

Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission

Zero-Emission Passenger Rail & Trail Project

Preliminary Purpose and Need Statement

Background

The Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line (SCBRL) is a continuous transportation corridor that spans approximately 32 miles of Santa Cruz County from the community of Pajaro in northern Monterey County to Davenport on the north coast. The study area includes 22 miles of the SCBRL Right-of-Way (ROW) from Pajaro to Natural Bridges Drive on the west side of Santa Cruz, and runs parallel to the often-congested Highway 1 while connecting to regional and state rail lines in Pajaro in Monterey County.

In 2012, the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (RTC) acquired the rail line, which has been a transportation corridor since the mid-1870s, bringing it into public ownership. RTC has an administration, coordination and licensing agreement with a short line rail operator that provides freight service along the SCBRL.

In 2015, RTC completed the Rail Transit Feasibility Study, which included a broad technical analysis of several public transportation service scenarios (developed based on input from the public), ridership projections, capital and operating cost estimates, review of vehicle technologies, and evaluation of funding options. Service scenarios were evaluated against multiple goals and objectives identified by the community, and compared to other rail transit systems in the nation. The report also discussed integration with other rail corridor uses, connectivity to bus and other rail services, and identified feasible options for further analysis, environmental clearance, engineering, and construction.

In 2021, the Transit Corridor Alternatives Analysis & Rail Network Integration Study (TCAA/RNIS) evaluated the feasibility of rail transit service on the SCBRL. The TCAA/RNIS established the planning-level data-driven basis for the project's Purpose and Need supported by feedback from collaboration with multiple agencies, elected officials, and public input. The TCAA/RNIS analyzed various transit alternatives leading to the identification of a locally-preferred alternative being Electric Passenger Rail that provides the greatest benefit to Santa Cruz County residents, businesses and visitors in terms of the triple bottom line goals of improving economy, equity, and the environment. The Purpose and Need statement identified below was developed using the information derived from the TCAA/RNIS.

The Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail Network (MBSST) is a proposed 50-mile bicycle and pedestrian pathway along the coast of Santa Cruz County, from the San Mateo County line in the north to the Monterey County line at Pajaro. The MBSST merges plans for a bicycle/pedestrian trail along the rail line – including coastal alignments and neighborhood spurs – into a connected network that will overlap and converge to provide safe and convenient travel choices. The Trail Network system's "spine" is intended to be the continuous Coastal Rail Trail, a bicycle and pedestrian trail largely within the 32-mile SCBRL ROW, adjacent to train tracks. The Trail Network will connect to other modes of transportation, like bus and rail. Some of the segments of the Coastal Rail Trail have been completed, while others are either under construction, in environmental review, or in planning.

Project Needs

The current state of Santa Cruz County's transportation infrastructure is strained and unable to effectively serve the community. The existing transportation network is an impediment to a stronger local economy, improved environmental and public health, improved equity and a better quality of life.

- **Diverse Transportation Needs not Fully Met and Slow Transit Travel Times.** Commuters, youth, seniors, low-income individuals, people with disabilities, businesses, and visitors have a diverse set of transportation needs which are not being fully met by the current transportation system. Many local residents cannot drive, or do not have the income needed to own a vehicle, and are dependent on transit service which at present is infrequent with slow service times.
- **Deficiencies in Roadway Travel and Insufficient Alternative Travel Options.** Local roads and highways are increasingly congested while the County population continues to grow which results in ever increasing roadway travel times, increasing economic losses due to time spent in traffic, and increased on-road vehicle emissions. Due to roadway congestion, on-road transit service times are lengthy, which makes transit less attractive to those with personal vehicles. The SCBRL corridor provides a critical link as an alternative to congested roadways between Watsonville and Santa Cruz.
- **VMT Reduction Mandates.** State mandates require reductions in how much people drive and provision of expanded transit is needed to support reductions in VMT.
- **Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Emission Reduction Mandates.** The California Sustainable Communities and Climate Protection Act of 2008 (SB 375) requires the establishment of regional greenhouse gas emission targets, California Senate Bill 32 (2016) requires the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 40% below 1990 levels by 2030, and California Assembly Bill 1479 (2022) requires reaching carbon neutrality by 2045. The transportation sector is one of the largest contributors to GHG emissions accounting for approximately 40% of emissions statewide.
- **Bicycle and Pedestrian Linkages Missing and Safety Concerns.** Bicycle and pedestrian facilities do not provide continuous linkage between communities in Santa Cruz County. For example, the current system of bicycle and pedestrian facilities in Santa Cruz County has gaps between Rio Del Mar and Pajaro. The SCBRL corridor provides a unique opportunity for continuous bicycle and pedestrian connectivity and user experience. Active transportation facilities are needed to support not only community connection but also community health. On-road bicycle and pedestrian facilities include safety risks due to traffic proximity.

Project Purpose

The project's fundamental purpose is to support and improve equitable multimodal transportation options in Santa Cruz County. Constituent elements of the project purpose include the following:

- **Provide increased access to convenient, accessible, and reliable public travel options.**
- **Improve transit connections to community activity centers supporting the local economy and providing better access between housing and jobs.**

- **Integrate with plans for future land use.**
- **Reduce transit travel times and improve transit system reliability.**
- **Enhance bicycle and pedestrian connectivity and safety.**
- **Promote alternative transportation modes to increase overall transportation system capacity and reliability, improve health and reduce mortality.**
- **Provide a critical link between the cities of Watsonville and Santa Cruz and communities in between as an alternative to congested roadways.**
- **Reduce vehicle miles traveled and associated GHG emissions.**