

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2021



Contact: Darrin Peschka
Program Manager, Government and Community Relations
Ventura County Transportation Commission
dpeschka@goventura.org
(805) 642-1591, ext. 108

VCTC, Sierra Northern Railway Reach Deal on Santa Paula Branch Line Lease

The Ventura County Transportation Commission (VCTC) has reached an agreement with Sierra Northern Railway to operate and maintain the Santa Paula Branch Line Railroad for freight, film and tourist services.

VCTC commissioners approved the agreement at a special meeting Thursday, December 16, at Camarillo City Hall. The agreement finalizes nearly a year of negotiations on a new operating contract for the Santa Paula Branch Line, a 32-mile rail line that extends from the city of Ventura to just east of Piru in eastern Ventura County.

Sierra Northern Railway, based in Northern California, is the freight division of Sierra Railroad Company. The 35-year agreement allows for Sierra Northern Railway to lease the Santa Paula Branch Line from VCTC for railroad purposes.

Sierra Northern Railway plans to develop a freight customer base that serves existing and future businesses along the branch line, providing freight and transload services, installing spur lines, and storing and switching rail cars. The company also plans to support film and television production on the branch line and to provide tourism and seasonal passenger services through its sister company, Mendocino Railway, which operates the historic Skunk Train in Mendocino County.

“The Santa Paula Branch Line is a unique asset in Ventura County,” said Ventura County Supervisor and Commission Chair Kelly Long. “This agreement with Sierra Northern Railway will ensure the branch line continues to provide economic opportunities for businesses and residents of the Heritage Valley and continues a tradition of tourist trains on the line.”

The agreement limits where rail cars may be stored, as well as prohibits storage of rail cars used to transport hazardous materials.

The historic and scenic Santa Paula Branch Line has long been used for freight delivery, as well as for tourist and holiday train excursions. The branch line has also been a film location for major motion pictures and television commercials.

Sierra Northern Railway is a sister company to Mendocino Railway, operator of the Skunk Train, which transports passengers through the redwoods of Mendocino County, and the Sacramento River Fox Train. Mendocino Railway also designed, built, and operates a two-seat recumbent

railbike service on two railroads in Northern California and has plans to expand railbike service on the Santa Paula Branch Line.

The agreement is expected to spark new economic activity in the Heritage Valley by continuing to support and grow freight rail operations, tourist excursions and a future recreational trail.

VCTC Commissioner Lynn Edmonds, a member of the Fillmore City Council, said: "I am excited for the return of the branch line excursions and to welcoming more tourists to our beautiful valley and cities. I am pleased that VCTC was able to respond to the many suggestions by the community to create a strict contract with Sierra Northern Railway. Sierra Northern will offer many additional services available for everyone to choose from. I am looking forward to taking a ride in the passenger rail car as well as on the proposed railbikes, zipping along on the rails."

VCTC Commissioner Andy Sobel, a Santa Paula City Council member, said: "I'm very excited about this agreement with Sierra Northern Railway, and I'm looking forward to seeing these developments as the agreement moves forward."

Mark Watkins, VCTC interim executive director, said: "Few operators out there have the qualifications we were looking for. Sierra Northern brings the expertise, the financial resources, and the operating ability for both freight and tourism trains. When VCTC cast the net more than a year ago, this was the type of operator VCTC was looking for, and we're happy to have them."

About the Santa Paula Branch Line

Originally built in 1887 by the Southern Pacific railroad, the line through the Santa Clara Valley was originally part of Southern Pacific's main line connecting Los Angeles and Santa Barbara. The Santa Paula Branch Line was abandoned east of Piru in 1984 as result of washouts between Piru and Saugus.

VCTC purchased the Santa Paula Branch Line from Southern Pacific, a predecessor of the Union Pacific Railroad, in 1995 for the purpose of protecting the assembled corridor for transportation-related purposes and eventually providing a route for potential commuter service.

About the Ventura County Transportation Commission

The Ventura County Transportation Commission is the regional transportation planning agency committed to keeping Ventura County moving. Program information is available at goventura.org.

###