

## Transportation leaders seek advice on public relations

Shanna McCord - Sentinel staff writer

After two failed attempts in recent years to sell voters on a sales tax to pay for transportation projects countywide, the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission is looking to burnish its public profile.

Commissioners Thursday agreed to pay Kris Reyes, head of the Seaside Co.'s community relations, \$15,000 during the next several months for public relations work. His goal will be to help the community understand the role of the agency and why a new local funding source is the only way commissioners believe progress can be made to improve Highway 1, expand public transit service, reduce the county's carbon output, and build bike lanes and walking paths.

The vote was 6-5 on Thursday with Commissioners Dene Bustichi, Kirby Nicol, Pat Spence, Jan Beautz and Emily Reilly opposed.

"Having this kind of assistance will guide us and help us be a little more effective," said the commission's executive director, George Dondero. "There are a lot of people who don't even know what the Regional Transportation Commission is, and they don't understand the services we provide."

The Regional Transportation Commission, which oversees state and federal funds spent on local transportation projects such as the new \$50 million merge lanes on highways 1 and 17, says a local funding source would protect the area's roadways from being neglected due to ongoing fluctuations in state and federal budgets.

However, getting that message to the general public has been difficult, as many people confuse the transportation agency with work done by county Public Works or Caltrans.

Reyes' job is to come up with strategies to strengthen the commission's name recognition and educate the public about the complexities of transportation funding.

The transportation commission says the loss of a \$600 million sales tax measure during the 2004 election and the failure of a countywide community group that met for nearly two years to formulate a new funding plan, are examples of how the public doesn't connect with the work of the agency.

"Reyes will develop a game plan and coach us on how to implement our goals better," said commission spokeswoman Karena Pushnik. "We need to focus on finding messages that will resonate with the broader spectrum of the community."

Bustichi said he doesn't think Reyes can come up with a sales pitch that the transportation commission hasn't already tried, while Beautz said the \$15,000, though nominal, could be better spent elsewhere.

"We can't fill potholes, but we can spend money on public relations," Beautz said. "I'm not sure I agree with that."

Reyes operates a consulting business outside of his work with the Seaside Co., which owns the Boardwalk, and will construct a public relations campaign for the transportation commission on his own time.

Reyes, who was born and raised in Santa Cruz, is a co-founder of the Locally Owned Business Association, and has worked on many local campaigns, including opposition to raising the minimum wage to \$9.25 an hour in Santa Cruz and the campaign for Santa Cruz County Superior Court's judge-elect Ariadne Symons.

Reyes, a graduate of Texas A&M University, served as campaign manager for former state Sen. Bruce McPherson during his 2000 Senate run.

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