey are included in Appendix A: Public Engagement Materials.

The Santa Cruz Community Workshop was held on May 14 at the London Nelson Community Center and resulted in approximately 40 attendees. The event included a presentation that provided a project overview, Milestones 1-3 engagement summary, as well as considerations for Beach Street alignment, West Side Station alignment, and Beach Flats traffic circulation. Interactive activities focused on the rail and trail alignments with large format maps displaying Beach Street and west side alignment and station options, and renderings of the at-grade and elevated structure options. Community members were encouraged to provide comments on the maps and fill out a Santa Cruz-specific survey. A copy of the presentation, board exhibits, and survey are included in Appendix A: Public Engagement Materials.

Virtual Open House

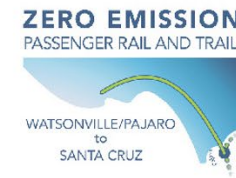
The Virtual Open House was available to all community members at zeprt.com as an interactive, self-guided public meeting enabling visitors to learn more about the Project Concept through engaging information and activities to gather feedback. The Virtual Open House included information on the conceptual rail and trail alignment, ridership projections, station locations and design, operations, and project costs and funding. The Virtual Open House was open 24 hours a day/7 days a week from June 12 through August 22 and attracted over 1,000 total users. A copy of the Virtual Open House panels is included in Appendix A: Public Engagement Materials.

Virtual and In-Person Office Hours

Public Engagement Summary

Zero Emission Passenger Rail and Trail

Milestone 4: March - August 2025



RTC hosted a series of office hours, offering in-person (Watsonville and Santa Cruz) and virtual options on different days and times over the summer. The office hours provided an opportunity for community members to talk directly with ZEPRT project team members one-on-one, ask questions and share input on the Draft Project Concept. Office Hours were held on the following dates and times:

Date	Time	Location
Monday, June 23	11 a.m. - 2 p.m. 5:30 - 7 p.m.	Watsonville: Civic Plaza 4 th Floor, Community Room, 274 Main Street
	4 - 5:30 p.m.	Virtually: Zoom
Tuesday, June 24	11 a.m. - 2 p.m. 5:30 - 7 p.m.	Santa Cruz: RTC Office, Oak Room, 1101 Pacific Avenue, 2 nd Floor
	4 - 5:30 p.m.	Virtually: Zoom
Wednesday, July 23	4 - 5:30 p.m.	Virtually: Zoom
Monday, August 4	11 a.m. - 2 p.m. 5:30 - 7 p.m.	Watsonville: Civic Plaza 4 th Floor, Community Room, 274 Main Street
	4 - 5:40 p.m.	Virtually: Zoom
Tuesday, August 5	11 a.m. - 2 p.m. 5:30 - 7 p.m.	Santa Cruz: RTC Office, Oak Room, 1101 Pacific Avenue, 2 nd Floor
	4 - 5:30 p.m.	Virtually: Zoom

Community Feedback

More than 500 comments and activity feedback submissions were received from community members throughout the Milestone 4 engagement period, including on the Draft Project Concept Report that was posted on July 31. All comments received via the Virtual Open House, project emails, Informational Community Sessions, and in-person comment cards are included in Appendix B: Public Engagement Comments.

Summary of Community Feedback Received

Below summarizes the key takeaways of feedback received throughout Milestone 4 engagement. More detail on specific feedback received via event activities and written comments are provided in the sections that follow.

- General
 - Frustration from South County and disadvantaged communities that the broader project community benefits aren't understood well or promoted better
 - Concerns about travel time (i.e., time windows to board train, number of passengers during commute hours, station to destination time versus car)
- Rail Corridor and Alignment
 - Questions about designing the system to accommodate both freight and passenger rail
 - Interest in preservation of the railroad corridor
 - Interest in further understanding how the rail trail and other activities in the Beach Flats area of Santa Cruz could complement each other
 - Interest in rail access to West Side Santa Cruz for UC Santa Cruz commuters
- Trail

- Preference to prioritize completion of the trail quickly
 - Concerns around safety of trail segments not located in the rail corridor
- **Cost and Funding**
 - Concerns about project cost estimates and how the project would be funded
 - Questions about funding source viability and local funding needs
 - Support for advancing the project to gain further understanding of how it could be funded as part of the state rail plan
 - Interest in trip cost per rider information based on the conceptual cost estimates
- **Equity**
 - Eagerness from Watsonville/South County and low-income communities for the economic and transportation opportunities the rail and trail project would provide
 - Concerns regarding right-of-way impacts and encroachments
- **Ridership**
 - Interest in ridership projections and comparisons to other systems
- **Stations**
 - Interest in advancing Depot Park as an end of line station option in Santa Cruz
 - Suggestions on station locations and connectivity, including additional or relocated stations
- **System Technology**
 - Interest in Personal Rapid Transit (PRT) as an affordable alternative to the project
 - Desire for Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) as more affordable transit option

Summary of Detailed Activity Feedback

Detailed below is an overview of the community feedback collected during Milestone 4 from the Virtual Open House, Informational Community Sessions, as well as in-person Watsonville and Santa Cruz Community Workshop activity surveys.

Community Workshop Survey Feedback

Participants at the Santa Cruz and Watsonville Community Workshops were asked to complete surveys as they worked through various activities reviewing sections of the proposed rail and trail alignment. Compiled tables of survey results are included in Appendix B: Public Engagement Comments.

The Watsonville Community Workshop asked participants to consider the proposed alignment for the rail and trail along Walker Street and at the crossings over the Pajaro River. The following summarizes survey responses:

- Participants noted their preference for the station in Watsonville to be located at the Historic Depot between W. Beach Street and Kearney Street, although many noted they would support whichever option was found to provide faster service or cost less.
- Participants noted the benefits of the station providing connections to other transit services, economic benefits and increased mobility for youth, seniors, and low-income residents.
- When considering the proposed Walker Street rail alignment and station location, participants indicated impacts to access to nearby properties/businesses and pedestrian and traffic movement.

- The trail alignment option along W. Beach Street to Rodriguez Street had the support of most participants with many also noting the trail's connection to the station via a dedicated multi-use trail that provided safety to cyclists and pedestrians was also very important.
- Respondents prioritized safety of bicyclists and pedestrians, buffered/protected bike lanes, and maintaining traffic lane width and existing parking as important elements for the trail alignments.
- Participants favored the trail bridge location from Rodriguez Street to Pajaro Park to provide a connection between Watsonville and Pajaro and connection to existing public facilities.

The Santa Cruz Community Workshop asked participants to consider the proposed alignment for the rail and trail along Beach Street, the traffic impacts in the Beach Flats neighborhood, and end-of-line service options to West Santa Cruz and Natural Bridges Dr.

- When evaluating the challenges and considerations for the proposed alignment along Beach Street, participants noted scheduling regular passenger rail service, easy access to the beach and Boardwalk, traffic, providing appropriate facilities for bicyclists and pedestrians and bicyclists, safety, and traffic congestion as the biggest challenges.
- Participants indicated the station's proximity to the beach and boardwalk and considerations for pedestrian and bicycle access to the station as important considerations.
- Participants were equally split between the elevated and at-grade structure options and felt they needed more information.
- If traffic circulation plan changes were considered within the Beach Flats neighborhood, participants noted improving access and connectivity for cyclists and pedestrians and reducing vehicle traffic as the two highest priorities. Participants also noted they would improve access to the beach and Boardwalk by utilizing one-way traffic on certain streets for parking access and providing more multi-modal opportunities to encourage less vehicular traffic.
- When participants were asked their considerations for determining the end-of-line service locations, station access, traffic impacts, connection to Downtown, and easy transfers to Santa Cruz Metro services were their top considerations. There was a preference for end-of-line service to be located at the Natural Bridges Drive alternative with Quiet Zones implemented.
- For the West Side service option, most participants noted reducing train noise heard at nearby properties, and providing pedestrian crossings separated from the road as the most important at-grade crossing improvements.

Feedback on Station Design and Locations

Participants were asked to provide feedback on the station locations being proposed for initial service and station design concepts during the Virtual Open House and Informational Community Session 7.

- Concerns regarding availability of parking at stations
- Desire for bicycle lockers at stations
- Concerns regarding the location of the proposed station in Aptos
- Interest in station location at Seacliff and a West Side Santa Cruz location between Beach Street and Natural Bridges Drive
- Desire for variability of station design based on location
- Preference for the "Woody" station concept
- Desire for weather protection incorporated into station design
- Need integration/connectivity with the bus transit system

Feedback on Proposed Conceptual Rail and Trail Alignment Maps

Participants were asked to provide feedback on the Virtual Open House's interactive comment map showing the proposed rail and trail alignment footprint. At the in-person Community Workshops and Office Hours, participants also had the opportunity to review and comment on conceptual alignment maps.

- Santa Cruz Station Locations
 - Station suggested at Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary Exploration Center so that service could be provided to both downtown Santa Cruz and West Santa Cruz
 - Station at or near Bay and California streets could provide connections to Downtown and to UC Santa Cruz
- South County/Watsonville Trail Alignment
 - Overall support for trail alignment along West Beach Street to San Andreas Road
 - Safety concerns on San Andreas Road due to agricultural vehicle traffic and on West Beach Street due to heavy industrial vehicle use
- Santa Cruz Beach Street Area
 - Suggestions to remove personal vehicle access to Beach Street at Boardwalk area, add dedicated bus lane to Beach Street with emergency vehicle access, and provide crossing safety improvements
 - Preference for the at-grade rail alignment alternative

Summary of General Comments

General comments received in writing via the Virtual Open House, project email, and written comment cards at the in-person events are highlighted below and included in Appendix B: Public Engagement Comments.

- Project Benefits
 - Will serve disenfranchised and disabled communities
 - Important to connect Watsonville to Santa Cruz and provide connections to existing trails and bus service, and plan new ways to connect people to destinations without cars
 - Economic growth potential, specifically for Watsonville
 - Project will support future generations and population growth
- Project Concerns
 - Concerns regarding the viability of project funding
 - Concerns related to project cost (construction, operations, maintenance), feasibility, and potential tax increase
 - Concerns related to ticket fare costs per person
 - Potential environmental impacts
 - ROW encroachment concerns for both rail and trail
- Support for prioritizing the trail over the rail
- Requests to consider less expensive alternatives, specifically Personal Rapid Transit (PRT)
- Questions about freight interoperability and connections to intercity rail
- Desire to utilize the Corridor ID Program to undertake environmental documentation instead of regional discretionary funds

- Alignment considerations
 - Concerns about pedestrian flow on Beach Street
 - Favor for routing the trail off the rail corridor onto San Andreas Road and up West Beach Street
 - Questions about design and cost to replace the Capitola Trestle bridge
 - Questions regarding how rail and trail bridge designs will be coordinated
- Ridership
 - Concerns about data reliability to produce ridership numbers/confidence in model predictions
 - Interest in details of ridership data and comparisons to other rail systems
 - Requests to incorporate other local and regional planning efforts into ridership modeling
- Desire to prioritize project benefits over cost
- Requests to examine project benefits based on estimated travel time by car vs. train
- Concerns about sea level rise in vulnerable alignment locations