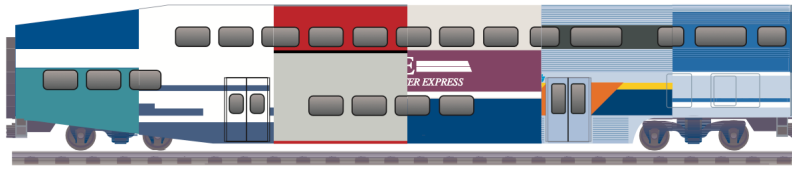


# TRAC

Train Riders  
Association  
of California



1017 L Street, Suite 765  
Sacramento CA 95814

(916) 557-1667  
[www.calrailnews.org](http://www.calrailnews.org)  
[president@calrailnews.org](mailto:president@calrailnews.org)

December 20, 2024  
email to: [info@scrtc.org](mailto:info@scrtc.org)

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Riley Gerbrandt  
Santa Cruz Regional Transportation Commission  
1101 Pacific Avenue, Suite 250  
Santa Cruz, CA 95060

Re: Comments, Santa Cruz County's Zero Emission Passenger Rail and Trail Project

Dear Mr. Gerbrandt:

The Train Riders Association of California, TRAC, has advocated for 40 years for better passenger rail service. We were sponsors of Prop. 116, which provided the funding for the purchase of the Santa Cruz Branch Line. We are most interested in seeing passenger service start in the near term. Below are our comments on how to accomplish that and on other Plan topics as well. Our most important recommendation: **The Project should intentionally be designed to fit within the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) definition of a "Small Starts" project, or alternatively, fit within the Federal Railroad Administration's (FRA) criteria for intercity passenger rail corridor projects.**

To fit within the FTA definition of a Small Starts project, the project cannot cost more than \$400 million for ALL transit components (e.g., not including trail features). That is much less than the estimates in the various project studies we've seen. TRAC notes that the most recent SCCRTC preliminary studies of rail and trail projected about 6,000–7,000 daily riders on the Santa Cruz–Watsonville route, based on an assumption of 30-minute headways. That simply isn't enough ridership to warrant a federal/state investment on the scale of the current project estimates. TRAC believes that Trump Administration 2.0 will look favorably upon projects that stay within the Small Starts \$400 million threshold and have significant private sector participation and financing. The following are our suggestions on several ways to stay within this limit.

### The TRAC Plan

In 2022, TRAC developed a plan for Santa Cruz County rail service that envisioned a system supported by both the public and private sectors. This study is available at: <https://calrailnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/TRAC-Santa-Cruz-Rail-Study-0722.pdf>

TRAC proposed three possible strategies, with the overriding goals of maximizing the cost-effectiveness, ridership and revenue potential of the Santa Cruz Branch Line in the shortest possible implementation time. These included potential dinner and

excursion trains between Santa Cruz and Davenport, a section of the Line that would not interfere with potential transit service. Another strategy was beach shuttles aimed mainly at tourists, with used Diesel Multiple Units (DMUs) from Europe<sup>1</sup> and substantial discounts for area residents.

Such privately funded and operated shuttles could serve as the basis for year-round rail passenger service, with visitor and resident fare revenues that could significantly reduce potential subsidy requirements. TRAC envisioned that beach shuttle visitor revenues would enable rail services to be operated during non-peak months with much smaller subsidies.

Another strategy was intercity passenger rail service from the San Francisco Bay Area to the Monterey Bay Area, with trains splitting at the new station in Pajaro, managed by the Transportation Agency for Monterey County (TAMC), with separate sections operating to both Santa Cruz and the Monterey Peninsula<sup>2</sup>.

In our 2022 proposal, TRAC projected about 13,000 daily riders on the line with 15-minute headways between Santa Cruz and Seaside/La Selva Beach, with 30-minute service to Watsonville.

We suggest SCCRTC develop project options that include private-sector participation, such as excursion and dinner trains on the line between Santa Cruz and Davenport, interim beach shuttles until full service can be implemented (e.g., year-round service, not just beach season), and S.F. Bay Area to Santa Cruz/Monterey trains.

#### TRAC's Recommendations on Holding Down Project Costs

- a. Upgrade EXISTING tracks, installing new ties, tie plates, rail fasteners, and new rail where needed to replace worn rail, to meet FRA's requirements for Class III trackage (59 mph). Avoid the current plan's all-new welded rail and concrete ties following total removal of existing rails.

Between most stops, service will likely operate at top speeds of 40-45 mph due to relatively close station spacings. Trains will only be able to reach 59 mph between Seaside/La Selva Beach and Watsonville due to wider station spacing.

- b. TRAC strongly recommends the project be constructed to regional rail standards, like those used by the 9-mile regional rail line between San Bernardino and Redlands. SCCRTC appears to be aware of the distinction between light rail standards vs. regional rail standards, since FTA can fund the former but FRA will only fund lines built to

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<sup>1</sup> There are a few European DMUs with sufficient on-board room so conversions to either hydrogen or battery-electric propulsion is possible.

<sup>2</sup> For reasons not entirely clear to TRAC, TAMC and Monterey-Salinas Transit (MST) are insisting on tearing out the tracks between Marina and Seaside for a busway. The problem with the busway is it is now estimated to cost more than \$100 million to serve less than 3,000 daily riders. This compares to previous proposals for intercity service from the S.F. Bay Area, including TRAC's, that is likely to have more passengers—and far more passenger revenues—than the busway. Caltrain is now working on a 4-car battery-electric version of its Swiss-designed 7-car Electric Multiple Units (EMUs) that could provide service to Santa Cruz and Monterey with separate sections, dividing at the new Pajaro station.

regional rail standards. Typical light rail standards could balloon project costs to well over a billion dollars.

- c. Evaluate the remaining useful lives of the Santa Cruz Branch Line railroad bridges. In the short term, only replace or substantially upgrade those with no life left. Develop a capital plan to gradually replace other bridges as they come to the end of their useful lives, e.g., over the next 15-30 years. After the line has demonstrated substantial ridership, obtaining grants from state and federal sources will be much easier. Bridges and other structures are the financial “wild cards” which could easily balloon capital costs beyond the \$400 million threshold without careful planning and oversight.
- d. It may be possible to avoid the cost of Positive Train Control (PTC) signaling if an arrangement for temporal separation of freight can be reached with Roaring Camp. If this is not possible, use a communications-based PTC system. We do not see the need for wayside signaling if PTC signals are shown to operators inside vehicle cabs. Installing wayside signaling in addition to communications PTC is another financial wild card that could have project costs balloon out of control (this can be more than complete grade, ties, and track replacement in some U.S. rail projects).
- e. Engineering and project management fees for trackwork and related items should not be more than 10%-12%, with contingencies at a similar level for this work. Upgrading existing trackage and total replacement of ballast, ties, and rails is a standard private railroad practice, based on industry-wide standard plans. SCCRTC could possibly handle this part of the project in-house, using railroad contractors and inspectors.
- f. Station designs for platforms and platform amenities should be standardized, requiring minimal customization at various locations. Of course, details such as bus and pedestrian access, parking (if needed) will vary.
- g. TRAC suggests platform heights of 550-600 mm (22-24 inches), the most common platform height used in Europe and is consistent with floor heights of potential vehicles such as Stadler FLIRTs now manufactured in Utah, Siemens’ regional rail vehicles, etc.,. TRAC notes that passenger operations shared with freight service can now operate with 22-24” platforms, where 8” platforms or gauntlet tracks were previously required under now-obsolete California Public Utility Commission railroad clearance standards.
- h. TRAC suggests the consideration of purchasing used European DMUs and converting them to zero-emissions operations using hydrogen or battery-electric propulsion. If Stadler vehicles were used, the Swiss firm's new North American division in Utah could provide the conversions. Other options include Siemens vehicles and other providers.
- i. If TRAC’s proposed strategies are implemented, vehicles may be the costliest line item. It may be possible, however, to purchase new rolling stock if overall project infrastructure capital costs can be held to \$200 million or so.

#### TRAC's Recommendations on Structures/Alignments

- a. An area where Bay Area–Santa Cruz/Monterey trains could split at Pajaro would be also desirable. Perhaps a second passenger track separate from the “mainline” tracks could be constructed.

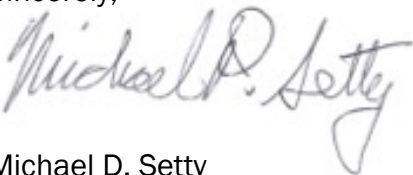
- b. TRAC believes TAMC's proposed Pajaro station should have a track layout allowing passenger trains to/from Santa Cruz to travel north or south on the Union Pacific Coast Route. This would make possible through-service north to San Jose and San Francisco, and south to Salinas, the Monterey Peninsula, and other destinations.
- c. We agree with FORT et al that pedestrian subways and tunnels should be avoided, with the possible exception of TAMC's proposed Pajaro station.
- d. A short rail extension to the UCSC Coastal Science Campus should be considered.
- e. A station at New Brighton Beach should include a bicycle/pedestrian bridge across the Highway 1 freeway. Perhaps this bridge should allow axle loadings for small automated, electric buses or lightweight shuttles providing a direct connection to Cabrillo College (as TRAC suggested in earlier Santa Cruz rail papers).

#### TRAC's Recommendations on Stations

- a. TRAC agrees with Friends of the Rail and Trail (FORT), Coast Connect and other local advocacy groups that Westside Santa Cruz needs rail service. This impacts where we believe additional stations should be located.
- b. If rail service cannot be extended via limited street running to Santa Cruz Metro's new downtown transit center, a station at Chestnut and Laurel should be constructed. In our view, trains could "stub in" here from both the Watsonville line and West Santa Cruz line.
- c. A Chestnut/Laurel station would connect directly to frequent bus service to UCSC, which opens the potential for future extensions to the Harvey West area. This would require a single-track bridge over Highway 1 for passenger vehicles (but not for freights or Roaring Camp heritage trains).
- d. We agree with FORT et al that a second Watsonville station is needed in the vicinity of Ohlone Parkway. This would provide expanded access to Watsonville neighborhoods and employment locations.
- e. We agree with FORT et al about the need for stations between Aptos and Seascapes, at Seascapes, and La Selva Beach. We also agree with FORT et al regarding a possible stop at State Park Drive, providing direct access to Seaclyff State Beach and surrounding neighborhoods and businesses.

Thank you for considering these comments.

Sincerely,



Michael D. Setty  
President, Train Riders Association of California