

Regional Transportation Commission has to tighten its belt

by Ramona Turner

SANTA CRUZ — Gearing up for the coming fiscal year, the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission approved a draft operating budget this week that includes administrative trimming and anticipates the possibility of lower revenue than in past years.

The early budget is for only \$5.4 million, far less than the current \$30.2 million budget, though commission staff anticipates the budget will grow as funding from the state and other agencies is allocated for transportation projects.

Much of the final budget will be made up of money not spent this fiscal year that will carry over, said George Dondero, commission executive director.

The RTC's budget fluctuates annually based on the projects the agency is working on. The single biggest reason why the commission's budget appears to be smaller in the coming fiscal year is because \$21 million set aside for the acquisition of the Union Pacific rail line have yet to be added.

"We don't have the money, yet. It is programmed, but it's not sitting in our account," Dondero said. "The state has the money. Last year, we thought we might close this year. It's very likely that we're not going to close the deal this year and will move the funds over."

Some other funding the commission normally gets may not appear at all. For instance, RTC staff replaced more than \$2 million in State Transit Assistance funding with a zero because the state budget eliminated that funding program through 2013, Dondero said.

In anticipation of getting less money, commission staff shaved \$71,000 in administrative costs, including furloughs for the staff. Nothing's set in stone but the furloughs could mean taking unpaid days off, or reducing work hours a few days weekly, said Luis Mendoza, deputy director. There also is the option of cutting overtime and temporary help. The RTC is in talks with employees and their union. "We are planning on it at this point, but it wouldn't start until July -- the beginning of the fiscal year. We're working with staff to get them ready," Dondero said.

Commission staff also suggested the groups the RTC supports receive 2.5 percent less funding. That means efforts like Bike to Work will see contributions drop from \$40,000 to \$39,000, while the Community Traffic Safety Coalition's piece of the pie will shrink from \$100,000 to \$97,500.

Revenue and budget adjustments will be brought back to the commission later this year, as staff monitors sales tax revenues, bond sales and lists carry over funding when the fiscal year ends in July, Dondero said.

An expected \$5.8 million from the federal stimulus package may give some transportation projects around the county a boost and new legislation in Sacramento could bring in as much as \$13 million.