



For immediate release

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SMART RELEASES DRAFT SUPPLEMENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT

(Sonoma/Marin, CA) Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit can add weekend service and use lighter-weight rail vehicles on its 70-mile passenger rail and pathway project without causing significant new environmental impacts, according to a Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Report that was released on Friday.

The report examines the impacts of weekend rail service, lighter self-propelled rail vehicles, alternative station sites in southern Novato and a higher level of freight rail service than was studied in SMART's 2006 Final EIR. The SMART Board of Directors decided in 2007 that those elements should be reviewed in anticipation of a revised ballot measure on the project that is expected to go before voters in November 2008.

One element originally proposed for analysis in the Draft SEIR – several short segments of the Class I bicycle-pedestrian path that will be built in conjunction with SMART – was not included in this study. SMART staff and environmental consultants determined that additional alignment planning, feasibility studies and engineering work should be done before the environmental impacts of those segments can be fully considered. While these segments are not included in this document, the SMART project still includes 70 miles of paved pathway in addition to the rail line.

The Draft SEIR is being mailed to more than 500 interested parties. It also is available at the Civic Center Branch of the Marin County Library, the downtown Santa Rosa Branch of the Sonoma County Library, the SMART project office in San Rafael, and at SMART's web site, www.sonomamarintrain.org. Public hearings on the document will be at 6:30 p.m. April 9 at the Novato Unified School District Board Room, Seventh and Grant streets, Novato, and 6:30 p.m. April 16 at the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors Chambers, 575 Administration Drive, Santa Rosa.

The Draft SEIR finds that, "in general, impacts of the revised (SMART) project are the same as or less severe than impacts identified for the proposed project analyzed in the 2006 certified Final EIR." It goes on to state that "no new significant unavoidable or more severe impacts were identified" with the addition of weekend rail service or the use of light – rather than heavy – Diesel Multiple Unit rail vehicles. In fact, both elements would provide environmental benefits: Weekend rail service would

further reduce vehicle miles traveled, while light DMUs -- with better fuel efficiency than their heavy counterparts -- would further reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

In its analysis of alternative sites for a station in southern Novato, the Draft SEIR finds that a station at the former Hamilton Air Force Base – now a mixed-use community with several thousand residents and jobs – would generate the highest ridership for the SMART train. Stations in downtown Novato and at the junction of Highways 101 and 37 also were analyzed.

The Draft SEIR also examines issues related to freight rail service to be operated by the North Coast Railroad Authority. While the report does identify “a potentially significant cumulative noise impact” associated with the combined use of the Northwestern Pacific rail corridor by both passenger and freight rail service, it notes that impact “would be significant and unavoidable due primarily to the more frequent” freight service on the line. SMART has proposed helping local jurisdiction establish “quiet zones” – rail crossings at which trains do not have to sound their horns – as a mitigation measure for noise impacts. The cost of providing quiet zones is included in SMART’s proposed project.

A key finding of the Draft SEIR is that freight operations of three round-trips per day proposed by the NCRA “could be accommodated on the SMART right-of-way during daytime off-peak hours without the need for night trains.” The document also analyzes two “speculative” levels of freight service of up to eight round trips per day. Those findings are included in the document.

The NCRA has an easement to run freight rail service on SMART’s tracks between Novato and Cloverdale. Following the certification of SMART’s 2006 Final EIR, the NCRA filed documents indicating it anticipates freight rail operations at a higher level than was studied in the 2006 Final EIR. The Draft SEIR released Friday analyzed the cumulative impacts of that higher level of freight service combined with passenger rail service, and found those impacts “generally consistent” with those identified in the original study, “with the exception of noise.” The use of light DMUs would help reduce overall noise impacts, the document states.

SMART’s 2006 Final EIR concluded that the proposed passenger rail and adjacent bicycle-pedestrian pathway project was the “environmentally superior alternative” in the NWP rail corridor. Based on the information contained in the Draft SEIR, this conclusion remains unchanged. SMART, according to this analysis, will “provide net overall environmental benefits in transportation, air quality, energy use and recreation.”

In addition to the public hearings, comments on the Draft SEIR may be made in writing to:

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