



**VENTURA COUNTY TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION  
SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE (SPBLAC)**

[www.goventura.org](http://www.goventura.org)

**AGENDA\*  
THURSDAY, MARCH 16, 2023  
9:00 AM**

*\*Actions may be taken on any item listed on the agenda.*

**Ventura County Transportation Commission  
751 E. Daily Drive, Suite 420  
Camarillo, CA 93010**

In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Government Code Section 54954.2, if special assistance is needed to participate in the Commission meeting, please contact VCTC staff (805) 642-1591 ext. 101. Notification of at least 48 hours prior to meeting time will assist staff in assuring those reasonable arrangements can be made to provide accessibility to the meeting.

**1. CALL TO ORDER**

**2. ROLL CALL**

- 3. PUBLIC COMMENTS** (For items not on the agenda) – *Each individual speaker is limited to three (3) minutes or less or less as set forth below. The Committee may, either at the direction of the Chair or by majority vote of the Committee, waive this three-minute time limitation. Depending on the number of items on the agenda and the number of speakers, the Chair may, at his/her discretion, reduce the time of each speaker to two (2) minutes. In addition, the maximum time for public comment for any individual item or topic is thirty (30) minutes unless extended by the Committee. Speakers may not yield their time to others without the consent of the Chair. Any written documents to be distributed or presented to the Committee shall be submitted to the Clerk of the Board. This policy applies to Public Comments and comments on Agenda Items.*

*Under the Brown Act, the Committee should not take action on or discuss matters raised during the Public Comment portion of the agenda which are not listed on the agenda. Committee members may refer such matters to staff for factual information or to be placed on the subsequent agenda for consideration.*

4. **APPROVE SUMMARIES FROM 10/21/2021 AND 03/23/2022 – SPBLAC MEETING – PG. 3**
5. **COMMITTEE MEMBERS/STAFF REPORT** – *This item provides the opportunity for the SPBLAC members and VCTC staff to report on attended meetings and any other items related to SPBLAC activities.*
6. **ADDITIONS/REVISIONS** – *The SPBLAC may add an item to the Agenda after making a finding that there is a need to take immediate action on the item and that the item came to the attention of the SPBLAC subsequent to the posting of the agenda. An action adding an item to the agenda requires 2/3 vote of the SPBLAC. If there are less than 2/3 of the SPBLAC members present, adding an item to the agenda requires a unanimous vote. Added items will be placed for discussion at the end of the agenda.*
7. **SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE BUDGET FOR FISCAL YEAR 2022/2023 – PG. 7**  
**Recommended Action:**  
*Review draft Fiscal Year 2023/2024 budget for the Santa Paula Branch Line and provide comments to staff.*
8. **SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE STORM DAMAGE – PG. 11**  
**Recommended Action:**  
*Receive and file a report on damage to the Santa Paula Branch Line railroad infrastructure sustained during Winter Storms in January 2023.*
9. **SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE RAILROAD LEASE AND OPERATIONS UPDATE – PG. 13**  
**Recommended Action:**  
*Receive and file a report on the status of the Santa Paula Branch Line Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement with Sierra Northern Railway.*
10. **SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE RAIL CAR STORAGE – PG. 15**  
**Recommended Action:**  
*Receive and file a report on Rail Car Storage on the Santa Paula Branch Line.*
11. **SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ENCROACHMENTS AND LEASING UPDATE – PG. 17**  
**Recommended Action:**  
*Receive and file a report on Santa Paula Branch Line Encroachments and Leasing.*
12. **SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE TRAIL MASTER PLAN UPDATE – PG. 19**  
**Recommended Action:**  
*Receive and file a report on a forthcoming proposed update to the Santa Paula Branch Line Trail Master Plan and provide feedback on the conceptual scope of work.*
13. **ADJOURN**



**VENTURA COUNTY TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION  
SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE  
(SPBLAC)**

**October 20, 2021**

**9:00 AM**

[www.goventura.org](http://www.goventura.org)

**SUMMARY**

**Ventura County Transportation Commission**

**Held via Zoom Webinar**

**751 E. Daily Dr., Suite 420, Camarillo, CA 93010**

**1. CALL TO ORDER**

Commissioner Sobel called the meeting to order.

**2. ROLL CALL**

Chair Long, Commissioners Edmonds, Sobel, Johnson, and La Vere were in attendance.

**3. PUBLIC COMMENTS**

None.

**4. APPROVE SUMMARY FROM 3/23/2021 SPBLAC MEETING**

Commissioner Edmonds made a motion to approve the minutes, seconded by Chair Long. The Committee approved the meeting summary by a vote of 5-0.

**5. COMMITTEE MEMBER / STAFF REPORT**

Chair Long announced that County of Ventura redistricting is underway and stakeholder engagement is needed for draft maps.

Commissioner Edmonds inquired about the status of a tour of the Branch Line, but none had yet occurred and would be revisited once a new Executive Director is in place.

**6. ADDITIONS / REVISIONS – None.**

**7. SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE 2020 BRIDGE INSPECTIONS – Receive and File.**

Amanda Fagan provided an overview of annual bridge inspection reporting process, with the 2021 inspections due by December 31, 2021. Staff had expected that the bridge inspections would be conducted by the new operator, but with the new Agreement not yet in place, VCTC would need to hire a new rail inspection contractor to complete the 2021 inspections. A draft Budget Amendment to complete bridge inspections was provided to the Committee. The status of bridge maintenance by the previous rail operator Fillmore & Western was discussed. The Committee requested a review

of the 2021 bridge inspections report results against bridge maintenance work completed by Fillmore & Western.

8. **SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ENCROACHMENTS AND LEASING UPDATE** – Receive and File.

Amanda Fagan provided an update on existing leases and portions of the Branch Line being used by adjacent landowners without agreements in place, and VCTC staff efforts to address encroachments on the Branch Line. Two new leases had been executed since the March 2021 Committee meeting, with Parallel Systems and Rancho Dos Vasos. The Committee discussed challenges in accessing Branch Line property and efforts to reach agreement with landowners on updated lease rates.

9. **SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE TRESPASS REMOVAL POLICY UPDATE** – Receive and File.

Amanda Fagan provided an overview of implementation of the Trespass Removal Policy in the City of Santa Paula. VCTC staff worked with the City of Santa Paula and Santa Paula Police Department, and developed tools and methods, to implement the Trespass Removal Policy and address encampments on the Santa Paula Branch Line. Steps to address vehicles parked on VCTC property was discussed. Cleanup efforts along the Branch Line were also discussed.

10. **SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE RAIL OPERATOR LEASE UPDATE** – Receive and File.

Amanda Fagan provided an update on the status of the rail operator lease negotiations with Sierra Northern Railway and introduced the Sierra Northern Railway leadership team to the Committee.

11. **ADJOURN**

Commissioner Sobel adjourned the meeting at 1:55PM.



**VENTURA COUNTY TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION  
SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE (SPBLAC)**

[www.goventura.org](http://www.goventura.org)

**AGENDA\***

**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 23, 2022**

**9:00 AM**

**SUMMARY**

**Ventura County Transportation Commission  
Held via Zoom Webinar  
751 E. Daily Dr., Suite 420, Camarillo, CA 93010**

**1. CALL TO ORDER**

Committee Chair Sobel called the meeting to order.

**2. ROLL CALL**

Commissioners Long, Johnson, Edmonds, and Sobel were in attendance. Commissioner LaVere was absent.

**3. PUBLIC COMMENTS (For items not on the agenda) – None.**

**4. APPROVE SUMMARY FROM 10/20/2021 – SPBLAC MEETING**

Commissioner Long made a motion to approve the minutes. Due to connectivity issues, the recording of this meeting was not clear regarding a second and vote to approve.

**5. COMMITTEE MEMBERS/STAFF REPORT –**

Executive Director Erickson thanked staff for their work on the Agreement with Sierra Northern Railway and remarked on the future potential of the SPBL.

Committee Chair Sobel stated that he had met with Assemblymember Bennett and his staff, and that they are supportive of a bike trail through the Santa Clara River Valley.

**6. ADDITIONS/REVISIONS – None.**

**7. SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE BUDGET FOR FISCAL YEAR 2022/2023 –**

*Receive and Comment.*

Amanda Fagan provided an overview of the proposed Fiscal Year 2022/2023 budget, including railroad operations and maintenance, staff time, and right-of-way maintenance. The proposed budget includes up to \$450,000 to reimburse Sierra Northern Railway for expenses related to railway and right-of-way maintenance consistent with the Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement. The draft budget is \$111,100 lower than the previous year due to reduced VCTC contribution to railroad maintenance. Revenues come

from lease revenues and fees, Local Transportation Fund (LTF), and State Transit Assistance (STA) sources.

Commissioner Johnson asked a question about costs for staff time to oversee private development along the Santa Paula Branch Line. Ms. Fagan explained that the staff responsibilities included oversight related to Hearthstone and Limoneira development projects.

Committee Chair Sobel asked a question about how to report requests for debris cleanup and encampment removal. Ms. Fagan stated that concerns can be reported to VCTC staff or to Sierra Northern directly.

**8. SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE 2021 BRIDGE INSPECTIONS –**  
*Receive and File.*

Amanda Fagan provided an overview of the annual bridge inspection process. In Fall 2021, VCTC released a Request for Proposals and selected an engineering firm, Wilson & Co., to complete annual bridge inspections for calendar year 2021. The bridges were inspected in December 2021, and results provided to VCTC through the Bridge Inspection Report in February 2022. Four bridges out of 37 inspected structures received the most significant findings, accounting for half of the total estimated costs of repairs. For the 2022 annual and future bridge inspections, the responsibility to conduct inspections and comply with bridge safety and management program requirements transfers to the Railroad operator, Sierra Northern Railway.

Handling of the costs of bridge repairs under the Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement was discussed. Ms. Fagan explained that Sierra Northern is responsible for bridge and other repairs to the railroad but may request reimbursement from VCTC of up to \$450,000. It is anticipated that Sierra Northern will exceed \$450,000 in costs to improve the SPBL, which is part of their long-term investment in the SPBL. Timing and potential State and Federal sources for bridge repairs and maintenance, and access to the railroad for bridge inspections were also discussed.

**9. SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ENCROACHMENTS AND LEASING UPDATE –**  
*Receive and File.*

Amanda Fagan provided an overview and update on efforts to assess and address encroachments and leasing activities on the SPBL. Encroachments and leasing activities relative to completion of the bike trail and addressing concerns of neighboring landowners regarding the potential for trespass by trail users onto adjacent property were also discussed.

**10. SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE RAIL OPERATOR LEASE UPDATE –**  
*Receive and File.*

Amanda Fagan provided an update on the status of the implementation of the Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement with Sierra Northern Railway. Sierra Northern has begun active operations on the railroad, including two new rail-related businesses, and continues to develop freight customers for the line. Sierra Northern is communicating with local businesses and community members. Marketing and branding is underway for tourist/excursion train services, with railbike service to begin first, followed by excursion train services. Representatives of the Sierra Northern Railway leadership team addressed the Committee regarding bridge and rail line inspections and repairs, trespass removal, replacement of railroad ties and other repairs, hiring activities, cleanup of the Fillmore Railyard, and signals inspections and repairs. Sierra Northern plans to apply for a CRISI grant from the Federal government for repairs to the bridges and rail infrastructure.

**11. ADJOURN**

Committee Chair Sobel requested any future agenda items. None were identified. The meeting was adjourned.



Item # 7

March 16, 2023

**TO: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE**  
**FROM: AMANDA FAGAN, DIRECTOR OF PLANNING AND SUSTAINABILITY**  
**SUBJECT: DRAFT SANTA PAULA BRANCH BUDGET FOR FISCAL YEAR 2023/2024**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

- Review draft Fiscal Year 2023/2024 budget for the Santa Paula Branch Line and provide comments to staff.

**DISCUSSION:**

The Draft Fiscal Year 2023/2024 Santa Paula Branch Line (SPBL) reflects the second full year of operations under the new Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement (Agreement) with Sierra Northern Railway (SNR). The Budget provides for operations and maintenance and associated costs for asset management, maintenance, and operational obligations along the thirty-two miles long railroad corridor. The budget also includes VCTC staff costs for lease and asset management, such as issuing new and updated leases and rights-of-entry and working with City and County partners and other stakeholders to update and implement the SPBL Trail Master Plan to complete the trail.

The Draft Budget includes operations and maintenance of the full SPBL right-of-way, with reimbursement of up to \$450,000 in expenses related to deferred and regular maintenance of the rail infrastructure and right-of-way, pursuant to the Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement. The Draft Fiscal Year 2023/2024 SPBL Budget is \$340,500 higher than Fiscal Year 2022/2023, due to the addition of storm response costs associated with the January 2023 storms (including reconstruction of the Sespe Creek Overflow bridge) and additional funding for consultant services related to the right-of-way survey and broadband.

Even with the inclusion of additional costs for storm response, right-of-way survey, and broadband coordination, the proposed budget reflects a reduced VCTC contribution to the operations and maintenance costs for the Branch Line of approximately \$8,000 compared to fiscal years prior to the SNR Agreement. Consistent with the previous fiscal year (2022/2023), the Signals Repair and Replacement and Non-Rail Maintenance expense categories have been absorbed into the Track Maintenance category in accordance with the Agreement.

Revenues for the Santa Paula Branch Line come from four primary sources: (1) Local Fees from lease revenue from the approximately 75 paying leases along the SPBL; (2) Local Fees from permits, filming, and rail car storage; (3) State Transit Assistance (STA); and (4) Local Transportation Funds (LTF). STA funds are used to cover the delta between Local Fee revenues and the deferred and regular maintenance reimbursement to Sierra Northern. LTF funds are used for VCTC staff salaries, benefits and indirect costs. It is anticipated that STA and LTF requirements for the SPBL Budget will be reduced over time as the Agreement with Sierra Northern matures.

**BUDGET TASK: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE****DIRECTOR:** Amanda Fagan**BUDGET MANAGER:** Amanda Fagan**OBJECTIVES:** Manage the Santa Paula Branch Line (SPBL) corridor.

**ACCOMPLISHMENTS:** The Ventura County Transportation Commission purchased the 32-mile long Santa Paula Branch Line railroad and right-of-way in 1995 with funding from a Federal Transportation Enhancement Activities (TEA) grant and local sources. With the purchase of the Branch Line came leases for cultivation, utilities, crossings, and pipelines, which provide a portion of the revenue needed to support the line. With these agreements comes the continual need to actively manage the SPBL.

In 2001, VCTC entered into a 20-year lease agreement with the Fillmore and Western Railway Company (FWRY) for maintenance and operation of the SPBL railroad. On June 30, 2021, the lease with FWRY expired. In anticipation of lease expiration, VCTC issued a Request for Proposals for Rail Operator Service in October 2020. After proposal review and negotiations, VCTC executed a Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement in December 2021 with Sierra Northern Railway (SNR) for a 35-year term. Under the Agreement, SNR is responsible to operate and maintain the full SPBL right-of-way, including weed abatement, trash removal, addressing trespass, bridge inspections, and other day-to-day management activities. During Fiscal Year 2022/2023, VCTC staff facilitated the transition of operations to SNR and continued to manage those responsibilities retained by VCTC, including efforts to address encroachments into the railroad right-of-way and leasing activities.

In April 2022, the Commission adopted a mid-term goal to reinvigorate the process to complete the SPBL bike trail. As a result, staff coordinated development of a conceptual scope of work to update the SPBL Trail Master Plan, including phasing, funding, stakeholder engagement, and improved connections to transit and housing development, and is pursuing a grant to support a Trail Master Plan update. Broadband infrastructure deployment through the Santa Clara River Valley via the SPBL has also become a key discussion point.

In January 2023, an approximately 120-foot section of the Sespe Creek Overflow bridge on the SPBL near Fillmore washed out during an atmospheric river storm. VCTC staff assisted with the damage assessment and efforts to secure Federal and/or State funding to repair and replace the damaged section of the bridge to reconnect the eastern section of the SPBL to the rail network.

**DESCRIPTION:** The Fiscal Year 2023/2024 Santa Paula Branch Line Task Budget provides for coordination and oversight of the Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement, which includes railroad and signals operations and maintenance, weed abatement, debris cleanup, trespass removal, and bridge inspections. The budget also includes VCTC staff costs for lease and asset management, such as lease reassignments and new or updated leases and licenses. With a long-term operator in place, Staff will continue to focus on efforts to implement the SPBL Trail Master Plan and work with City and County partners to complete the trail. The workplan also includes coordination with Federal, State, and local partners to repair the Sespe Creek overflow bridge and respond to storm damage, including efforts to secure Federal and State emergency funding assistance. The Fiscal Year 2023/2024 SPBL Budget is \$340,500 above the previous fiscal year, due to inclusion of additional funding for consultant services related to right-of-way survey, storm damage response and broadband.



**BUDGET TASK: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE (continued)**

**DIRECTOR:** Amanda Fagan

**BUDGET MANAGER:** Amanda Fagan

**WORK ELEMENTS:**

1. Coordination and oversight of the Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement.
2. Railroad operations and right-of-way maintenance, including response to neighbor complaints, weed abatement, vegetation management, and annual bridge inspections.
3. Ensure compliance with policies and requirements of VCTC, California Public Utilities Commission, Federal Railroad Administration, and Surface Transportation Board.
4. Coordinate with Railroad Operator to identify and address areas of encroachment onto the railroad right-of-way through noticing and leasing.
5. Prepare and administer leases, licenses, and right-of-entry permits for use of SPBL property. Evaluate leases and establish a new rate schedule where applicable.
6. Conduct a Railroad Right-of-Way Survey.
7. Implement VCTC Trespass Policy requirements.
8. Update the SPBL Trail Master Plan.
9. Respond to storm-related damage to SPBL infrastructure.
10. Coordinate with the County of Ventura regarding possible broadband deployment.

**PRODUCT:** Continued safe and cost-effective management of the SPBL corridor.

**FUNDING:**

<b>Funding Source</b>	<b>Funding Dollars</b>
LTF Fund Transfer	\$ 102,300
STA Fund Transfer	441,500
Local Fee – Leases	355,000
Local Fee – Permits, Film and Rail Car Storage	30,000
<b>Total Funding</b>	<b>\$928,800</b>

**EXPENDITURE COMPARISON:**

	<b>Fiscal Year 2021/2022 Actual</b>	<b>Fiscal Year 2022/2023 Budget*</b>	<b>Fiscal Year 2023/2024 Budget</b>
Salaries	\$ 50,503	\$ 38,300	\$ 41,000
Fringe and Tax	21,812	13,800	14,000
Indirect Cost Allocation	43,309	34,700	47,300
Mileage	126	500	500
Notices	0	500	500
Office Support	675	500	500
Consultant Services	45,976	24,000	350,000
Legal Services	78,417	20,000	20,000
Non-Rail Maintenance	40,671	6,000	5,000
Signal Repair and Replacement	354	0	0
Track Maintenance	320,000	450,000	450,000
<b>Total Expenditures</b>	<b>\$601,843</b>	<b>\$588,300</b>	<b>\$928,800</b>

\* This budget task was amended after the Commission approved the budget in June 2022.

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March 16, 2023

MEMO TO: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE  
FROM: AMANDA FAGAN, DIRECTOR OF PLANNING & SUSTAINABILITY  
SUBJECT: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE STORM DAMAGE UPDATE

**RECOMMENDATION:**

- *Receive and file a report on damage to the Santa Paula Branch Line (SPBL) railroad infrastructure sustained during Winter Storms in January 2023.*

**BACKGROUND:**

The Sespe Creek Overflow bridge is located at approximately Mile Post 423.44, west of Fillmore, California. The bridge was constructed in 1969 and has a total length of 450 feet, vertical clearance of 14 feet, and 15 spans of 29 feet-10 inches each.

On the early morning of January 10, 2023, heavy rain, stream flow, and debris accumulated during a series of storms and washed out three spans, or approximately 90 feet, of the Sespe Creek Overflow railroad bridge. Three spans on the western end of the bridge were destroyed and require reconstruction to restore pre-disaster design, capacity, and function to restore rail service on the bridge. Bridge repair is necessary to reconnect the Fillmore-Piru segment of the SPBL railroad with the remainder of the SPBL and restore the connection to the mainline at East Ventura.

On January 14, 2023, the President of the United States issued a disaster declaration for California Severe Winter Storms, Flooding, Landslides, and Mudslides (DR-4683-CA), including Ventura County.

**DISCUSSION:**

On January 9<sup>th</sup>, prior to the bridge wash-out, railroad operator Sierra Northern Railway (SNR) relocated one locomotive from the rail yard in Fillmore to the SNR location in Santa Paula. As such, there is an operational locomotive on either side of the bridge, enabling continued operations on both segments of the bridge on a temporary basis until the bridge can be repaired. Preliminary estimates of repair and reconstruction costs range from \$1.4 - \$2.3 million.

In addition to the damaged Sespe Creek Overflow bridge, several areas on the SPBL were identified where landslides had occurred and/or debris collected beneath bridges or in culverts. In particular, the Hopper Canyon



area received substantial debris flows, with an estimated 6' – 8' of mud and debris. The SNR team worked quickly to clear debris and restore rail operational capabilities.

The Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement includes provisions covering responsibilities for repair or replacement of railroad facilities. In general, SNR is responsible for the cost of repair, replacement, or reconstruction of damaged railroad facilities for the railway to conduct its operations. However, in the case of "Damage Caused by Acts of God or Other Factors" (such as storm damage), the Agreement states that SNR may repair or replace the facilities needed for railway operations, but neither SNR nor VCTC is obligated to do so.

VCTC staff assembled information from prior SPBL storm events, attended Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) financial assistance training hosted by the California Office of Emergency Services (CalOES), and submitted a Request for Public Assistance to FEMA to initiate the process to apply for reimbursement of costs to repair the Sespe Creek bridge and other damaged areas of the SPBL.

VCTC staff are currently developing a procurement approach and solicitation for design, engineering, permitting, and construction to repair the damaged portion of the bridge. The procurement would include compliance with all applicable State and Federal environmental laws and permitting requirements, and to restore the pre-disaster design, capacity, and function of the Sespe Creek Overflow railroad bridge.

The scope of services will include compliance with all applicable State and Federal environmental laws and permitting requirements, structural design and engineering, development of specifications consistent with Federal Railroad Administration, California Public Utilities Commission, and Southern California Regional Rail Authority standards, evaluate the potential for cost effective design variations to mitigate future hazards, construction management, coordination with the railroad operator, and construction of three railroad bridge spans.

Staff will present to the Commission for approval of procurement documents at an upcoming Commission meeting, with the timing dependent on the procurement approach. The timeline to repair the bridge and restore service is estimated at six to nine months.



Item # 9

March 16, 2023

**MEMO TO: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

**FROM: AMANDA FAGAN, DIRECTOR OF PLANNING & SUSTAINABILITY**

**SUBJECT: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE RAILROAD LEASE AND OPERATIONS UPDATE**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

- *Receive and file a report on the status of the Santa Paula Branch Line (SPBL) Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement with Sierra Northern Railway.*

**BACKGROUND:**

With the June 30, 2021 expiration of the lease agreement with Fillmore and Western Railway (FWRY), VCTC issued a Request for Proposals for Rail Operator Service in October 2020. After proposal review and negotiations, VCTC executed a Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement in December 2021 with Sierra Northern Railway (SNR) for a 35-year term. Under the Agreement, SNR is responsible to operate and maintain the full SPBL right-of-way as of January 1, 2022. The Agreement defines roles and responsibilities and grants to Sierra Northern the exclusive rights to operate the SPBL for Railroad Purposes, including tourist and freight services, film and television production, and storage and transload services.

**DISCUSSION:**

*Railroad Operations & Maintenance*

Since January 2022, SNR has conducted regular railroad inspections and made improvements to the condition of the signals and railroad tracks, weed abatement and other right-of-way maintenance activities, and rail operations on the SPBL. VCTC staff last provided an update to the Commission in September 2022. Activity highlights since that time include:

- VCTC staff and SNR representatives hold a virtual bi-weekly coordination meeting.
- SNR conducts regular track inspections in accordance with Federal and State regulations.
- SNR continues to reach out to local businesses and residents to share information and build relationships with the community.
- SNR has continued discussions with several local businesses to provide freight rail services in the Santa Clara River Valley. Freight rail service reduces truck traffic at a rate of four trucks for every rail car. In January 2023, SNR began service west of Santa Paula to Agromin Limoneira, providing transload service for its organics recycling operations.
- Sierra Northern is working to expand television and film business on the SPBL and launched a new website, <http://www.movierailroad.com>. Several film and television productions have taken place on the SPBL in recent months, such as the television show *Mayans* and a commercial for Subaru.

- SNR has made substantial investments in improvements to the SPBL rail infrastructure, such as replacement of railroad ties, ballast, and signal upgrades.

After several months of negotiations, the City of Fillmore and SNR were unable to reach agreement on the terms of a lease to the Fillmore railyard location owned by the City of Fillmore and previously occupied by Fillmore & Western Railway. On July 5, 2022, Sierra Northern Railway announced an agreement with the owners of the Santa Paula Hay & Grain property located near 12<sup>th</sup> Street in Santa Paula. SNR leased an approximately 1.5 acres lot and 4,000 square foot shop space to store and maintain tools, equipment, and locomotives for use in freight, film, and tourist rail operations. Sierra Northern now operates its freight and film services and rail maintenance operations from this temporary location in Santa Paula and continues to look for a permanent home on the Branch Line. SNR anticipates operating from the Santa Paula Hay & Grain location for approximately 1 – 2 years. SNR anticipates a level of freight operations that includes one train per week of approximately 5 – 10 rail cars.

Without a lease and access to the portion of the Fillmore railyard owned by the City of Fillmore, SNR relocated rail cars and equipment from City-owned land onto available siding tracks on VCTC-owned property. VCTC has received complaints regarding rail cars parked on the SPBL-owned railroad tracks blocking pedestrian access to Fillmore City Hall. SNR and VCTC staff are working together to address these concerns while also ensuring that railroad safety regulations are followed. For purposes of rail safety, railroad crossings are limited by the CPUC and FRA.

On the tourist/excursion side of the business, SNR's sister company, Mendocino Railway, conducted a market study to select a new name for the excursion rail business on the SPBL. Mendocino Railway negotiated with the City of Santa Paula to operate its tourist/excursion train service from the Santa Paula Depot. Railbikes began service on March 3, 2023, with guided trips departing from Santa Paula Depot twice daily on Thursdays through Sundays. Railbikes operate much like an excursion train, with guides at the front and rear of the tours, traveling eastward towards Fillmore, with a 17-mile round-trip tour that lasts approximately 3 hours, with a stop at Prancer's Farm.

Parallel Systems, a relatively new VCTC lessee on the SPBL, expanded its operations in the development and testing of electric, autonomous train cars. Parallel Systems describes itself as, "decarbonizing freight by building a cleaner, automated rail future." This autonomous rail system is intended to allow rail access to smaller markets for shorter trips, shifting freight from trucking to rail and reducing air emissions from freight movement. For more information on Parallel Systems, visit <https://moveparallel.com>. SNR constructed a new railroad siding east of Fillmore to support Parallel's operations. Parallel Systems delivered its second generation vehicle for testing on the SPBL in October 2022.

#### *Trespass Removal Policy Implementation*

In accordance with the Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement, SNR assumed responsibility to carry out the Commission's Good Neighbor Policy by actively managing the SPBL to conduct weed abatement and trash removal, and to implement the Commission's Trespass Removal Policy. The policy defines trespass identification, site inspection, removal, and storage of collected property located on VCTC property. SNR has worked closely with the Santa Paula Police Department and the Ventura County Sheriff's Department to implement the Policy in Santa Paula and Fillmore. When addressing encampments, SNR conducts field surveys, provides notices of Trespass and Personal Property Collection in English and Spanish, uses the VCTC-provided GIS-based tools and procedures for documenting personal property to be collected and stored, and completes personal property collection and disposal of debris.



Item # 10

March 16, 2023

**MEMO TO: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE**  
**FROM: AMANDA FAGAN, DIRECTOR OF PLANNING & SUSTAINABILITY**  
**SUBJECT: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE RAIL CAR STORAGE**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

- *Receive and file a report Rail Car Storage on the Santa Paula Branch Line (SPBL).*

**BACKGROUND:**

VCTC executed a Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement (Agreement) in December 2021 with Sierra Northern Railway (SNR) for a 35-year term. Under the Agreement, SNR is responsible to operate and maintain the full SPBL right-of-way as of January 1, 2022. The Agreement defines roles and responsibilities and grants to Sierra Northern the exclusive rights to operate the SPBL for Railroad Purposes, including tourist and freight services, film and television production, and storage and transload services.

Rail cars are sometimes stored on the SPBL railroad as part of railroad operations. Revenue from the storage of rail cars contributes to maintaining and improving the condition of the SPBL railroad and right-of-way. Rail car storage also contributes to efficient and safe operations of the national railroad network.

Rail Car Storage is a defined term under the Agreement between VCTC and SNR. It refers to rail cars owned by a third party being stored on the SPBL. Rail Car Storage is anticipated to be used in the early stages of Sierra Northern operations to generate revenue while the freight, tourist/excursion, and movie businesses are further developed. Rail Car Storage is not anticipated to be a major source of revenue in the long term. The Agreement was constructed to mitigate the impact of Rail Car Storage by prohibiting storage within incorporated cities and existing communities as defined by the County of Ventura (namely Saticoy and Piru), or within 150 feet of legal public and private railroad crossings. The Agreement also prohibits Rail Car Storage of rail cars containing hazardous materials.

Passenger and freight rail cars and locomotives owned by Sierra Northern Railway and its sister company, Mendocino Railway, may be parked on the railroad, including within incorporated cities, as part of regular railroad operations. These types of cars are not considered Railroad Car Storage.

**DISCUSSION:**

As of March 2023, approximately 45 rail cars are being stored near Old Telegraph Road west of Fillmore. These rail cars were slated for storage east of Fillmore. However, the storms that took place the week of January 9th washed out a portion of the railroad bridge over the Sespe Creek overflow area, and the rail cars could not be transported further east. As a result, the rail cars will temporarily be stored between Grand Avenue and 7<sup>th</sup> Street, with the cars split at the crossings, until the bridge can be safely traversed and the cars can go to the eastern end of the line, or the owner of the rail cars places the cars back into service.

Sierra Northern was already contractually obligated to receive the rail cars for storage when the railroad bridge was damaged by the January storms and has explained that the cars are being stored in the least impactful location on the SPBL to store the rail cars. The rail cars have been placed to follow the constraints included in the Agreement, notably to avoid incorporated cities and legal public and private railroad crossings, and to preserve the operating right-of-way for railbikes and other railroad operations. One house is located opposite the area of the SPBL where rail cars are stored.

Once the damaged railroad bridge that crosses the Sespe Creek overflow can be repaired, the cars will be moved further to the east in a less visible area, or the rail cars will be placed back in service by the owner, whichever happens first. VCTC and Sierra Northern are actively working on plans to reconstruct the damaged bridge.

The rail cars are empty but were used to transport non-hazardous materials. As noted above, Rail Car Storage of cars containing or previously used to transport hazardous material is not allowed anywhere on the SPBL, in accordance with the Agreement.

Sierra Northern is responsible for ensuring that Rail Car Storage is conducted in a clean and orderly fashion free of blight in conformity with applicable laws and regulations. Sierra Northern is responsible for maintaining the right-of-way, including removing any garbage or refuse accumulating near stored rail cars and other activities necessary to ensure that storage of rail cars does not result in blighted conditions on the Property. If railroad cars stored as part of Rail Car Storage have graffiti that contains obscene or offensive (e.g., discriminatory or hate speech) material, the Agreement includes provisions for addressing such graffiti.

Several residents have expressed concern over the rail cars being stored along Old Telegraph Road. To date, VCTC has not received evidence of accumulated trash/garbage around the cars or on the right-of-way or any obscene or offensive graffiti on the rail cars. VCTC staff conducted a visual inspection on March 6, 2023 and did not observe accumulated trash on the right-of-way. Photographs taken in January 2023 and again on March 6th were shared with the Special Enforcement Unit (SEU) of a local law enforcement agency for review relative to gang activity. Review by a Detective and SEU Officer indicate none of the graffiti visible from the roadway contained gang-affiliated symbols and were instead tagging/graffiti of a general nature. VCTC will continue to work with Sierra Northern to ensure the procedures outlined in the Agreement are followed, including removing any garbage or refuse accumulating near stored rail cars and addressing graffiti that meets the definition of obscene or offensive contained in the Agreement.

Residents also expressed concern over the security of rail car hatches and rail cars attracting people to congregate on the right-of-way. If anyone is observed walking along or congregating on the railroad and associated right-of-way, or climbing on the rail cars, unless these individuals are wearing railroad-issued safety vests and identification or are being escorted by railroad personnel, those individuals are likely trespassing and subject to removal from the property. Regarding rail car hatches, Sierra Northern monitors the cars on a regular basis and will be on the lookout for any unsecured hatches. If residents see something of concern, they can call local law enforcement, or they can also call Sierra Northern, to relay information about active or ongoing trespass activities. Sierra Northern Railway's Ventura Division Manager can be reached at (530) 490-1446.





Item # 11

**TO: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE**  
**FROM: AMANDA FAGAN, DIRECTOR OF PLANNING AND SUSTAINABILITY**  
**SUBJECT: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ENCROACHMENTS AND LEASING REPORT**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

- Receive and file a report on Santa Paula Branch Line encroachments and leasing.

**BACKGROUND:**

The Santa Paula Branch Line (SPBL) consists of 99 parcels owned by VCTC and runs for 32 miles from Mile Post (MP) 403 to MP 435, with 29 active track miles extending through MP 432. The SPBL property has 79 active paying leases and generated \$318,151.95 in lease, film, and other local fee revenue in Fiscal Year 2021/2022. The SPBL currently has 625 total ongoing leases, the majority of which are for utilities (460 leases) or access (76 leases) that do not pay lease fees on an ongoing basis. Leased areas include 25 cultivation leases extending 11.55 miles, where agriculture occurs on some portion of the property owned by VCTC and leased to private parties.

In March 2020 and again in March 2021, the Commission directed staff to address encroachments through leasing activities to ensure fairness among neighboring landowners and generate revenues to sustain SPBL management and operations. An initial field study conducted in February 2020 and an analysis of the SPBL property indicated that many neighboring properties have extended cultivation activities and/or access onto the public property without entering into a lease with VCTC. These encroachments include row crops, lemon and avocado trees, equipment and materials staging areas, and other uses of the public property without an active lease or other permission to access the Branch Line property.

Though used for a public purpose, railroads are considered private property, unlike streets and highways. In California, courts have found that railroads are not subject to adverse possession, so users cannot gain a right to use the railroad property by using or occupying the property.

**DISCUSSION:**

The Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement with Sierra Northern Railway transfers responsibility for operations and maintenance of the railroad and right-of-way to Sierra Northern. However, the Agreement retains to VCTC the right and responsibility of managing leases and licenses for the SPBL right-of-way and provides for cooperation between VCTC and Sierra Northern to address encroachments into the right-of-way to ensure that railroad operations are not impacted and that proper leases, licenses, and crossing agreements are in place with the appropriate insurance coverage by users of VCTC-owned property.

As leases are renewed or reassigned, VCTC continues to work with landowners to update rent values consistent with current market rates and modern insurance and indemnity provisions. For leases with termination provisions, VCTC staff will continue to work proactively with leaseholders to update leases to market rates. Since the SPBL Advisory Committee last met in March 2022, two new or updated leases

have been executed (Frontier California Inc. and California American Water Inc.). Two leases are currently in the development process, including reassignment of the Lindgren Lease to the Underwood Partnership, and a utility license for an under-crossing for a battery storage project in Santa Paula (Black Walnut). In addition, with a recent sale of the Loose Caboose property by Fillmore & Western Railway, a new lease will need to be executed with the new property owner.

As time and workload allows, VCTC Staff conducts field study to document encroachments, prepares and sends letters to neighboring property owners to notify, educate, and inform the owners about the need for a lease to access or cultivate within the public right-of-way or on railroad property, and gives property owners sufficient time to respond, execute a lease, or remove encroachments and/or cease access without permission. VCTC staff has not yet been able to access all of the Branch Line to conduct a detailed evaluation due to difficulty of access on certain portions of the Line without crossing private property; however, from a visual inspection, it is anticipated that additional encroachments along the Line are occurring. VCTC Staff works with Sierra Northern to identify and prioritize encroachments that impact safe and efficient rail operations on the SPBL.

Given time and workload challenges, as well as push-back from some adjacent landowners on property lines, VCTC Staff has requested additional funding in the draft Fiscal Year 2023/2024 budget to contract for and conduct a right-of-way survey. This approach is similar to one used by the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission, which owns a short line railroad similar to the SPBL. Survey results will be useful for leasing activities as well as trail planning.



Item # 12

March 16, 2023

**MEMO TO: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE**  
**FROM: AMANDA FAGAN, DIRECTOR OF PLANNING & SUSTAINABILITY**  
**SUBJECT: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE TRAIL MASTER PLAN UPDATE**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

- *Receive and file a report on a forthcoming proposed update to the Santa Paula Branch Line (SPBL) Trail Master Plan and provide feedback on the conceptual scope of work.*

**BACKGROUND:**

The SPBL railroad is a 32-mile corridor owned by VCTC that extends from the East Ventura/Montalvo Metrolink Station in the City of Ventura through Santa Paula, Fillmore and the unincorporated Piru community. VCTC acquired the SPBL in 1995 with the intent to build a trail for active transportation and recreation and adopted a Master Plan and Environmental Impact Report in 2000 for the so-named *SPBL Recreational Multi-Use Trail*. Sections of the trail have been constructed in the cities of Santa Paula and Fillmore and the Piru community.

**DISCUSSION:**

In April 2022, VCTC renewed its goal to build-out the SPBL trail, with the Commission having adopted a goal to “Reinvigorate the process to complete the Santa Paula Branch Line (SPBL) multi-use path.” While the focus more than two decades ago when originally conceived was on recreation (as the Master Plan’s name implies), the SPBL trail now provides an important opportunity to make equitable investments in active transportation for the residents of the Santa Clara River Valley, while reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and greenhouse gas emissions associated with transportation. The cities of Santa Paula and Fillmore are experiencing relatively more housing growth and have higher VMT per capita than other parts of the county and region.

To accomplish the Commission’s adopted goal, VCTC staff developed a conceptual scope of work for initial coordination with agency partners and key stakeholders. Based on the conceptual scope, staff are working with a consultant team to prepare a grant application for the Regional Early Action Planning (REAP) 2.0 County Transportation Commission (CTC) Partnership Program to update the SPBL Trail Master Plan. If awarded, the grant will support the Master Plan Update with a focus on improved connections to housing, employment opportunities, and transit and an emphasis on engagement with neighboring landowners, the agriculture community, disadvantaged communities, potential future trail users, and the broader community. The Master Plan Update would also incorporate the recommendations of the *SPBL Trail Compatibility Survey* and Federal Railroad Administration’s *Best Practices for Rails with Trails*.

The draft concept paper has been shared with a variety of community partners, as well as this Committee, and staff welcomes feedback. Such feedback will be considered as the scope of work and application materials are further developed, which will include a discussion of outreach and engagement strategies. Staff anticipates presenting the grant application (along with several other applications for the REAP 2.0 CTC Partnership Program) to the Commission for approval at the May 12<sup>th</sup> meeting.

**Concept Title:** Santa Paula Branch Line Active Transportation - Master Plan Update and Validate Connections to Serve New Housing and Reduce VMT

**Background:** The Santa Paula Branch Line (SPBL) railroad is a 32-miles corridor owned by VCTC that extends from the East Ventura/Montalvo Metrolink Station in the City of Ventura through the Santa Clara River Valley and along the State Route 126 corridor through Santa Paula, Fillmore and the unincorporated Piru community near the border with Los Angeles County. VCTC acquired the SPBL in 1995 with the intent to build a trail for active transportation and recreation and adopted a Master Plan and Environmental Impact Report in 2000 for the *SPBL Recreational Multi-Use Trail*. Sections of the trail have been constructed in the cities of Santa Paula, Fillmore, and Piru.

In April 2022, VCTC renewed its goal to build-out the full trail along the SPBL, with the Commission having adopted a goal to “Reinvigorate the process to complete the Santa Paula Branch Line (SPBL) multi-use path.” While the focus two decades ago when originally conceived may have been on recreation (as the Master Plan’s name implies), the SPBL trail now provides an important opportunity to make equitable investments in active transportation for the residents of the Santa Clara River Valley, while reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and greenhouse gas emissions associated with transportation. The cities of Santa Paula and Fillmore are experiencing relatively more housing growth and have higher VMT per capita than other parts of the county and region.

Build out of the SPBL Trail will provide active transportation connections, improve access to transit (rail and bus) and to employment centers in Ventura and Oxnard, help to mitigate VMT impacts of new housing construction in the Santa Clara River Valley, and help to address access and equity issues affecting disadvantaged communities in Saticoy, Santa Paula, Fillmore, and Piru. The SPBL Trail will also provide a safer and more attractive bicycling and walking option than the limited alternatives, notably State Route 126. The proliferation of e-bikes and expanded interest in biking during the Covid-19 pandemic increase the potential for use of the SPBL Trail as a means of transportation to work, school, recreational amenities, and other community assets. The SPBL Trail project is included in Connect SoCal, 101 Communities Connected Multimodal Corridor Study, and other local plans. Notably, the SPBL Trail received one of the highest scores on the Communities Connected Index, a series of performance metrics developed for 101 Communities Connected.

**Scope:** The necessary update of the Santa Paula Branch Line Master plan and EIR includes an update of the existing conditions, phasing plans, and cost estimates for the project. There is also a need to confirm that the Master Plan’s trail alignment, connections, and amenities serves planned and constructed housing in the communities, or whether additional improvements or connections will be needed to better serve housing areas and/or improve access to transit connections. The project will include engagement with SPBL route corridor stakeholders, including disadvantaged communities, neighboring landowners and the agricultural community to address any concerns, ensure key destinations are served, and build support for the project. The project will evaluate and make recommendations for lighting and other technology tools that can improve safety and encourage use of the trail and transit connections and incorporate the recommendations of the 2018 SPBL Trail Compatibility Study. The project will also incorporate Best Practices for Rails with Trails from the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) and incorporate resilience and climate adaptation aspects of trail completion. Receiving REAP 2.0 funding for this effort will assist VCTC and partner agencies to successfully compete for future State and Federal funding opportunities for Active Transportation and Reconnecting Communities, while helping to mitigate VMT impacts of housing and other growth in the Santa Clara River Valley, and contributing towards Connect SoCal’s Key Connections Strategies, namely Wayfinding.

Scope of Work Tasks include:

- Review and assess Master Plan and EIR, including update of existing conditions, mapping and imagery, environmental and community contexts, and consideration of both State (CEQA) and Federal (NEPA) requirements, such as certifying agency
- Emphasize mobility and transportation aspects of the project, with connectivity to housing, employment, education, and transit
- Identify and evaluate multimodal improvements and wayfinding to the SPBL corridor that would improve access to transit, housing, and key destinations, and reduce GHG/VMT associated with freight and goods movement through rail service
- Develop strategies to align trail development with freight, tourist/excursion, and film rail operations and investments with/by Rail Operations partners Sierra Northern Railway and Mendocino Railway, including signal enhancements, drainage improvements, and bridge repair investments
- Incorporate [Best Practices for Rails with Trails](#) from Federal Railroad Administration (FRA)
- Evaluate project VMT impacts and/or benefits
- [Integrate e-bikes](#) and identify/evaluate opportunities to pair trail completion with incentives to low-income residents
- Incorporate VCTC's [Bicycle Wayfinding Plan](#) signage and related strategies
- Incorporate recommendations of the [SPBL Trail Compatibility Study](#)
- Engagement with the agricultural community and adjacent landowners
- Engagement with disadvantaged communities using a variety of methods and bilingual communication tools
- Coordination and collaboration with Tribal Entities and affected Cities, including the Cities of Ventura, Santa Paula and Fillmore, County of Ventura, and Piru Neighborhood Council
- Plan with an Equity focus, including planning for transportation investments in SCR Valley disadvantaged communities
- Incorporate [resilience and climate adaptation](#) considerations into Trail plans
- Identify and evaluate alternative trail treatments and options that consider Americans with Disabilities Act requirements, environmentally friendly options, and alternatives to paving, such as decomposed granite, gravel, or other treatments for portions of the trail and/or during project phasing
- Identify potential synergies with County of Ventura and [Broadband Consortium of the Pacific Coast](#) plans to use the SPBL right-of-way as a [corridor for installation of fiber](#) optic telecommunications infrastructure
- Update trail maintenance cost estimates, potential funding sources, and responsibilities, including potential for philanthropy to assist (Adopt-a-Trail program, capital campaign, leverage existing Ventura County Community Foundation Bike Fund, etc.)
- Identify potential funding sources for design and construction of the SPBL trail
- Identify potential trailhead amenities and evaluate the feasibility and costs of multimodal transportation improvements at Saticoy Depot, such as a [railroad-themed playground](#), community event space, transit and active transportation connections, and possible future home for the VCTC offices and Regional Transportation Information Center (RTIC)
- Evaluate the feasibility and costs of rehabilitating the Saticoy Depot building and surrounding railroad right-of-way for use as a multimodal transit hub with office space for VCTC and other agency partners, such as County of Ventura and/or SCAG
- Prepare a Phasing Plan and Timeline that establishes an orderly phasing of projects for trail completion that are executable from engineering and funding perspectives, including Next Steps/Action Plan, Phasing Plan, and Funding Strategy.