

## LATEST HEADLINES

## Streetcar demonstration opens to the public in Watsonville, Santa Cruz

Despite support, roar over a form of rail rolls on



A Coast Future streetcar is ready to roll on the tracks in Watsonville on Friday. (Shmuel Thaler/Santa Cruz Sentinel)

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WATSONVILLE — This weekend and the next, residents can ride down the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line in a streetcar, a temporary demonstration made possible by local donors such as Roaring Camp Railroads and the City of Santa Cruz.

Beginning in Watsonville on Saturday and Sunday, rides are available between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. to approximately 32 masked riders at a time, Coast Futura volunteers said during a preview of the demonstration Friday morning. [Coast Futura](#) is a community group made up of individuals that believe that the passenger vehicle manufactured by TIG/m, called ViaTran Streetcars, would provide a clean energy option that is affordable to locals.



Trink Praxel, left, and others ride the Coast Futura streetcar during Friday's demonstration in Watsonville. (Shmuel Thaler/Santa Cruz Sentinel)

Most of the tickets to board the streetcar sold out in one day, but standby openings are expected, said Coast Futura volunteer Lani Faulkner. Those who did not get a seat and just want to watch the car go by can find suggested viewing locations and route maps from the group at [coastfutura.org/event](https://coastfutura.org/event).

Not only will residents get to see what lines the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line, but they will be making history doing it. TIG/m President Brad Read said that this is TIG/m's first demonstration in California for the public, and as a state employer, he and his colleagues were honored to show off their creation.

"TIG/m is the only company in the world that has been able to design, manufacture and deliver an electric railway vehicle that can operate a full day of service, up to 20 hours, without requiring any wayside power systems," Read said. "All the energy for an entire day's service is carried onboard each car."

Environmentally friendly too is TIG/m's ability if contracted to do so to store up to 24 bicycles on any given streetcar. Sixteen could strap to the outside of the car and eight could be shelved in vertical bike racks which would take the place of where a handful of seats are just inside the doors, Read said.

Faulkner said that a streetcar system such as TIG/m's in Santa Cruz County would improve its transportation equity.

"With a robust transit system, our community benefits from greater economic mobility and lower household costs," she said. "Independence on one's own schedule to go shopping, to work, to other appointments is very important to the health and well-being of our elderly and our disabled."

In order for the demonstration to have taken place, the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission approved it. RTC staff members rode the car Friday and spoke with Read briefly during the journey; this summarizes what is happening with the possibility of making the vehicle a permanent facet on the rail line now, Praxel said.





The Coast Futura demonstration rail vehicle seen Friday in Watsonville is a battery-dominant hydrogen fuel cell hybrids manufactured by California-based TIG/m. (Shmuel Thaler/Santa Cruz Sentinel)

“They are in conversation not about a formal proposal but about some sharing of information in how this could fit in the guidelines the RTC has developed for this corridor,” she said.

In the past, RTC commissioners and staff have both spelled out concerns over the cost of a potential transit system. Read said that it is too early to be able to determine the exact funding necessary, but that he knows now it would be less than what RTC consultant HDR estimated for other alternatives in the [Alternatives Analysis for High Capacity Public Transit On the Rail Right of Way](#) document submitted in 2019.

## Immediate backlash

Minutes after members of the press had arrived back in their offices, Santa Cruz County Supervisor Manu Koenig’s office issued a statement that he would not be supporting the demonstration or possible future implementation of TIG/m’s streetcar model. In fact, his analyst confirmed in the email, the RTC commissioner planned to show up on Saturday in order to disprove the offering.

“Specifically, he will focus on the fact that the electric light rail concept would require millions of dollars in subsidies to a private company from Santa Cruz County taxpayers, and that the county has no funds to support such an enterprise,” the statement reads. “He will also review why this publicity stunt for an unproven vehicle that can’t cross out-of-service trestles for the next 15-20 years is not a realistic and thoughtful way to ‘get people moving’ in Santa Cruz County.”

When asked about Koenig’s stance, Coast Futura directed the Sentinel to Friends of the Rail and Trail Board Chair Faina Segal. Segal said that the community needs visionary leadership, not the supervisor positioning himself as “the Grinch who stole public transit.”





Train operator Kevin Hills steers a Coast Futura electric streetcar along the tracks adjacent to the bike and pedestrian trail in Watsonville during a demonstration on Friday. The public is invited to free rides of the clean-energy, affordable, accessible streetcar on the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line Saturday and Sunday in Watsonville and next Thursday through Sunday in Santa Cruz. (Shmuel Thaler/Santa Cruz Sentinel)

"We're seeing overwhelming community interest in transit solutions that address climate change and bring greater equity to transportation for hardworking commuters, especially those who live in South County," Segal wrote in an email. "We should be working together to meet the future, not derail it."

Trail advocates at Greenway, a group that Koenig formerly led, [designed and shared a website](#) specifically addressing the demonstration, calling the presentation of the battery-dominant hydrogen fuel cell hybrid "trolley folly." Greenway members [attached the proposal referenced by Traxel](#) that TIG/m and Roaring Camp sent to the RTC in September, alleging that it would create a public/private partnership. In the document, TIG/m describes the strategy of "an excursion tourist train" that would only run from Capitola to Davenport.

"(It) will not address traffic congestion in Santa Cruz County," Greenway states.

This means that the site where the demonstration began would not at all be traversed by passengers.

A Coast Futura spokesperson said that the two-weekend demonstration is unrelated to the proposal currently before the RTC. When asked what the demo was related to, they referenced previous commission preferences.

"The Santa Cruz Regional Transportation Commission identified Electrified Passenger Rail as the preferred transit option for the coastal rail corridor in February and authorized the demonstration as an opportunity for the public to see an example of a modern electric rail vehicle on the Santa Cruz Branch Rail Line track," the spokesperson said.

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