

County of Santa Cruz

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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August 7, 2015

Will Kempton, Executive Director
California Transportation Commission
1120 N Street, Room 2221 (MS-52)
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Mr. Kempton:

As members of the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (RTC), we are seeking information regarding Santa Cruz County's 32-mile branch rail line. In 2012, the CTC (California Transportation Commission) generously agreed to release Proposition 116 funds to the RTC in order to purchase the line, providing one of the most significant investments in local transportation infrastructure in a generation. Since that time, the RTC has contracted with a common rail carrier, completed an award-winning master study on sanctuary scenic trail, conducted a passenger rail feasibility study, as well as invested in upgrades and repairs along the length of the rail corridor.

All of these actions support possible future uses of the rail right of way and will help inform the RTC's decision-making regarding the highest, best use--or uses--of the line. This is a critical goal as the rail corridor is one of three main travel arteries along which mobility between northern and southern population centers in our county may be improved, mobility that is essential to our region's economic future and environmental well-being.

Given that the rail line was purchased using Proposition 116 rail funds, the RTC was required by the CTC to implement some level of rail service, which the RTC has already done. RTC staff has repeatedly confirmed that the current level of seasonal passenger rail service fulfills the CTC's requirements relative to the use of Proposition 116 funds. However, a recently completed rail feasibility study gives the RTC a broader basis from which to consider expanded passenger rail service for commuters, students, and tourists. While the study provides a basic framework as to how such a service could become possible, it also presents a host of complex challenges to making extensive passenger rail service a reality in the foreseeable future.

As policymakers, it's always best to make decisions with as much information as possible. We believe the rail study gives us a snapshot of expanded passenger rail service on the line, but we do not believe we have a strong understanding of how other uses could either complement or replace rail service on the corridor should rail service be deemed infeasible or impossible due to exigent circumstances. These other uses,

such as bus rapid transit (BRT) or a multi-modal trail, should be explored along with any other feasible alternative in order to provide the fullest data set for our Commission's evaluation. We are not advocating for any particular use, nor are we advocating for divestment of the rail line. We would simply like to have more information about other options such as a "trail only" use, or a combined trail and BRT use, so that we can fully vet our decision regarding use of the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line. Many in the community have expressed interest in these same questions and we feel it is essential that we have definitive answers to these questions before we move forward with any funding measure. We would also like to know what steps are needed to provide the level of detailed analysis necessary for the RTC to seriously consider expanded passenger rail service.

The RTC is in the process of considering a countywide transportation sales tax measure, which may include rail elements. Before the Commission pursues this, we believe exploring all avenues available to the Commission are essential to the success of the measure. We are not advocating for any particular use, nor are we advocating for divestment of the rail line. We simply want to be able to demonstrate to the community due diligence in review of all possible scenarios associated with future transportation elements on this corridor and information from the CTC is essential in that process.

To that end we would like the following information:

1. Is a "trail only" option something that would be allowed by the CTC?
2. If so, what are the repercussions relative to the Proposition 116 funds? What are the various options available to the RTC to mitigate these?
3. Is there any other relevant information the CTC would like to provide to the RTC regarding options for our rail line?

We fully understand that the CTC has already expressed concerns about our use of Proposition 116 money to purchase our rail line, and also understand that asking these questions may be cause for further concern. The CTC's letter to the RTC from 16 years ago made it very clear that there were some doubts about the viability of rail service here and whether the RTC was serious about using the Proposition 116 funding for its intended purpose. Over the course of the ensuing 16 years, CTC commissioners and opinions may have changed, while it is certain that the policy-making environment has changed. Because of this, it is imperative that we get a new assessment of the requirements, steps, and process for all options on the line. It is vitally important that the RTC's decisions regarding the use of the rail line are unassailable, and until we can directly state that we've explored every alternative, our decisions will not be viewed by the community as credible or definitive. In order to establish that passenger rail service as envisioned in the feasibility study will provide the greatest benefit to the community, we must have a full understanding of all our options.

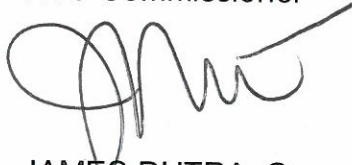
Given the timeframe in which the RTC will be considering next steps relative to the recently completed rail feasibility study, we request that the CTC provide the requested information on or before September 15, 2015. We have initiated similar correspondence to the Surface Transportation Board.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.



Sincerely,

ZACH FRIEND, Supervisor
Santa Cruz County, Second District
RTC Commissioner



JAMES DUTRA, Councilmember
City of Watsonville
RTC Commissioner



CYNTHIA CHASE, Councilmember
City of Santa Cruz
RTC Commissioner



BRUCE MCPHERSON, Supervisor
Santa Cruz County, Fifth District
RTC Commissioner



DENNIS NORTON, Mayor
City of Capitola
RTC Commissioner

Cc: Congressman Sam Farr