



Rails moving ahead of trails

Excursion trains are sought over protests of area residents.

By Cathy Locke - Bee Staff Writer

El Dorado County trails advocates were reminded that trains have first dibs on the railroad right of way they covet for recreational uses.

The Board of Supervisors last week approved a document soliciting proposals for operating excursion trains along part of the Sacramento-Placerville Transportation Corridor, formerly the Southern Pacific railroad right of way. The corridor was purchased in 1996 by a joint powers authority consisting of El Dorado and Sacramento counties, the city of Folsom and Sacramento Regional Transit.

The 53-mile corridor, extending from 65th Street near Brighton Avenue in Sacramento County to just west of Placerville in El Dorado County, was acquired under the National Rail System Act. Commonly known as the "rails to trails" act, it preserves the area for future rail use while allowing alternative and recreational uses, including hiking, biking and equestrian trails.

El Dorado County has been working to develop trails along sections of the 28 miles of the corridor in its jurisdiction. At the same time, groups including the El Dorado and Sacramento Historical Railroad Association have aired proposals to provide excursion rail service from Folsom's Sutter Street area into El Dorado County.

"We at the JPA have knowledge of three different entities ... that want to make use of the right of way, and we can't just say 'no,'" said Supervisor Jack Sweeney, who represents the county on the joint powers authority board.

The JPA board directed staff members in May to prepare a request for proposals. The document sets parameters that would allow the joint powers authority to compare proposals to "see if they are exclusive of each other, and if they are, which one is best," Sweeney said.

Potential uses for the Folsom-to-Placerville section of the corridor were discussed at two public meetings in the spring. More than 130 people attended the session in Placerville, Sweeney said, and more than 60 were present in Folsom.

Some residents told the Board of Supervisors last week that they do not want rail service restored along the historic train route. James Waterman of Shingle Springs said he represents about 300 families who want the corridor reserved for trails.

"Under no circumstances do we want to see trains, excursion or otherwise, running through our county or neighborhoods," he said.

Waterman said he attended meetings of the joint powers authority, and no one explained who would benefit from excursion trains. He speculated that they are intended to serve the Foothill Oaks Casino to be built on the Shingle Springs Rancheria off Highway 50, or El Dorado County's wine country.

Bob Smart, a county Parks and Recreation Commission member, said it is important to coordinate trail development with potential rail service. In places where the right of way runs through narrow cuts in hillsides, he said, it would be difficult to provide a trail alongside the rail line.

"People want safe places to ride their bikes, ride horses and walk," Smart said, adding that the joint powers authority needs a timeline for considering rail proposals.

Shingle Springs resident Art Marinaccio said he was involved in efforts to continue rail service along the corridor when Southern Pacific decided to cease operations, but he said studies indicated at the time that rail operations were not economically feasible.

Marinaccio said he does not think excursion trains would be profitable. He argued, however, that the request for proposals should be issued, with the stipulation that any proposal must include a financial plan.

Marinaccio, who also represents the Taxpayers Association of El Dorado County, said the county should not subsidize such ventures.

Sweeney said it is important the public understand that acquiring the corridor under the "rails to trails" act preserved the railroad right of way. Had that right of way been abandoned, the land would have reverted to private property owners, making development of a trail system, as well as right-of-way acquisition for light rail, more expensive.

At least one group interested in operating excursion trains has indicated it could help fund trail development, Sweeney said. He and fellow supervisors recommended that the request for proposals include an introductory statement that the county's goal for the corridor is to provide connectivity for trails and that it expects excursion rail to help fund that effort.

Sweeney noted that the request for proposals also must be approved by the three other agencies in the joint powers authority.