

# City of Watsonville

## MEMORANDUM



**DATE:** 02/06/24

**TO:** Courtney Lindberg, Public Works & Utilities Director

**FROM:** Murray Fontes, Public Works & Utilities Department Assistant Director

**SUBJECT:** Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commissions Zero Emission Passenger Rail and Trail Project Preliminary Purpose and Need

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### RECOMMENDATIONS

I recommend that the Watsonville City Council receive a presentation from Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation (RTC) staff and provide input on the Preliminary Purpose and Need for the Zero Emission Passenger Rail and Trail Project (Attachment 2).

### BACKGROUND

In 2012, the RTC acquired the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line (Branch Line), which provides a unique opportunity for Santa Cruz County to have a dedicated transportation facility connecting the county's two largest cities, Watsonville and Santa Cruz, and the communities in between. Subsequently, several planning studies evaluated public transportation and trail investment options for Santa Cruz County, including Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail Network Master Plan, Rail Transit Feasibility Study, Unified Corridor Investment Study, and Transit Corridor Alternatives Analysis. These culminated in a preferred scenario comprising high-capacity zero emission passenger rail with a multi-use bicycle and pedestrian trail (Coastal Rail Trail) along the Branch Line. Seventeen miles of Coastal Rail Trail projects have been constructed or are under development as separate projects.

In 2022, the RTC solicited proposals from qualified and experienced professional consultants to develop the project concept and subsequently the environmental documentation for the proposed passenger rail transit and coastal rail trail project. The scope includes zero emission passenger rail along the Branch Line between Pajaro and Santa Cruz, and the remaining segments of the Coastal Rail Trail including between Rio del Mar and Pajaro (Segments 13 through 20), and the Capitola Trestle (Segment 11, Phase 2). The Commission awarded a Professional Engineering Services Agreement to HDR Engineering, Inc. to complete the Project Concept Report for the Zero Emission

Passenger Rail and Trail Project in 2023. The Project Fact Sheet (Attachment 1) provides additional information on the Project.

## **DISCUSSION**

The first milestone for the Project includes seeking input on the Preliminary Purpose and Need Statement. The Preliminary Purpose and Need Statement identifies and documents the needs and constraints, which drive the development of transportation improvements in the Project study area, as well as the Project purpose, which guides the development of the conceptual alternatives analysis and ultimately the project concept options that are further evaluated in subsequent Project tasks.

On January 11, the Project Development Team, consisting of the consultant team and staff from the Cities of Watsonville, Capitola, and Santa Cruz, County of Santa Cruz, Transportation Agency for Monterey County, Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District and the Commission recommended the Preliminary Purpose and Need Statement (Attachment 2) for community input.

Public engagement providing project information and soliciting input on the Preliminary Purpose and Need milestone is ongoing from February 1 through March 4 and include presentations to RTC committees, partner agencies and stakeholders, in addition to the virtual and in-person open houses. The Project's virtual, web-based open house kicked off on February 5 at [www.zeptr.com](http://www.zeptr.com) and will be live through the duration of this public engagement milestone. In-person open houses were held earlier this week in both Watsonville and Santa Cruz. The Project Open House Flyer (Attachment 3) provides more information on the Project's engagement opportunities.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Watsonville City Council input on the Project Purpose and Need will guide the development of the project concept as the first milestone for the Project. The project team will develop the initial draft alignment and seek community input scheduled for the summer of 2024 as milestone 2, followed by the refined alignments, station locations, and facilities in the fall of 2024 as milestone 3. The Project Concept Report is milestone 4 and is expected to be completed in early 2025.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

1. Project Fact Sheet
2. Preliminary Purpose and Need Statement
3. Project Open House Flyer

## ZERO EMISSION PASSENGER RAIL AND TRAIL



# FACT SHEET

## FEBRUARY 2024

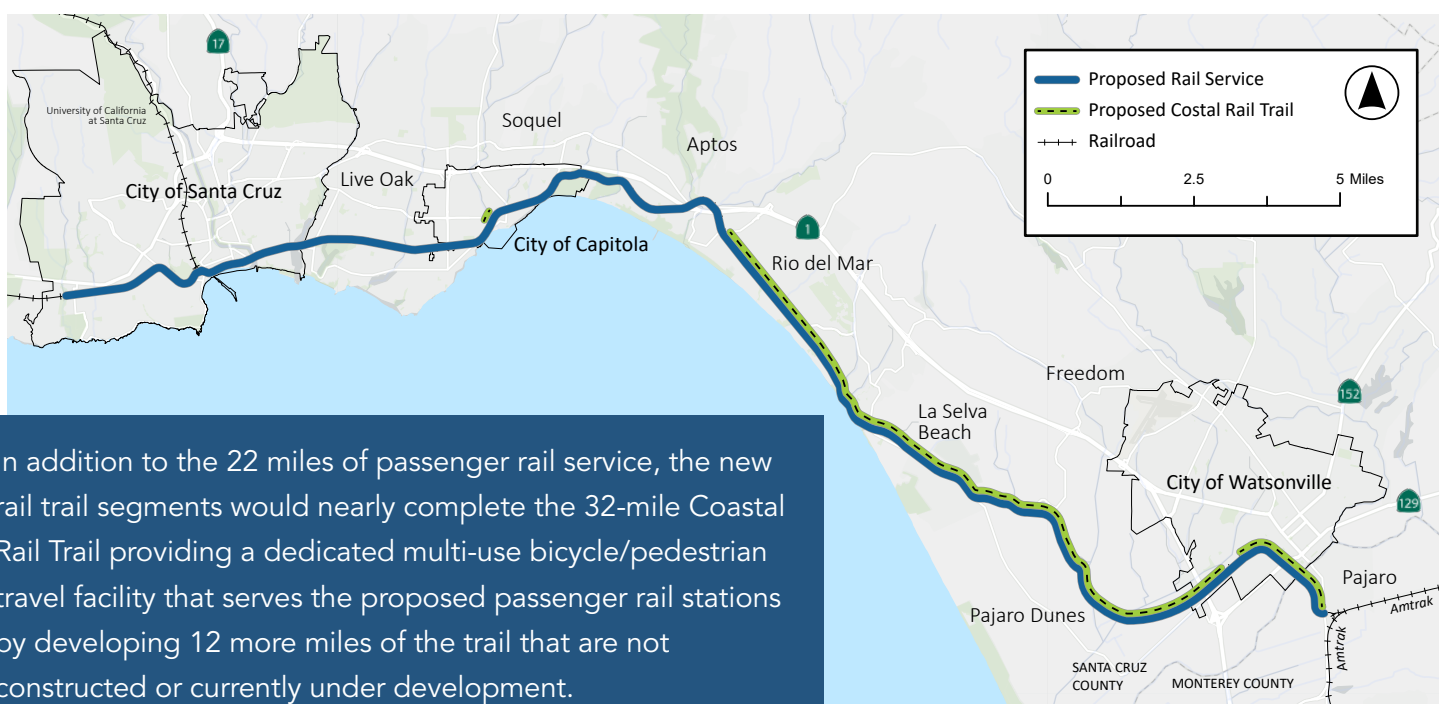
## ZERO EMISSION PASSENGER RAIL AND TRAIL PROJECT

The Zero Emission Passenger Rail and Trail Project proposes a new high-capacity passenger rail service and stations on approximately 22 miles of the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line (SCBRL) from the city of Santa Cruz in the north to Pajaro, just south of Watsonville. The project also proposes 12 miles of Coastal Rail Trail: Segments 13-20 from Rio del Mar Boulevard through the community of La Selva Beach and the city of Watsonville, as well as the Capitola Trestle reach (Segment 11, Phase 2).

The project aims to take advantage of the publicly owned rail right-of-way to provide passenger rail service to connect the most populated areas of Santa

Cruz County to each other and to the greater region as well as to provide integrated intercity travel options for riders on the Central Coast. Passengers will be able to bypass Highway 1 and local arterials that are highly congested, providing high-quality connections to key destinations within the county.

The project builds on studies previously completed by the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (RTC), including the Rail Transit Feasibility Study in 2015 and the Transit Corridor Alternatives Analysis & Rail Network Integration Study in 2021, which identified a locally preferred alternative for Electric Passenger Rail.



## PROJECT SCHEDULE

In October 2023, RTC began work on the Project Concept Report. This report is anticipated to be completed in spring 2025 and will define, evaluate, and develop a project build concept to be advanced into subsequent tasks. Key milestones for this phase of work are listed to the right.

Throughout these activities, meaningful, proactive, and focused public and stakeholder outreach will occur, including several virtual and in-person public workshops and open house meetings.

Following completion of the Project Concept Report, the project will move into Preliminary Engineering and Environmental Documentation, and then through Right-of-Way and Final Design.

## Project Concept Report – Milestones and Engagement Opportunities

WINTER  
2024

- PRELIMINARY PURPOSE AND NEED STATEMENT
- PROJECT LOOK AHEAD

★  
WE ARE  
HERE

SUMMER  
2024

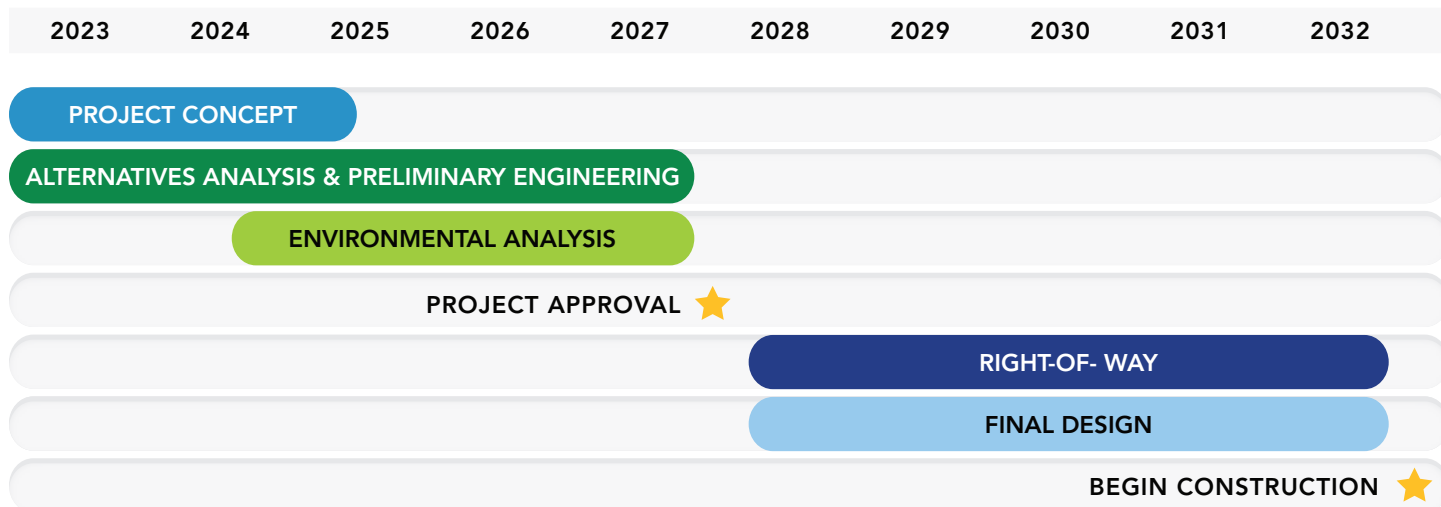
- CONCEPTUAL ALIGNMENTS
- ZERO EMISSION VEHICLE TYPES

FALL  
2024

- REFINED CONCEPTUAL ALIGNMENT
- STATION/LAYOVER FACILITY AND MAINTENANCE LOCATIONS

WINTER  
2025

- DRAFT PROJECT CONCEPT REPORT
- PRELIMINARY COST ESTIMATES
- NEXT STEPS FOR PROJECT DEVELOPMENT



## STAY CONNECTED

The RTC and its project partners are committed to meaningful public engagement throughout the project's lifecycle. Community participation is vital to aid in minimizing impacts while meeting the needs of riders, bicyclists, and pedestrians. There are many voices in our community, and we want to hear yours.



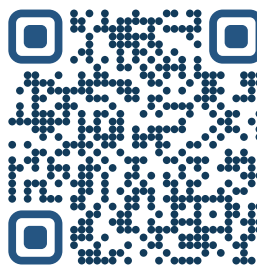
Visit the project webpage for updates and sign up for the contact list: [sccrtc.org/zeprt](https://sccrtc.org/zeprt)



Email us with comments or questions: [zeprt@sccrtc.org](mailto:zeprt@sccrtc.org)



Attend future public meetings and provide comments throughout concept development



SCAN HERE





## 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.

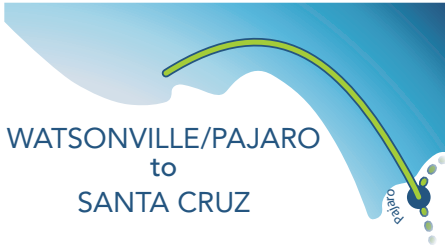
## Project Purpose

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.

# ZERO EMISSION PASSENGER RAIL AND TRAIL

WATSONVILLE/PAJARO  
to  
SANTA CRUZ



## Join us for an Open House

Learn about the **Zero Emission Passenger Rail and Trail Project** and provide input on the project's Preliminary Purpose and Need.

The project proposes new passenger rail service and stations on approximately 22 miles of the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line and 12 miles of Coastal Rail Trail: Segments 13-20 as well as the Capitola Trestle reach (Segment 11, Phase 2).

### IN-PERSON

**Monday, Feb. 12**

6 – 7:30 p.m.

Ramsay Park Family Center  
1301 Main St., Watsonville

**Tuesday, Feb. 13**

6 – 7:30 p.m.

Live Oak Grange  
1900 17th Ave., Santa Cruz

### VIRTUAL

Beginning **Feb. 5** at  
**[sccrtc.org/zeprt](https://sccrtc.org/zeprt)**



or scan this QR code

