ON SIERRA CLUB LETTERHEAD

DATE

Chair Leopold and CommissionersSanta Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission1523 Pacific AvenueSanta Cruz, CA 95060

Re: Local Group of the Sierra Club supports an amended UCS Scenario B

Dear Chair Leopold and Commissioners,

After reviewing the Unified Corridor Investment Study, the Santa Cruz Group of the Sierra Club feels that an amended Scenario B would best meet the environmental and social equity principles of the Sierra Club.

Scenario B, amended to remove the projects that increase auto capacity, prioritizes transit and active transportation. Scenario B serves the highest number of transit users, and includes a future rail option. According to national Sierra Club Transportation Policy, “rail systems are most effective in stimulating compact development patterns, increasing public transit patronage and reducing motor vehicle use.” (policy updated 9/2018)

We do not support the RTC staff modified “Draft Preferred Scenario,” presented at the RTC’s November 15, 2018 meeting, as compared to Scenario B. Particularly, the Preferred Scenario incorporates more auto-centric projects and drops out Bus Rapid Transit – Lite for the Soquel Ave. – Freedom Blvd. corridor.

While the Sierra Club supports Scenario B over the other scenarios, Scenario B could be enhanced by addressing the following concerns:

* As now called for by the State of California, recognize the potent effects of induced travel, which has been shown to make automobile-oriented capacity projects in congested corridors self-defeating after not many years. Don’t sink major resources into auto capacity measures like Highway 1 ramp metering.
* Special attention must be paid to the avoidance and mitigation of environmental impacts during the design phase of transportation projects. We must do a better job of implementing modern transportation design that protects plants and animals.
* Use the environmental review process required by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) to analyze and make better choices among meaningful project alternatives, including alternate designs for public transportation on the rail corridor. CEQA is not merely a confirmation process for project decisions already cemented in place. Accordingly our support of an amended Scenario B is not unconditional support for each component. We need environmental review of each project for informed decision making.
* Continued use of the rail line for transport of goods by freight should be included in an amended Scenario B. Every freight rail car removes three to four trucks from the highway, improving safety for road users and reducing greenhouse gases.
* Increased safety for bicyclists and pedestrians should be the design criterion for any modifications to Mission Street intersections.
* We urge future upgrades of public transit modes to all electric as soon as possible. This conversion coupled with the County’s participation in Monterey Bay Community Power will further reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Transportation is the highest source of CO2 emissions in the United States. As the national Sierra Club Transportation Policy states, transportation strategies must “protect natural systems and open space, reduce vehicle miles traveled, and promote environmental and economic justice and access for all, including low-income communities and those most impacted by pollution.” (policy updated 9/2018)

The Sierra Club would welcome working with the RTC and local jurisdictions to increase the environmental gains of Scenario B with more protection for local sensitive habitats.

Sierra Club policy opposes the building or widening of limited access highways and states that HOV lanes should come from converting existing highway lanes rather than constructing new lanes.

When it comes to the environment, an amended Scenario B can be clearly best of the four scenarios analyzed in the Step 2 Analysis. We urge the RTC to support Scenario B with the enhancements we identified above.

As you may know, the October 8, 2018 Special Report issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns us that the time to act to avoid catastrophic climate changes and limit global warming to 1.5ºC is “rapidly closing.” We urge you to make a wise decision on the UCS scenarios sooner rather than later, with climate action a guiding concern.

Respectfully submitted,

Gillian Greensite, ChairSierra Club, Santa Cruz Group

cc: George Dondero, RTC Executive Director