

OP-ED

Micah Posner: A vision for the green line

Thanks to the foresight and hard work of the county's Regional Transportation Commission RTC, it appears likely that the public will own the Union Pacific Railroad corridor within the year. It is clearly time for a public discussion about what we, as a community, want to do with this under-utilized transportation corridor. Our vision is a rail with trail system along the corridor that would enable residents to engage in short trips by foot or bicycle, while providing an option for longer trips via a local tram connected to the statewide transportation systems, including Caltrain, at the Watsonville Junction. We call it the Green Line.

The Union Pacific railway corridor is a 32-mile-long linear strip of property between Davenport and Watsonville with an average width of 80 feet, currently used to haul freight three times a week. The corridor passes within one mile of more than 120,000 people, about half the residents of Santa Cruz County, as well as many of the region's major employers, schools, public facilities and state parks. It is basically flat; trains don't do well at grades over 3 percent and avoids crossing most minor residential streets. According to engineering firm Mesiti-Miller, "a Rail With Trail facility on the current UP right of way is feasible based on the width of the available corridor, excepting a few short segments diverted to public streets." More than 65 trails in the U.S. currently operate adjacent to working rail lines. They are uniformly popular, safe and well-used.

A trail along the right-of-way would attract some of the hundreds of thousands of trips daily that are less than three miles in length, one third of all trips in the county. A trail system could eventually span the entire Monterey Bay, creating a destination recreational opportunity, but more importantly and more immediately, the rail trail would allow families to get to school, the store and the beach by foot or bicycle, resulting in decreased CO2 emissions and better human health. The RTC is in the process of planning for the "Sanctuary Scenic Trail network," which will include the spine of the system — the rail trail. We need to make sure that the plan prioritizes our everyday lives in addition to our scenic opportunities.

For longer trips, many of us would enjoy a clean, quiet, public transportation system that would join the coastal communities Watsonville, Aptos, Live Oak, Capitola, Santa Cruz and Davenport to each other and to destinations around the state and nation. Such a system is in the planning stage in Monterey County, where rail transportation is currently being developed to bring Caltrain and Amtrak to Watsonville Junction where the Santa Cruz branch line terminates just past the county line, while developing a local system to Salinas and Monterey. As a community it behooves us to imagine using our tracks to connect to these larger systems as well as creating access to different parts of this county.

Advocates for such a system are using the word "tram," because it has yet to be fully defined, allowing us a chance to envision the system together. How can we make a "tram" quiet and low in emissions while still providing for maximum usage and minimum subsidy? How can a tram coexist with freight service within the context of restrictive federal railroad guidelines? While the RTC need not flesh out plans for a rail system before the purchase of the line, they do need to make sure that all agreements with Union Pacific include the various options for future passenger rail. The specifics of this part of the purchasing agreement should be carefully negotiated by a business consultant familiar with the railway industry and written into the agreement.

While we are busy trying to acquire the corridor, fixed line systems in medium density areas similar to Santa Cruz County are going up as fast as the price of gas. Systems in Austin, Charlotte, Columbus,

Nashville, Norfolk and Yakima are under construction and will join operating systems in Buffalo, Charlotte, Camden, Newark, Tacoma and even the megalopolis know as Kenosha, Wisconsin. Studying the above systems provides a diverse look at how communities like ours are responding to questions of congestion and climate change.

Taken together, the rail-with-trail system will comprise a "Green Line" along the coast of Santa Cruz County — a new system of transportation that will highlight the ecological sensibilities of our community; will work in tandem with our excellent Metro bus system and provide relief to our overused road system. It is ours to imagine.

Micah Posner is director of People Power, which advocates for bicycle use and other sensible transportation.