

Freight trains raise ruckus in Novato

By Rob Rogers

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Novato and Marin County officials say the Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit board greatly underestimated the number of trains that will pass through downtown Novato under a plan for restored freight train service.

SMART's 2006 environmental impact report declared that a maximum of six freight trains per week would pass through Novato.

But a June 19 memo by Mitch Stogner, executive director of the North Coast Railroad Authority, said the agency expects up to 32 freight trains a week to use the route between Willits and Lombard - a national rail interchange near Napa - which travels through downtown Novato.

"It's difficult to predict what, exactly, the number of freight trains would be because there are so many variables," said Stogner, whose agency received a promise of \$43.2 million in state and federal transportation funds in November 2006. "The estimate (of six trains per week) we provided SMART in May of 2006 was based on what we knew at the time."

The latest estimate has raised eyebrows among Marin County and city officials, who are now asking for a new environmental analysis.

"I'm concerned about the increased impact of freight trains when you're going from six trains a week to 32," said Supervisor Judy Arnold. "There has to be another analysis. ? Those trains are going to be running through Novato's newly restored \$10 million downtown."

SMART Executive Director Lillian Hames said her board had already hired a contractor to perform a study based on the new information.

"SMART is committed to doing an environmental analysis of the impact of freight on passenger rail service," Hames said. "We're moving forward with that now."

Yet the number of freight trains could increase even further if, as planned, the state rail authority extends its route to Eureka, carrying freight from a proposed container port in Humboldt County and new rock quarry at Island Mountain near the Eel River. The trains also could carry garbage from Sonoma County through Novato to a disposal site in Nevada or Utah.

Freight service along the 142-mile route between Lombard and Willits is slated to begin by the end of 2008, according to the authority. Service ended in 2001 after federal rail authorities declared the line unsafe. Advocates say restored service could help save fuel and reduce truck traffic on Highway 101.

The revelation prompted Novato City Manager Dan Keen to ask SMART for a new analysis of the environmental impact of freight service in Marin County.

The Novato City Council will consider the issue at its Tuesday meeting and hold a public forum on the matter July 19. In addition, Arnold, a former Novato councilwoman, will ask her board to endorse Keen's letter at the Board of Supervisors' meeting Tuesday.

"From six to 30 - that's a big switch in terms of the impact for Novato," said City Councilman Jim Leland. "There are eight crossings in Novato where the trains will have to sound their horns under new federal regulations. Things could be very noisy in town."

In addition to the issue of freight traffic frequency, SMART's 2006 environmental report also declared the trains' length to be 12 cars each. In fact, according to Stogner's memo, the length of the authority's trains would range from 25 to 65 cars.

Stogner said neither his authority nor SMART knew the length or frequency of freight trains on the Willits-Lombard route at the time of the SMART report because the state had not yet hired a private company to operate the train.

Hired in September 2006, that operator, the Northwestern Pacific Railroad Co., includes Woodside Consulting Group of Palo Alto, Evergreen Natural Resources of Oroville and Berg Holdings of Novato.

According to the company's business plan, its directors expect to restore rail service between Lombard and Willits - including the replacement or repair of 53 grade crossings, 38 bridges, 50,000 railroad ties and 62 miles of track - at a cost of \$42.6 million.

Company officials expect to ship 1,800 to 2,000 carloads of freight annually between Lombard and Willits, with principal shippers including Standard Structures, Mead Clark, Diablo Timber, Dairyman's Co-Op and Hunt and Behrens.

Northwestern Pacific officials also expect to secure a contract with Sonoma County to transport 4,056 carloads of solid waste annually - at a cost of \$2.02 million - to a disposal site in Nevada or Utah. Eventually, the freight trains could begin hauling Marin's trash as well, the business plan states.

Extending rail service north to South Fork could cost \$108 million, according to the company's plan. However, Northwestern Pacific said it believes the work would be worthwhile, because it would provide access to the Island Mountain quarry in an area inaccessible by truck. The company expects annual revenues from quarry freight to equal \$30 million.

The plan has been vigorously opposed by Friends of the Eel River, a Humboldt County environmental group that said it believes the quarry proposal could add another 10 freight trains a day to the route.

Voters in Marin and Sonoma counties narrowly defeated a half-cent sales tax to pay for SMART service in 2006. The SMART board had hoped to return the issue to the ballot in 2008. In his June 19 memo, however, Stogner said the SMART board was worried that news of the additional freight trains could delay a vote on the tax and asked rail officials to hold off on releasing information about the new freight numbers.

Despite the time and expense of a new environmental study, opponents of the SMART project say the agency needs to know how additional freight trains will affect Marin.

"From a legal point of view, SMART is obligated to do an environmental study based on the number of freight trains NCRA will ultimately be operating during the next 20 years, all the way to Port Eureka," said Mike Arnold, co-chairman of the Marin Coalition for Effective Transportation.

That's a much larger analysis than the state rail authority is prepared to conduct, Stogner said, adding that his agency would have to conduct an entirely new environmental study should the port or quarry plans become a reality.

"Our estimates are only for freight traffic at the south end of the line," Stogner said. "What happens north of Willits is too speculative at this point. It's not foreseeable. If it comes to pass, we'll have to have another environmental document."

But Arnold wants any environmental analysis of the project to be as comprehensive as possible.

"The city of Novato has asked for a supplemental EIR," Arnold said. "I think we may need something bigger than a supplement."

Both the railroad authority and SMART will share use of the tracks connecting Marin with Sonoma County. Stogner could not say whether freight trains would have to run at night to accommodate SMART's passenger trains.

"We have to have an operational agreement with SMART," Stogner said. "We'll be sharing the tracks with the passenger operation, just as is the case in other parts of the country."

Stogner insisted that the freight project had changed little from its inception, and that concern over the number of freight trips through the county was misplaced.

"What you're hearing now is a small group who is opposed to train service, who always has been and always will be, and they've revved up their propaganda machine," Stogner said.

Because the North Coast Railroad Authority is a state agency, neither county nor city officials have jurisdiction over its activities. But Arnold said the county is not without recourse should the prospect of restored freight trains become a cause for concern.

"We can always contact our elected representatives," Arnold said. "They're the ones who appropriate money for this project."

MEETING

Marin supervisors will discuss plans for increased freight operation during a 10 a.m. meeting Tuesday in Room 330 of the Civic Center in San Rafael. The Novato City Council will discuss the same issue at a 6:30 p.m. meeting Tuesday. The council will also hold a public forum on the matter at 6:30 p.m. July 19. Both meetings will take place at Novato Unified School District headquarters at 1015 Seventh St.