



Freight Trains and Passenger Trains

White Paper No. 14

When the first trains resume running in Marin and Sonoma Counties in the coming years, they will likely be carrying freight, not passengers.

Freight trains do not need a vote of the people to return to the rails. Nor does freight service need new track or new stations.

And those are just a few of the ways that freight rail service differs from the proposed Sonoma-Marin Area Rail Transit passenger train project.

Though freight and passenger train service have been intertwined along the North Coast rail corridor since the 19th Century, today the two operations are overseen by two separate government agencies. Sonoma-Marin Area Rail Transit – SMART – is charged with establishing and operating passenger train service, while the North Coast Railroad Authority – NCRA – is responsible for freight rail service. Each has its own board of directors composed of members – most of them elected officials from other government agencies – representing the region served by its rail service.

The historic Northwestern Pacific (NWP) railroad alignment generally parallels Highway 101. After the SMART District was created by Assembly Bill 2224 in 2003, SMART took ownership of all of the NWP right of way south of Healdsburg, and also the trackage that runs east from Novato along Highway 37 to a connection with the national rail system at Lombard in Napa County. The NCRA retains ownership of the rail line north of Healdsburg. (SMART's proposal to operate passenger trains from Larkspur to Cloverdale includes using NCRA's track between Healdsburg and Cloverdale.)

The NCRA has a perpetual and exclusive easement to operate freight rail service on the SMART-owned tracks from Healdsburg south to the Ignacio Wye at Highway 37 in Novato and then east to Lombard. While it needs approval from the Federal Railroad Administration before it resumes the freight rail service that was suspended in 2001, the freight agency does not need voter approval to use these tracks. The NCRA in September 2006 entered into an agreement with a private rail operator to reinstate freight service along the corridor. In 2007, NCRA issued a Notice of Preparation of an Environmental Impact Report that indicated it planned to operate at a level of service up to three round-trip trains per day through the corridor between Lombard and

Willits, including the SMART-owned tracks between Novato and Healdsburg where SMART trains will operate.

Since that time, NCRA increased its projection of the proposed level of service. Because NCRA's proposed level of service is now greater than what was studied in the SMART Final EIR in 2006, SMART in late 2007 included a study of revised cumulative impacts of freight and passenger service in the SMART Supplemental Environmental Impact Report. That report, recently released in its final form, concludes that freight and passenger trains can operate together in the SMART railroad corridor at SMART and NCRA's proposed levels of service without the need for freight trains to run during the night. The single significant and unavoidable impact of that combined service will be noise. The majority of that impact will be from freight trains, which are longer and louder than SMART's proposed two-car passenger trains.

AB2224 requires SMART to work with NCRA to achieve "safe, efficient and compatible" operation of both passenger and freight service in Marin and Sonoma Counties. To that end, SMART and NCRA will have an operating agreement to outline the parameters of freight service on SMART's tracks.

That agreement will cover a number of areas, including the amount SMART will charge NCRA in "trackage fees," which are essentially user fees on the right-of-way. It also will describe how freight and passenger trains will co-exist on the line.

When SMART begins passenger train operations, it will control the dispatching of trains along the corridor, as NCRA's freight easement is subordinate to regularly scheduled passenger train service. In other words, freight operations must work cooperatively with SMART's passenger train schedule. In general, this means that freight trains will not be moving through the corridor during the peak morning and afternoon commute hours when SMART is running.

SMART's financial plan includes money for upgrades to the corridor that are not likely to be made by NCRA. For example, while NCRA is investing about \$37 million in upgrades to the corridor for freight operations, SMART proposes to spend more than \$100 million for track and bridge rehabilitation, which includes installing welded-rail track that does away with the gaps that cause the familiar "clackety-clackety" sound of a train going by. SMART also proposes to spend about \$4.5 million – three times the amount included in its 2006 ballot measure – on quiet zone infrastructure. Quiet zones are at-grade rail crossings, usually with enhanced safety improvements, where trains are exempt from sounding their horns. (See White Paper No. 15.)

There has been much public speculation regarding how high a level of service NCRA will be able to achieve, and when. While it makes for an interesting debate, it has nothing to do with the merits of the SMART project proposal. NCRA will achieve its levels of service based upon its own economics and the economy of the North Coast without regard to SMART. It will operate with or without SMART.

For more information about SMART, go to www.sonomamarintrain.org or call SMART's information lines in Marin, 415-419-3510, or Sonoma, 707-538-2323.