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Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors
701 Ocean Street
Santa Cruz, CA 95060

March 23, 2024

Re: Environmental Impact Report (EIR), Coastal Rail Trail Segments 10/11
Meeting Date: March 26, 2024
Agenda Item No. 10

The Sierra Club appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Coastal Rail Trail Segments 10 and 11 Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR). The Sierra Club strongly supports the Rail Trail and the future of rail and active transportation in Santa Cruz County. We believe that the net effect of building transportation systems which include rail will have a positive overall environmental impact, due to the beneficial changes these facilities will make to our local culture--specifically around transportation, which is a very large source of a variety of pollutants. *The fact that this is an environmentally positive project **does not**, however, negate our responsibility to build the facility in a way that has the least possible impact on the environment.*

The Coastal Rail Trail segments 10 and 11, as outlined in the FEIR, pose an urgent and unavoidable threat to our invaluable biological resources, including Coastal Live Oak Woodlands and Forest, the soon-to-be federal Endangered Species-listed monarch butterfly, and the endangered black salamander, among other wildlife and natural habitats, which are all in immediate jeopardy. Moreover, removing a significant number of trees—803 in the Ultimate Rail Trail plan, of which 584 are Significant and Protected, according to the FEIR—will not only harm our biological resources but also worsen the climate crisis. The number of trees planned for removal in Segments 10 and 11 is nearly three times the amount as that listed in Segments 8 and 9, posing a substantial threat to our environment.

Preserving habitat is not just important; it is imperative for the survival of species such as the endangered Monarch butterfly, Santa Cruz black salamander, native coastal live oaks, and other essential biological resources. To ensure their survival, we offer the following comments and proposed further mitigations.

- **Comments with regard to FEIR Master Response A; Tree Removal and Mitigation:**
- The Sierra Club asserts that the extensive tree removal may be further mitigated by slight narrowing of the bicycle path in areas where there are significant trees just at the interior border of the railway, and that this mitigation approach should be used in those locations where numerous trees occupy this interior location. The Sierra Club notes that the FEIR justifies the loss of trees by referring to the Caltrans Highway Design Manual, Chapter 1000, *Bicycle Transportation Design*. The grim irony of this statement is not lost on the Sierra Club, as Santa Cruz County has for decades disregarded these standards in its road developments and redevelopments. County General Plan (GP) Policy 3.9.1 does indeed require that bikeways are designed in accordance with Caltrans standards. But those standards delineate bikeway widths, and other standards, that are routinely violated by the County in its current and new road designs. As a further example, GP Policy 3.9.3 dictates that “all arterials” shall be striped for bike lanes, and that on-street parking shall be limited where the need for a clear bike lane exists. **As the Sierra Club sees it, the County wishes to strictly adhere to Caltrans *Bicycle Transportation Design* standards in a location where slight deviation will save many trees, but routinely ignores these standards should they have any impact on automobile travel or automobile parking.** Again, the Sierra Club asserts that the extensive tree removal may be further mitigated by slight narrowing of the bicycle path in areas where there are significant trees just at the interior border of the railway, and that this mitigation approach should be used in those locations where numerous trees occupy this interior location. The retention of more mature trees is a much more effective mitigation than the proposed sapling replacements. The minimum 1:1 replacement ratio proposed, but only for certain species, may give the impression that these planned losses are compensated for. However, newly planted saplings are in no way equivalent to the retention of more mature trees, which provide far greater carbon sequestration and offer urban wildlife habitat.

- The tree loss raises the further concerns of loss of shade, and the creation of heat islands; retaining more border trees addresses this. The FEIR, at page 16, dismissively states that these effects cannot be readily determined, and that any attempt to do so would be speculative. The Sierra Club maintains that this response is inadequate.

Segments 10 and 11 contain a significant population of hundreds of mature trees, including coastal live oaks and non-native eucalyptus, which will require removal during construction of either Alternative 1 or Alternative 2 (Interim Trail with Rail Preservation), as well as the Ultimate Trail Configuration. Any project involving construction of a trail will incur the loss of natural resources; mitigation along these segments is critical to maintaining a core of urban greenery, contributing to temperature cooling, preserving moisture, and offering shaded spaces. These trees provide valuable habitat, shelter, and food sources for urban wildlife, in an area of heavy and increasing development. Minimizing this loss by slenderizing the trail in certain areas will help to mitigate against the afore-mentioned concerns.

Figure A.8-n illustrates one of the many locations where slight trail narrowing would preserve numerous significant trees:



- **Comment on Impact BIO-4; Effects on Avian Species:** The Sierra Club takes issue with the comments in the FEIR, at 3.3-64, that ascribe “less than significant impact with mitigation” for the impacts to bird habitat through tree loss. The assertion that this impact is less than significant “because birds have the ability to fly and select suitable nesting habitat elsewhere outside the project boundary” is directly contradicted by the earlier statements that “birds that search for and select breeding habitat as a result of habitat loss may cause increased competition for habitat elsewhere. Mitigation such as replacement tree planting and enhancement cannot completely compensate for this loss of habitat because of the lag time between the Project and when replacement trees would be mature enough to provide suitable habitat for birds.” The lag time is discussed in the FEIR as 20 years. Despite this clear statement of significant impact, the impact is somehow found to be less than significant in a later section. The Sierra Club again notes that a better mitigation is to minimize the tree loss by slenderizing the trail in certain areas, thus allowing greater retention of mature trees, as discussed above.

- **Further Biological Concerns; Bats:**

- The Sierra Club notes that bats are declining in numbers and critical aspects of ecosystem.

CEQA compliance as well as good governance requires that if any current or historic cavity or crevice habitat used for bat roosting, hibernation or reproduction is found, whether or not bats are present, the trail route or configuration shall be modified or adjusted to preserve the subject trees. If not physically feasible to retain them, the trees shall be replaced on a 5:1 basis with the same species in adjacent suitable habitat. Because trees take decades to reach an age and size suitable for bat habitat, bat houses shall be installed in adjacent suitable habitat to replace the demolished bat sites on a 10:1 basis. In like fashion, bat houses shall be installed in suitable nearby habitat to replace any bat roosts, maternity sites or hibernacula identified in any demolished bridges, culverts or other physical structures on a 10:1 basis. A bat house installation and habitat restoration program should be implemented, and shall be modified and expanded until bat utilization exceeds that of the demolished habitat, and maintained in perpetuity.

- **Comments with regard to Response to Commenter 1 (State of California – Natural Resources Agency; Department of Fish and Wildlife)**
- California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has made it clear that there are significant impacts to monarch butterfly habitat in their comment letter. The FEIR responses to these serious concerns are inadequate, and the statements that the FEIR cannot be revised to incorporate their recommendations are inappropriate. CDFW has made specific recommendations about tree retention in the area. Again, the FEIR refers to the Caltrans trail width “requirements”. As noted above, the County routinely disregards these requirements for the bicycle lanes and pathways. The Sierra Club recommends that the County utilize whatever justifications it has been using for decades to deviate from bicycle path/lane width requirements again in this case, in order to partially alleviate the tree losses pointed out as significant impacts in the CDFW letter. Should the County, in this case, rigidly adhere to the Caltrans *Bicycle Transportation Design* standards in this case, where slight deviation would relieve some of the significant impacts of tree loss, the County can rest assured that any further deviation from these standards on any future road project will be robustly contested.

The Sierra Club appreciates this opportunity to comment on this important environmental review document. We appreciate that our recommendations will be carefully considered.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Guth". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'M' and a stylized 'G'.

Michael Guth

Executive Committee Chair

Santa Cruz Group of the Ventana Chapter of the Sierra Club