



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

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**AGENDA*
MONDAY, MARCH 11, 2024
10:30 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 SUMMARY FROM 03/16/2023 – 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 2024/2025 – PG. 5**
Recommended Action:
Review draft Fiscal Year 2024/2025 budget for the Santa Paula Branch Line and provide comments to staff.
8. **SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE UPDATE FROM SIERRA NORTHERN RAILWAY – PG. 9**
Recommended Action:
Receive and file an update from Sierra Northern Railway representatives regarding operations and maintenance on the Santa Paula Branch Line.
9. **PARALLEL SYSTEMS OVERVIEW – PG. 11**
Recommended Action:
Receive and file an update from representatives of Parallel Systems regarding their research, development, and testing activities on the Santa Paula Branch Line.
10. **ADJOURN**



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

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MEETING SUMMARY

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

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

1. CALL TO ORDER

Executive Director Erickson called the meeting to order.

Attendees introduced themselves, including Committee Members LaVere, Long, Johnson, and Crosswhite, VCTC Executive Director Erickson, VCTC Staff Fagan and Kent, and public attendees Amy Gurrola, Bob Jolley, Avery Stewart, and Tracy Stewart.

2. ROLL CALL

Committee Members Johnson, LaVere, Long, and Crosswhite were in attendance. Committee Member Broggie arrived during Agenda Item 7.

3. PUBLIC COMMENTS (For items not on the agenda)

None. All comment cards were submitted for Agenda Item 10.

4. APPROVE SUMMARY FROM 10/20/2021 and 03/23/2022 – SPLBAC MEETING

Commissioner Long made a motion to approve the minutes from 10/20/2021 and 03/23/2022, seconded by Commissioner LaVere. The motion carried 4-0.

5. COMMITTEE MEMBERS/STAFF REPORT

Commissioner Long expressed appreciation for the VCTC Strategic Planning session and working closely with the community regarding the Santa Paula Branch Line.

Commissioner Johnson expressed appreciation for having the railbikes and representatives of Mendocino Railway in attendance at the Strategic Planning Session.

Mr. Erickson expressed appreciation for the residents in attendance for the Committee meeting and noted the importance of the Santa Paula Branch Line and its future.

6. ADDITIONS/REVISIONS

None.

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

Ms. Fagan provided an overview of the Santa Paula Branch Line draft budget for Fiscal Year 2023/2024, 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 also includes funding for a right-of-way survey for the SPBL, administration and planning of the Sespe Creek Overflow bridge reconstruction, and broadband coordination. The draft budget is higher than the previous year due to the right-of-way survey and Sespe bridge reconstruction, but is in line with prior year budgets previous to the Agreement with Sierra Northern Railway. Revenues come from lease revenues and fees, Local Transportation Fund (LTF), and State Transit Assistance (STA) sources.

Commissioner LaVere asked about the term of VCTC reimbursement of Sierra Northern for railway and right-of-way maintenance per the Lease and Operations Agreement. Ms. Fagan stated that the provision applies for the first five years of the Agreement. After that time, lease and license revenues will pass through to Sierra Northern for right-of-way maintenance, but the requirement to reimburse Sierra Northern for deferred maintenance ends.

Commissioner Long asked about the status of addressing homeless encampments on the SPBL. Ms. Fagan stated that Sierra Northern Railway is responsible for addressing trespass and encampments in accordance with the VCTC Trespass Removal policy and in coordination with local agencies.

Commissioner Crosswhite asked about the proposed right-of-way survey. Ms. Fagan provided additional information about the reasoning behind the proposed survey, including addressing encroachments and drainage issues. The resulting product will be official recorded deeds of survey for the SPBL property. Commissioner Broggie asked for the completed survey report to come back to the SPBL Advisory Committee prior to consideration by the full Commission.

The Committee received and filed the report on the draft budget.

8. SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE STORM DAMAGE

Ms. Fagan provided an overview of the damage to the SPBL during the January 2023 storms, including damage to the Sespe Creek Overflow Bridge and several areas of the railroad right-of-way damaged by mud and debris flows. Sierra Northern has continued to work to clear debris from the railroad right-of-way and restore rail service. VCTC Staff are working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to seek reimbursement for the costs to restore the bridge and rail service. Staff are working to prepare a scope of work and request for proposals for bridge design, specifications, and environmental compliance to reconstruct the Sespe bridge. A

concern was raised that trespass is occurring on the Sespe Overflow bridge, with people walking on the bridge.

The Committee received and filed the report.

9. SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE RAILROAD LEASE AND OPERATIONS UPDATE

Ms. Fagan provided an overview of the Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement and current operations, including right-of-way maintenance, development of freight rail service, and base of operations in Santa Paula. Railbike service began in March 2023, with guided railbike tours departing from the Santa Paula Depot, operating on a set schedule similarly to excursion trains. The importance of stakeholder outreach with neighboring landowners and agriculture operators was discussed. Ms. Fagan provided an update on Parallel Systems operations on the SPBL east of Fillmore for testing of its new autonomous battery-powered rail system.

Ms. Gurrola inquired whether the Agreement includes a limit on the number of trains that can be operated on the SPBL railroad. Ms. Fagan explained that the Agreement does not include a limit on the number of freight cars or the types of freight that can be moved on the railroad due to the Federal preemption on the regulation of railroads. The SPBL is a short line railroad that serves the customers within the Santa Clara River Valley. Current operations include an average of one freight train per week, but that number of trains may increase based on future market demand.

The Committee received and filed the report.

10. SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE RAIL CAR STORAGE

Ms. Fagan provided a report on rail car storage on the SPBL. Rail car storage is a defined term under the Agreement that refers to rail cars owned by a third party being stored on the SPBL, anticipated to generate revenue while freight, excursion, and movie businesses are further developed and not anticipated to be a major long-term source of revenue. The Agreement was constructed to mitigate the impacts by prohibiting storage within incorporated cities and existing communities and to prohibit storage of rail cars containing hazardous materials. It was noted that passenger and freight rail cars and locomotives owned by Sierra Northern Railway and Mendocino Railway may be parked within incorporated cities as part of regular railroad operations.

The approximately 45 rail cars currently being stored on the SPBL were slated for storage east of Fillmore, but the January storms washed out a portion of the railroad bridge over the Sespe Creek overflow area. Rail cars could not be transported further east and will temporarily be stored between Grand Avenue and 7th Street until the bridge can be safely crossed 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.

Prior to the bridge collapse, Sierra Northern was already contractually obligated to receive the rail cars for storage and identified the least impactful location to store the rail cars, while following the Agreement's constraints 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. Once the bridge 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 comes first.

The Agreement requires rail car storage to be 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 garbage and other activities to ensure that storage of rail cars does not result in blighted conditions on the Property. It was also noted that the owner of the rail cars declined to repaint the cars but agreed to allow any local graffiti abatement programs to repaint the cars.

It was noted that several residents have expressed concern over graffiti and safety issues related to the stored rail cars. VCTC will continue to work with Sierra Northern to ensure the procedures outlined in the Agreement are followed. It was noted that, if residents see something of concern, they can call local law enforcement or Sierra Northern to relay information about active or ongoing trespass activities.

Three public comment cards were received:

Mrs. Gurrola provided a packet of photographs and information. Mrs. Gurrola stated that graffiti contains four instances of new images (i.e. gumby, KC) include "tagging teams" from Santa Paula, which indicates that a "tagging war" is occurring. Mrs. Gurrola proposed moving the rail cars to the west where they would not be visible from Old Telegraph Road. Mr. Gurrola added that adding an additional span to the Sespe bridge may impact the Old Telegraph Road bridge, and that moving the cars to the east may impact Parallel Systems testing.

Mr. Jolley stated that the graffiti on the rail cars violates the County of Ventura municipal code and presents a public nuisance that requires abatement. Mr. Jolley shared concerns on behalf of Mrs. Jolley (including written comment).

Mrs. Stewart stated that the rail cars are generating graffiti on rail cars, electrical boxes, and fences and devaluing properties in the area. Mrs. Stewart stated that waiting for the bridge to be fixed is not acceptable, and that the rail cars should be required to move out of the neighborhood.

Commissioner Johnson asked about rail car storage as part of the overall strategy for rail operations. Ms. Fagan stated that rail car storage is anticipated to be part of the early operations of the railroad until the freight and tourist portions of the business can be built up to be self-sustaining.

Commissioner Long stated a preference to work with the railroad to move the rail cars and prevent additional tagging and public safety impacts.

The Committee received and filed the report.

11. SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ENCROACHMENTS AND LEASING UPDATE

Ms. Fagan provided a report on SPBL leasing activities and the development of a new Right of Entry permit process.

The Committee received and filed the report.

12. SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE TRAIL MASTER PLAN UPDATE

Ms. Fagan provided a report on a proposed update to the SPBL Trail Master Plan and efforts to secure funding for design and construction for portions of the trail in Ventura. The importance of stakeholder engagement in the process to update the Master Plan and complete the trail was emphasized. Stakeholder concerns regarding food safety, trespass by trail users onto neighboring property, impacts to agriculture, and other concerns will be addressed, integrating trail compatibility strategies and tools, such as fencing, lighting, sensors, trail cameras, etc.

The Committee received and filed the report.

13. ADJOURN

The meeting adjourned at 11:07 a.m.



Item # 7

March 11, 2024

TO: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE
FROM: AMANDA FAGAN, DIRECTOR OF PLANNING AND SUSTAINABILITY
SUBJECT: DRAFT SANTA PAULA BRANCH BUDGET FOR FISCAL YEAR 2024/2025

RECOMMENDATION:

- Review draft Fiscal Year 2024/2025 budget for the Santa Paula Branch Line and provide comments to staff.

DISCUSSION:

The Draft Fiscal Year 2024/2025 Santa Paula Branch Line (SPBL) reflects the third 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 2024/2025 SPBL Budget is \$ 6,714,854 higher than Fiscal Year 2023/2024 (as amended), 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. It is anticipated that the Final Program Budget will be updated to reflect costs associated with response to additional damage to the Sespe Creek Overflow railroad bridge sustained during the February 2024 atmospheric river storms.

Consistent with the prior two fiscal years (2022/2023 and 2023/2024), 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) STA - Federal Emergency Management Agency / California Office of Emergency Services (CalOES) reimbursement. STA funds are used to cover the delta between Local Fee revenues and the deferred and regular maintenance reimbursement to Sierra Northern. STA funds are also used for VCTC staff salaries, benefits, and indirect costs. It is anticipated that STA requirements for the SPBL Budget will be reduced over time as the Agreement with Sierra Northern matures and following completion of disaster response and reconstruction.

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. The purchase included leases for cultivation, utilities, crossings, and pipelines, which provide a portion of the revenue needed to support the line and a continual need to actively manage the SPBL. In December 2021, VCTC executed a Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement 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 2023/2024, VCTC staff provided administrative oversight and managed 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 goal to reinvigorate the process to complete the SPBL bike trail, and in April 2023, adopted a Five-Year Strategic Plan that included a strategy to update the trail master plan, validate trail alignment, connections, and amenities, and update existing conditions to facilitate trail completion, with stakeholder engagement. To implement these goals and strategies, VCTC successfully applied for a Regional Early Action Planning County Transportation Commissions Partnership Program Grant from the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) to update the SPBL Trail Master Plan and Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement. However, due to State budget uncertainties for Fiscal Year 2024/2025, SCAG issued a stop work order in January 2024. At the time of VCTC budget draft preparation, it remains uncertain whether the awarded grant funds will be available to complete the project, and VCTC placed the project on hold.

In January 2023, an approximately 90-foot section of the Sespe Creek Overflow bridge near Fillmore washed out during an atmospheric river storm. VCTC procured design, environmental permitting, and construction management contracts to restore the bridge and continued efforts to secure Federal and State emergency funding to repair and replace the damaged section of the bridge to reconnect the eastern section of the SPBL to the rail network. Designs and permits were completed. VCTC also executed Amendment No. 1 to the Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement to refine the rail car storage allowable area and resolve neighborhood concerns with rail car storage after the bridge was damaged.

DESCRIPTION: The Fiscal Year 2024/2025 Santa Paula Branch Line Task Budget provides for coordination and oversight of the Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement, lease and asset management, and 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 workplan also includes continued efforts to update SPBL Trail Master Plan and work with City and County partners to complete the trail. The Fiscal Year 2024/2025 SPBL Budget is \$6,894,700 above the previous fiscal year due to storm damage response and broadband deployment.

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, i.e. weed abatement, response to neighbor complaints, and annual bridge and track 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:**

Funding Source	Funding Dollars
STA Fund Transfer	\$3,510,650
STA Fund Transfer – FEMA / CalOES	5,381,250
Local Fee – Leases	315,000
Local Fee – Permits, Film and Rail Car Storage	10,000
Total Funding	\$9,216,900

EXPENDITURE COMPARISON:

	Fiscal Year 2022/2023 Actual	Fiscal Year 2023/2024 Budget*	Fiscal Year 2024/2025 Budget
Salaries	\$ 52,909	\$ 61,900	\$ 76,700
Fringe and Tax	15,658	21,200	26,300
Indirect Cost Allocation	45,631	71,600	80,400
Mileage	17	500	500
Notices	0	500	500
Office Support	0	500	500
Consultant Services	106,466	1,830,846	1,330,000
Legal Services	24,924	60,000	72,000
Bridge Reconstruction	0	0	7,175,000
Non-Rail Maintenance	2,595	5,000	5,000
Track Maintenance	450,000	450,000	450,000
Total Expenditures	\$698,200	\$2,502,046	\$9,216,900

* This budget task was amended after the Commission approved the budget in June 2023.



Item # 8

March 11, 2024

TO: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE
FROM: AMANDA FAGAN, DIRECTOR OF PLANNING AND SUSTAINABILITY
SUBJECT: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE SIERRA NORTHERN RAILWAY UPDATE

RECOMMENDATION:

- Receive and file an update from Sierra Northern Railway representatives regarding operations and maintenance on the Santa Paula Branch Line.

BACKGROUND:

In December 2021, VCTC executed a Railroad Lease and Operations Agreement (Agreement) 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 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:

Representatives of Sierra Northern Railway will provide verbal updates on the activities, operations, and maintenance of the Santa Paula Branch Line railroad.



Item # 9

March 11, 2024

TO: SANTA PAULA BRANCH LINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE
FROM: AMANDA FAGAN, DIRECTOR OF PLANNING AND SUSTAINABILITY
SUBJECT: PARALLEL SYSTEMS OVERVIEW & UPDATES

RECOMMENDATION:

- Receive and file an update from representatives of Parallel Systems regarding their research, development, and testing activities on the Santa Paula Branch Line.

BACKGROUND:

Parallel Systems is a company founded to create autonomous battery-electric rail vehicles. In September 2023, Parallel Systems publicly introduced its second-generation rail vehicles with plans to integrate into the existing rail network alongside conventional freight trains. Parallel is conducting critical testing to verify the system's ability to use the general rail network and developing tools and software to allow rail customers to operate Parallel vehicles from their existing dispatching and train control systems.

Parallel Systems leases a portion of the SPBL right-of-way from VCTC east of Fillmore and uses the track and right-of-way to conduct testing of the autonomous rail vehicles and system operations.

DISCUSSION:

Representatives of Parallel Systems will provide a verbal update on their research, development, and testing activities on the Santa Paula Branch Line railroad.