

Purchase of 32-mile rail line slated for fall

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SANTA CRUZ -- Long-stalled plans to bring the Union Pacific rail line under public ownership are back on track, local planners say, and the 32 miles of railroad that run from Watsonville to Davenport could be turned over to the county's transportation agency as soon as October.

The rail corridor has been hailed as a major component of an expanded and greener transportation network for the region, opening up the possibility of a county-long trail for bicycle commuters and even a route for passenger trains.

"I thought there were lots of hurdles that would keep it from happening," said Piet Canin, a transportation director at nonprofit Ecology Action and member of the community's strong lobby for alternative transportation. "I'm pleasantly surprised."

The announcement of a fall closing date is at least the third timeline the county's Regional Transportation Commission has proposed in as many years; previous deals for the sale have been derailed by disagreements over the line's cost and condition.

But Luis Mendez, deputy director of the Regional Transportation Commission, said last week that recent discussions with the national rail operator have been "positive" and that earlier stumbling blocks have been removed.

Negotiations between the Regional Transportation Commission and Union Pacific are private, but both sides have acknowledged that a main point of contention has been who would pay for needed repair work and how much.

After transportation commissioners signed a letter of intent to pay \$19 million for the line in 2004, structural assessments revealed that as much as an additional \$13 million would be needed for line upgrades, much of it going to trestles that date back 100 years.

"That halted pretty much everything," Mendez said.

The Regional Transportation Commission has secured money to buy the rail line: \$11 million from the transportation measure Proposition 116 and \$10 million from the state. But a final price is still being negotiated.

More decisions await the Regional Transportation Commission if and when the sale goes through -- like what to do with the rail line, a decision that is complicated by the county's lack of transportation funding.

"The idea is to preserve the corridor and let future generations decide what the best thing to do with it is," said Supervisor Ellen Pirie, who sits on the transportation agency's board. "We don't want to lose this opportunity like other communities have."

Nearly \$6 million set aside for the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail could go toward construction of a rail-trail, planners say, but some estimates put the price of opening the corridor to hikers and bikers at \$30 million.

A proposed countywide sales tax that would have lent funds to the project as well as provided seed money for passenger trains fell through earlier this year. The county transportation agency, as a result, has put new projects on hold.

Freight trains currently running between Davenport and Watsonville would continue under the county agency's ownership.

Canin, with Ecology Action, suggests that building a rail-trail is not prohibitively expensive, and that relatively flat parts of the corridor could be converted to trail rather easily, like stretches in Santa Cruz and Live Oak.

"You could put in two miles of rail-trail here and two miles there," he said. "Hopefully, that would reduce car trips, and parents would feel safer having their kids on a bike in car-free corridor, going to school or the Simpkins Swim Center."

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