

RTC, cyclists see the signs

by Ramona Turner

WATSONVILLE — If a bicyclist wanted to ride to Watsonville from Santa Cruz, there may soon be signs posted around the county pointing out the safest route to do so.

After much debate Thursday, the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission voted 8-3 to use some of the \$11.4 million in federal stimulus and state transportation funds to pay for bike route signs.

This, after RTC staff recommended the commission not go forward with the countywide program, citing staffing shortages as local public works departments grapple with budget cuts, furloughs and even layoffs. Staff suggested the commission wait until 2012 to pursue a bike route program. That's when the RTC will be updating its regional transportation plan, as required by the Association of Bay Area Governments.

"Whatever we can do, we must find a way to keep the sign program alive," pleaded Antonio Rivas, commissioner and Watsonville mayor. He noted his city's effort, combined with that of community groups, to improve the health and safety of residents as reasons to support the sign program sooner than later, even if it means doing it in phases.

"We have a community that's engaged," he said. "It's important to keep them engaged."

The commission voted to use \$100,000 of about \$1.8 million staff proposed should be socked away into a rainy day fund to pay for the first-phase bike route program.

Thursday's discussion centered on the \$5.6 million the county is getting from the second phase of President Barack Obama's American Reinvestment and Recovery Act stimulus package and \$5.8 million from the state Regional Transportation Surface Transportation Program.

Commissioners also voted to give \$100,000 from the reserve fund to the Watsonville Bicycle-Pedestrian Safety Task Force to expand its safety programs in South County. Another \$680,000 in rainy day money will pay for road improvements to Empire Grade Road. Those changes leave \$1 million in reserve.

RTC FUNDS \$11.4 MILLION IN PROJECTS

Reconstruct 38th Avenue between Brommer Street and Capitola Road, Capitola: \$438,000

Install roundabouts at Pacific Avenue and Beach Street, and Pacific Avenue at Center Street, Santa Cruz: \$1 million

Build a sidewalk and possible bike lane along Whispering Pines, Scotts Valley: \$350,000

Repair Bear Creek Road, Soquel-San Jose Road, Soquel Drive: \$2.1 million

Rehabilitate Green Valley Road, Watsonville: \$2 million

Various road repairs countywide: \$1.5 million

Build auxiliary lanes project on Highway 1 from Soquel Avenue to Morrissey: \$360,000

Replace two passenger vans for UC Santa Cruz's vanpool program: \$66,000

Fund the Freeway Service Patrol tow service to broken down motorists on highways 1 and 17: \$180,000

Promote the RTC's Rideshare and Park and Ride programs: \$410,000

Ecology Action's transportation program at Cabrillo College: \$120,000