



SANTA CRUZ COUNTY GROUP

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Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission
1101 Pacific Ave., Suite 250
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Dear SCC-RTC Commissioners and Staff,

The Sierra Club has been a strong advocate for robust public transit. Public transit addresses a number of challenges we face, providing equitable access to opportunity and activities while reducing the need for driving and traffic. Rail transit is a critical component of addressing climate change. The Sierra Club's commitment to supporting rail nationally and locally can be seen in the full 2023 "Sierra Club Transportation Statement" via the link found within the [executive summary](#) describing the importance of rail in averting the worst impacts of climate change. The Santa Cruz County Zero Emission Passenger Rail and Trail (ZEPRT) project is critically important not only to locals who travel for work, school, or want to visit the many beaches and local parks, the ZEPRT is a critical connection to the State Rail Network.

The 2023 Santa Cruz County 6th Cycle Housing Element outlines the goal of building close to 5,000 more housing units over the next 8 years in the unincorporated area, and similarly, incorporated cities are ramping up, building more housing to meet their Housing Element's as well. The county has been experiencing rapid growth in traffic and an increase in Vehicle Miles Traveled with over 70% of greenhouse gases (GHGs) attributed to transportation.

The Sierra Club supports the critically important Santa Cruz County Zero Emission Passenger Rail and Trail (ZEPRT) project as a critical addition and an important option which will provide community members a way to easily connect with over 90 parks, including Nicene Marks, Natural Bridges, and Schwann Lagoon, access 40 schools, shopping, theaters and restaurants from the West Side, Aptos Village, Capitola Village, theaters along 41st Ave, and in Watsonville. This important transportation corridor is within one mile of over half of the county's population (per census blocks) making it accessible to over half the county's population to walk or bike to the trail and rail. We must prioritize robust rail transportation, alongside the coastal rail-trail, in order to provide clean transportation options for generations to come, for locals traveling throughout the county and to help alleviate traffic due to the increasing number of tourists coming to Santa Cruz, especially during the summer to escape the heat on the other side of the Santa Cruz Mountains. In addition to improving local travel, given that the SCC-ZEPRT will also connect to the greater State Rail Network, which will provide car free transportation access to the entirety of California's public transportation network and beyond, including High Speed Rail, Caltrain, BART, AMTRAK, and other connectors into local transit networks.

Regarding options reviewed on the SCC-ZEPRT online open house, we recommend the following:

Ridership Model:

We concur that using a hybrid approach to ridership modeling may be more useful and suggest including the STOPS model as it ensures our ability to apply for federal transit funding. This approach of selecting options which will maximize our ability to qualify for federal, state, and other potential funding is critical. We encourage the SCC-RTC to consider more stops, in particular Ohlone Park in Watsonville from where a considerable number of residents travel to more northern portions of the county to work. Equitable access to opportunity, including work, Cabrillo, and UCSC is important as well as including access to the West side parks, shopping and restaurants, including Natural Bridges as destination and gateway to the extensive and world class coastal trails which lead to Wilder Ranch and the soon to be open Cotoni Coast Dairies National Monument.

Conceptual Alignment and Stations:

When possible, consider options, alignments and additions that will allow for implementation of the trail as soon as possible. While we prefer the trail be maintained alongside the rail as much as possible, when there are deviations from the rail line, it is important that the trail quality be maintained with fully protected separated barriers from traffic so that pedestrians and cyclists can make use of the trail without having to navigate and compete for space with surface traffic. Sharrows are not wise especially through key areas where there is significant speeding traffic, like on Sumner. We recommend functional traffic calming mitigation whenever the trail runs adjacent to a road.

We would like to question if all of the rail stations need to be 350 feet long, which is about as long as a football field? While appropriate in the busier areas along the rail line, it seems inappropriate in many places where smaller protected 'rail stops' might be significantly more affordable and reasonable. The visual nature of our rail line should keep in theme with our communities along the rail line with a smaller visual profile and a more village appeal while not sacrificing service or scalability into the future. Keep in mind that all rail stops and stations should be fully navigable by wheelchair, with walking aids, and for people who are visually or hearing impaired. Level boarding is ideal in all cases.

The speed of the rail system as it passes through a number of areas along the rail line will be significantly slower than 60MPH, and more likely closer to 30-35 MPH. Consider these speeds when proposing moving tracks and reducing curvatures along the tracks as it may not be necessary in some areas given the lower speeds we anticipate. We also propose short dwell times and more rail stops to key locations.

Additional stop at Ohlone Park – Please consider adding this additional rail stop in Watsonville as this is a key location where community members travel to and from work. Having two versus just one rail stop in Watsonville is far more equitable and will help address current commuter patterns from Watsonville northwards.

Access to and from the West Side – Access to the West Side is imperative as this will provide important equitable access to parks and beaches as well as jobs to people from Watsonville and all along the coast. Access to the West side is a key feature that can also incentivize tourists to leave their cars behind if they are able to access incredible features like Natural Bridges, Cotoni Coast Dairies, and burgeoning restaurant and shops located right along the rail line. The alternate proposed stop at Depot Hill may be fine for some portion of the stops, but the walk from the original proposed rail stop is walkable and only a few short blocks from

downtown. We recommend the resumption of the downtown ‘trolley’ shuttle or something along those lines to provide easy access for people who have limited mobility.

Beach Street – The complicated nature of this area should be addressed thoughtfully, working to keep solutions simple and affordable. It seems reasonable that the at-grade options will be more financially feasible compared to an elevated option for rail. Consider minimizing car traffic in this area and propose access to parking lots from other streets, like 2nd street into the ‘Beach Street’ parking lot. Consider making a majority of Beach Street transit and pedestrian/bike only.

Coastal Rail Trail Alignment 17 and 18 – We support options which will provide safe protected equitable access to the beach (e.g. Beach Street option) for Watsonville community members who have not had easy safe non car access to the beach and consider access to Ohlone Park, both via rail and a trail stop, as there is a significant population in this area.

Sumner Ave, et. Al. – We do not support sharrows as a part of the rail trail. This will put cyclists and pedestrians who may not have much experience in danger. These streets require significant traffic calming, regardless, and both local and tourist travelers on the trail may have minimal experience. It is imperative that we maintain a fully protected trail throughout the length of the trail, whether or not the trail is adjacent to the rail.

Jade Street Park – While option 3 is ideal for its maintaining the trail adjacent to the rail line, option 1 would be the more ideal of the two non-adjacent models. Brommer Streets needs significant traffic calming but is a main vein for both car and bike traffic. Again, the importance of a continuation of a fully protected bike/ped experience is important for the integrity of the rail-trail experience and safety.

Cabrillo Station – Having a station at McGregor with either a ped/bike overpass or underpass is ideal as this will place the stop closer to Cabrillo than the New Brighton option and allows walkable, bikeable access to Cabrillo with a potential shuttle stop on the opposite side of Hwy 1.

Station Features:

All of the station features listed, with the exception of parking, are important including shelter, seating, kiss and ride, ticket vending, wayfinding/public information, bike parking, connections to other trails and key features, and portable potties/restrooms. Regarding parking, with over half of the county population living within a mile of the tracks, we recommend a powerful marketing and incentive program which encourages people to walk and bike to the rail stops and trail rather than park and ride. We recommend connecting shuttles, when feasible.

Quiet Zones:

We approve of quiet zones whenever possible, especially during early morning and late night hours, but understand this feature is up to the local jurisdictions.

Funding and Service Types:

Access to funding for capital funds, in particular federal funds, may be limited based on the type of service chosen and we understand that currently light rail vehicles do not qualify for federal funding. Therefore, at this time and for this and other reasons, we recommend the ‘multiple unit train’ option.

Summary

We appreciate the in-depth work by the RTC staff that is being done to move us forward towards implementing Zero Emission Passenger Rail Transit (ZEPRT) for Santa Cruz County. Passenger rail is a critically important addition to our community in providing current and future generations with a truly robust equitable option to travel throughout the county, and connect with the rest of California and country, in a way that will not have the detrimental impact on degrading the environment and increasing traffic while providing significantly more people who currently are unable to afford or do not want to drive a car access to opportunity. We look forward to continuing to work with the RTC to bring this important project to fruition.

Thank you for your consideration,

Michael Guth,
Chair, Santa Cruz Group of the Ventana Chapter of the Sierra Club