

1. INTRODUCTION

The project analyzed in this Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) is the implementation of the Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit District (SMART) passenger rail service and ancillary bicycle/pedestrian pathway along the former Northwestern Pacific (NWP) Railroad right-of-way from Cloverdale in Sonoma County to Larkspur in Marin County. This DEIR satisfies the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for analysis of the proposed multi-modal transit project.

1.1 PROJECT BACKGROUND

The pattern of development and the transportation investments in Sonoma and Marin counties have been strongly influenced by the geographic limitations in the counties; hills that cross east-west through the urbanized areas define edges to the cities and their subcenters. Development has centered on a series of towns that are generally located along Highway 101 and the former NWP railroad right-of-way. Hereafter, the rail corridor is referred to as the “proposed project corridor.” The towns and cities are generally well defined with large expanses of agricultural lands and open space separating San Rafael, Novato, and Petaluma.

Bordering the central corridor of Sonoma County are the Mayacmas and Sonoma Mountains to the east, and the fertile rolling hills spreading to the coast form the western border. The development corridor of Marin County is bordered by the San Francisco Bay on the east and Mount Tamalpais and the Bolinas Ridge to the west. Much of the land in western Marin County is protected state and federal open space (Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Point Reyes National Seashore). These geographic constraints have concentrated development and transportation investments in the two counties to those areas generally along the Highway 101 corridor and the NWP right-of-way.

Starting in the 1920’s there was a rapid increase in automobile and truck use. This change in transportation mode led to the reduction of passenger rail service along the NWP railroad. In 1961, the Puerto Suello Tunnel in north San Rafael was destroyed by fire, discontinuing freight service on the southern portion of the line. However, intermittent freight service continued on the NWP in Sonoma County and northern Marin County until 2001. There is currently no freight service in operation.

The loss of passenger rail service put increasing emphasis on Highway 101 as the primary route for direct north-south travel between and through Sonoma and Marin counties. Today, Highway 101 is the only continuous four-lane, north-south roadway connecting the two counties. As both counties have grown, so has the number of vehicles using Highway 101, resulting in the congestion experienced today.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE EIR

The purpose of this DEIR is to evaluate the environmental effects associated with implementation of passenger rail service and a parallel bicycle/pedestrian pathway in Sonoma and Marin counties by SMART. Section 15121 of the CEQA Guidelines states that the purpose of an EIR “is to provide public agencies and the public in general with detailed information about the effect which a proposed project is likely to have on the environment; to list ways in which the significant effects of such a project might be minimized; and to indicate alternatives to such a project.” This DEIR provides decision makers, public agencies and the general public information on the short-term and long-term environmental effects associated with the construction and operation of the proposed project and project alternatives.

1.3 CEQA REQUIREMENTS

This DEIR has been prepared in accordance with CEQA and the CEQA Guidelines. The SMART District is the Lead Agency for the proposed project defined by Section 21067 of CEQA as “the public agency

which has the principal responsibility for carrying out or approving a project which may have a significant effect upon the environment.”

1.3.1 Public Scoping

In accordance with Section 15082 of the CEQA Guidelines, a Notice of Preparation (NOP) was issued by the SMART District on November 8, 2002 (State Clearinghouse number SCH#2002112033). The NOP indicated that the SMART District was preparing an EIR for the proposed passenger rail project and invited comments on the environmental issues associated with the proposed project from the general public and public agencies. The NOP established a 30-day comment period for public agencies, organizations and interested groups and individuals to provide their comments on the scope of the EIR. The NOP and a summary of scoping comments are included in Appendix A of this DEIR.

As part of the public scoping process, SMART held two series of scoping meetings. The purpose of the open-house scoping meetings was to allow the public and other public agencies to provide input into the scope, focus, and content of the project’s environmental review document, including the alternatives to the proposed project. Five public open-house scoping meetings were held in November 2002 in Novato, San Rafael, Santa Rosa, and Petaluma. Additional public open-house scoping meetings were held in September 2003 in Novato, San Rafael, and Petaluma.

1.3.2 Previous Rail Planning Studies

Beginning in the 1980s, several studies addressing the concept of passenger rail service between Sonoma and Marin counties were prepared. These studies, listed in the References section of this report, are described more fully in section 2.4.2 of Chapter 2.

1.3.3 Technical Studies of the Project

A number of technical studies have been prepared for the project. They include:

- Air Quality (2005) – prepared by Parsons Brinckerhoff Quade & Douglas, Inc.
- Archaeological Resources (2004) – prepared by Garcia and Associates, Inc. (Due to the confidential nature of the material in the report, it is unavailable for public review)
- Biological Resources (2005) – prepared by Garcia and Associates, Inc.
- Community Impact Assessment (2005) – prepared by Parsons Brinckerhoff Quade & Douglas, Inc.
- Detailed Project Design Options and Preliminary Engineering Drawings (2005) – prepared by Parsons Brinckerhoff Quade & Douglas, Inc., and HDR Inc.
- Geotechnical Report (2005) – prepared by Mactec Engineering & Consultants, Inc.
- Hazardous Materials Assessment (2005) – prepared by Mactec Engineering & Consultants, Inc.
- Historic Architectural Resources (2004) - prepared by Garcia and Associates, Inc.
- Hydrology and Water Quality Assessment (2004) – prepared by Winzler and Kelly Consulting Engineers
- Noise Study (2005) – prepared by Parsons Brinckerhoff Quade & Douglas, Inc.
- Travel Demand Forecasting Report (2005) – prepared by Parsons Brinckerhoff Quade & Douglas, Inc.
- Visual Impact Assessment (2005) – prepared by Winzler and Kelly Consulting Engineers

With the exception of the Archaeological Resources Report, these documents are available for review at the offices of the Sonoma-Marina Area Rail Transit District, 4040 Civic Center Drive, Suite 200, San Rafael, CA 94903, (415) 492-2857. Also available for review is the SMART Expenditure Plan (Parsons

Brinckerhoff, 2004), Alternate Sites for Vehicle Maintenance and Storage Report (LTK and HDR Engineering, Inc., 2001) and Vehicle Alternatives Report (LTK and HDR Engineering, Inc., 2001).

1.4 ORGANIZATION OF THE DEIR

This DEIR was prepared in conformance with CEQA Guidelines (Sections 15120 to 15132) and includes the following sections:

- **Chapter 1: Introduction** describes the purpose of the DEIR and provides an overview of the environmental review process.
- **Chapter 2: Project Description** describes the project purpose and need, objectives and the details of the proposed passenger rail project, including the project right-of-way location, proposed stations and maintenance facilities, corridor transportation characteristics, project costs, and construction timeline.
- **Chapter 3: Environmental Setting, Impacts and Mitigation Measures** evaluates the adverse and beneficial impacts associated with implementation and operation of the proposed project. The analysis provides an overview of the existing conditions for each issue area being evaluated, a discussion of significance thresholds used to determine the level of potential impacts, an assessment of the potential short-term and long-term impacts of the proposed project, and a description of the mitigation measures that would reduce or eliminate those impacts.
- **Chapter 4: Project Alternatives** describes and analyzes the various alternatives to the proposed project, which include the No-Project, Express Bus, and Minimum Operable Segment (MOS) alternatives.
- **Chapter 5: Impact Overview** describes those impacts which are considered significant and unavoidable in addition to those effects found to not be significant. The section also includes a discussion of growth inducing impacts associated with the proposed project.
- **Chapter 6: References** lists the documents consulted in the preparation of this document.
- **Chapter 7: Report Preparation** lists those involved with the preparation of the EIR and those agencies and persons consulted in the preparation of this document.

1.5 DEIR REVIEW AND PUBLIC COMMENT

Copies of the DEIR and related documents are available for public review at:

Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit District
4040 Civic Center Drive, Suite 200
San Rafael, CA 94903
(415) 492-2855

Civic Center Library
3501 Civic Center Drive Room # 414
San Rafael, CA 94903
(415) 499-6051

Santa Rosa Central Library
211 E Street
Santa Rosa, CA 95404
(707) 545-0831

Metropolitan Transportation Commission Library
Joseph P. Bort MetroCenter
101 8th Street
Oakland, CA 9460
(510) 817-5836

The DEIR is also available online at SMART's website, located at www.sonomamarintrain.org.

The public review period for this DEIR is 60 days, beginning with the issuance of the Notice of Completion. Public hearings will occur during this period and oral comments may be made at these hearings. Hearings will be held on the following dates:

- January 17th, 2006 at 6:00 p.m. (Tuesday)
County Board of Supervisors Chambers
575 Administration Drive
Santa Rosa, CA 95403
- January 21st, 2006 at 9:00 a.m. (Saturday)
County Board of Supervisors Chambers
3501 Civic Center Drive
San Rafael, CA 94903

Agencies and the public are invited to provide comments on the DEIR in person at the public hearings, by email or standard mail. Comments should be focused on the adequacy of the DEIR.

Please submit written comments on the DEIR to the following address by no later than January 23, 2006:

Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit District
Attention: Lillian Hames
General Manager
4040 Civic Center Drive, Suite 200
San Rafael, CA 94903
(415) 492-2855

Comments may also be submitted by email to Nina West at nwest@sonomamarintrain.org.

Once the public review period is closed, a Final EIR (FEIR) will be prepared. The FEIR will incorporate this DEIR by reference, and will contain all comments on this DEIR, responses to those comments, and any revisions to the text of the DEIR. Following completion of the FEIR the SMART District, acting as the lead agency, will certify the document. Subsequent to certification of the FEIR, the SMART Board of Directors may approve the project for implementation. After the SMART Board of Directors has certified the FEIR and if it approves the project, a Notice of Determination will be filed with the State Office of Planning and Research and the Clerks of Marin and Sonoma Counties.

Before the project is approved, the SMART Board of Directors would be required to find (per CEQA Guidelines Section 15091) for each significant impact of the project: that changes in the project would reduce the impact to a level that is less than significant; that such changes are within the jurisdiction of a public agency other than the District; or that mitigation measures and alternatives are infeasible. For impacts that the District determines cannot be mitigated to a less than significant level, it would be necessary for the SMART Board of Directors to adopt a Statement of Overriding Considerations (per CEQA Guidelines Section 15093) that describes how benefits of the project outweigh those impacts before approving the project.