

Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission Meeting
April 2, 2026
Comments on Agenda Item 21 (Rail Operator)

Dear Commissioners:

Thank you for supporting the interim trail and for seeking a reasonable solution to rail operations on the Santa Cruz Branch Line. Please continue on the current course.

I have read the letter from Roaring Camp/Big Trees Pacific Railroad dated March 3. They make a number of disingenuous claims. The tracks between Santa Cruz and Watsonville have not carried trains in a decade or longer. Big Trees has already been cut off from the main line for many years, and there is no funding available to fix the ballast, ties, rails, and trestles that require replacement or repair before a train could use those tracks again. Construction of a trail is hardly the tipping point that takes rail access away and isolates the Felton Branch. The Felton Branch was isolated long ago.

There have been calls to retain the existing tracks and ties and build the trail on top of them. This is a ridiculous idea. RTC's own reports, all the way back to the Feasibility Report in 2015, state that the ties and rails need to be removed and replaced before trains can use the line. The RTC's draft Business Plan in 2021 budgeted for replacement of 75 percent of ties and 100 percent of rails. The 2025 ZEPRT Project Concept Report discussed the track replacement issue in detail. Ballast, ties, and rails work together to support the weight and motion of trains. The Project Study Report states that much of the existing ballast is contaminated, which compromises the ballast's ability to support loads without levels of deflection that exceed Federal Railroad Administration standards. Most existing timber ties are at least 20 years old. Wood ties in straight track may have a lifespan of 25 to 30 years in the relatively damp Santa Cruz County climate. In curves wood ties may have a useful life of approximately 10 years. Thus, many of the existing wood ties are at or near the end of their useful life and could not continue to function if regular passenger operations were implemented. To be serviceable for regular passenger service, most of the existing jointed rail, much of it over 100 years old, manufactured before modern metallurgical practices improved rail strength and reliability, would need to be replaced with modern, continuously welded rail. The track would need to be completely rehabilitated with new ballast, new ties, new rail, a new rail fastening system. Building a trail on top of the existing rails complicates design and compromises the quality of a trail, and simply makes no sense in terms of keeping the rails for future train service.

Richard James, AICP
Aptos, CA



March 31, 2026

Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission
1101 Pacific Avenue, Suite 250
Santa Cruz, CA 95060

Re: Agenda of April 2, 2026, Item 21:

Dear Commissioners,

We are writing to respond to the March 27, 2026 letter to us from Executive Director Sarah Christensen and to address the actions contemplated by the Commission in Item 21 of this week's RTC agenda. While Ms. Christensen's response addresses several of the issues we raised, it avoided the most obvious one we face now—the Commission's decision, in light of the pressure to preserve the grant funding it has obtained from the State, to take a major and consequential step to tear up portions of the Santa Cruz Branch Line in order to install a bike path, knowing that such an action will create a nearly insurmountable barrier to instituting rail service in Santa Cruz County. In addition, a number of statements in the letter are simply inaccurate, particularly with regard to the condition of the line and the Commission's failure to maintain it.

While Roaring Camp has its own economic reasons for wanting to preserve the prospect of reinstating freight service, as railroad professionals we are also very aware of the history of public projects sequestering rail rights-of-way in the name of expedience, thereby permanently preventing rail from ever returning. We have always supported the Ultimate Trail configuration and have taken many steps to support the Commission in implementing that project.

In taking the actions contemplated under this item, the Commission is taking a consequential step to cement the transportation future of this County. As traffic grows on Highway 1 and the economic health of the County is threatened by gridlock in its transportation infrastructure, this Board will be the party that was responsible for foreclosing the implementation of rail to address those challenges. Significantly, the Commission is taking this action without providing any analysis of the financial impact it will have on any future rail projects.

Our March 3rd letter specifically asked for the Commission to "inform the public regarding the burden its contemplated actions will place upon any future efforts to

restore freight service or institute passenger service on the line." That question was not addressed in your response nor in the materials being presented to the April 2 meeting. Yet by utilizing grant funds to modify the right-of-way, the Commission will be accepting an obligation to repay those funds should it remove those improvements before the end of their useful life. As we noted the Commission, in taking the proposed actions, will be "initiating a nearly insurmountable obstacle to the reestablishment of rail service in the County" But the Commission has failed to quantify the amount of that burden as it makes this consequential decision. And this all comes despite the clear mandate of the County's voters in rejecting Measure D at the June, 2022 election, to preserve the line for rail purposes.

Our March 3 letter also reviewed the history of the Commission's ownership of the line, initially taking ownership under an assertion that it would not interfere with freight operations, but then failing to fund the upkeep of the line. The Commission also accepted rail bond funding, repaid with taxpayer dollars, to acquire a rail line. It now is choosing to build a bike path. Had that intent been disclosed to the State, the bond funds would not have been forthcoming. In short, the Commission's stewardship of the line has been disappointing.

The Commission points to an absence of active freight service as evidence of a lack of demand or viability. However, the Commission's own action (or more properly, inaction)—by restricting access and failing to complete required repairs—have directly impeded the railroad's ability to operate, market, and grow freight business.

The Commission's narrative of long-standing, systemic structural deficiency is inconsistent with the documented operational history of the line and the timeline of maintenance decisions. Following the RTC's acquisition of the corridor in 2011, trains continued to operate successfully to Davenport—an outcome that would not have been possible had the infrastructure been in "significant disrepair". As recently as 2016, Iowa Pacific Holdings conducted regular holiday train operations in Santa Cruz, which required operation from Watsonville to Santa Cruz over the full length of the line. These operations further demonstrate that the corridor remained serviceable and capable of supporting freight rail activity several years after the initial purchase of the line.

The turning point came in 2017, when storm events caused washouts at two culvert locations just north of Watsonville. However, the prolonged five-year delay in completing repairs by the RTC stands in stark contrast to the prior response of the former operator, Sierra Railroad. Notably, a significant washout in Aptos in March 2011 was repaired in approximately two months by Sierra, illustrating that timely remediation of infrastructure can be both feasible and achieved. Sadly, the RTC used this period to neglect the bridges, resulting in the RTC ultimately placing them out of service.

Having successfully restored our Felton Branch Line upon acquisition and following severe storm damage—including extensive bridge and culvert repairs—we have a clear and practical understanding of what is required to repair and maintain an operable freight rail line. Aside from the replacement of the La Selva Bridge—completed as a

condition of the RTC's acquisition—and a minor repair to a small structure in the Harkins Slough area, there has been no substantive effort to implement the maintenance and repair recommendations identified in the 2006, 2012 and 2018 Santa Cruz Branch Line bridge inspection reports. In the 15 years since the RTC assumed ownership, the absence of follow-through on these documented needs has contributed directly to the deterioration of critical infrastructure along the line; the RTC did not unknowingly acquire a deteriorated rail line, but rather bought an operable freight corridor—its current condition has developed during the Commission's custody.

Finally, as it seeks to modify the status of the Santa Cruz Branch Line (SCBL) with the Surface Transportation Board to "discontinued," the Commission has not discussed whether the actions it proposes to take to implement the bicycle trail are compatible with the obligation of the carrier to reinstitute rail service, which is a requirement of the discontinuance approval.

And the Commission should not fool itself that the well-financed bicycle advocates will cooperate with any future proposal that will threaten their precious bike path. They will not. In fact, they are already advocating for the Commission to give up on rail planning altogether.

The Commission must understand the magnitude of the action it is considering. The citizens of the County have placed their trust in you to make informed and intelligent decisions. They expressed their views via the rejection of Measure D. The proposed action runs counter to that expression and permanently impacts the transportation future of the County.

Sincerely,

Melani Clark
CEO, Roaring Camp, Inc.



March 30, 2026

TO: Chair Eduardo Montesino, Commissioners and Executive Director Christiansen

RE: RTC April 2, 2026 Agenda Item 21. Approval of a Separation Agreement and Mutual Release with the current Rail Operator for the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line (SCBRL) and for an Administration, Coordination, and License Agreement with a new Rail Operator over portion of the SCBRL

Chair Montesino, Commissioners and Executive Director Christiansen:

We have several questions and points of clarification regarding agenda item #21.

First, we would like to reiterate **Friends of the Rail and Trails' continuing opposition to removal, without immediate replacement, of any existing rail infrastructure as part of any planned trail project.** FORT has presented a clear example of an agency which has incorporated existing rails as part of their trail projects. We also want to remind the commission that, in June 2022 (less than 5 years ago), voters overwhelmingly rejected removal of the coastal rail tracks proposed in Measure D.

Based on our understanding and the information presented at the February and March 19 Special Commission meeting, Santa Cruz County Coastal Rail will be operating as the "common carrier" for the rail line north of Mile Post 3, while Chicago Rock Island Chicago and Pacific Railroad will be the common carrier between Mile Post .433 and Mile Post 3.0. As stated earlier, the board of Santa Cruz County Coastal Rail will be the same as the commission, but the staff report in several locations says, "the SCCCR or its designee". It is not clear from this staff report or previous discussions, who or what would be the designee of SCCCR. Would this be another rail carrier that would provide the freight service on the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line in coordination with SCCCR? It would be helpful to understand how this new agreement would be implemented and to have an operational definition of "designee". "Designee" is not defined in any portion of the supporting materials.

Finally there is a significant cost (\$450,000 plus \$1,000/day if the transition and STB approval process takes longer than 90 days) for the work Progressive Rail is agreeing to do to accomplish the transition to a new freight operator. According to the staff report, this cost will be covered from the Coastal Rail Trail Segments 10 and 11 budget. We are concerned that, even though the commission has expressed concern about construction cost estimate increases on these trail segments, that it would simultaneously add these costs to the trail project budget. This does not make sense to us. We hope that the Commission will remember these additional expense as they face the still very real and significant financial challenges of building these segments of the Coastal Rail Trail.

Santa Cruz County Friends of the Rail and Trail (FORT)
Matt Farrell, Chair