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Tourist train gains steam

Reviving historic foothills line would foster community ties, tourism and fun, backers say

By Tony Bizjak - Bee Staff Writer

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The historic -- and long abandoned -- Placerville Branch railroad that meanders quietly through the wooded hillsides of El Dorado County may be on the verge of a new life.

A group of train fans is proposing turning the 140-year-old rail line into an excursion train ride, climbing from old town Folsom through Latrobe to Shingle Springs.

A tourist train, they say, could knit foothills communities, draw visitors and money to the region, bring some history to life and just be plain fun.

"There could be packages to go to Apple Hill and the wineries," said one of the proponents, rail buff Bill Anderson of Folsom.

"Cyclists could take their bikes. It's a fantastic venue with scenery and wildlife."

Proponents say someday, passengers could even dine on the train at tables with white tablecloths, like the Wine Train in the Napa Valley.

Folsom city and El Dorado County officials -- part of the rail line ownership group -- say they will work with Anderson's organization in the coming months on the plan.

Officials, however, say they also will look for proposals from any other interested groups on what could be done to get more community use out of the rail line corridor, which includes the tracks and adjoining space for recreation trails.

Not everyone is on board the train, however.

Some El Dorado County residents say the roughly 40-mile railroad right-of-way between old town Folsom and Placerville should be developed mainly as a recreation corridor for hikers, bikers, runners and horseback riders.

Mike Kenison of Shingle Springs is among residents who said they don't want to see a train squeeze out those other recreational uses.

"A train is a nice tourist thing," Kenison said. He's not necessarily opposed to one, "but people are out there biking and hiking all the time with their families."

Kenison, who rides his bike and walks on trails next to the tracks, asked planners to look into connecting the corridor in Folsom to the existing American River Parkway.

El Dorado County Supervisor Jack Sweeney, who is among officials interested in the tourist train idea, said his goal would be to develop the corridor for multiple uses, including trains.

He said the time to do it is now, because community interest is high.

"This is an opportunity; I see this as a shoestring that pulls our communities together in a way that Highway 50 doesn't," Sweeney said.

Officials said it is too early to estimate how much it would cost to set up an excursion line, but it is likely that federal funds and private money would be used.

Anderson and his group, the Folsom, El Dorado & Sacramento Historical Railroad Association (FEDS), say existing rails on the line remain largely intact and usable.

The Placerville Branch railroad was built in 1867 to haul logs and farm products and serve passengers to and from the foothills, Anderson said.

The FEDS group tentatively is proposing a 40-mile round-trip ride that would take about two hours, possibly starting near Folsom Boulevard, heading south of Highway 50 over the hills to Latrobe, then curling back north to Shingle Springs.

Anderson said his group envisions starting out by running trains on the line once or twice a day on weekends during good weather months.

To make it happen, the FEDS group is asking for an OK from the agency that owns the rail line, the Sacramento-Placerville Transportation Corridor Joint Powers Authority.

That agency is made up of four governments, El Dorado County, Sacramento County, the city of Folsom and the Sacramento Regional Transit District.

Joint powers authority executive John Segerdell said his agency will work in the coming months on a formal public process for requesting corridor use proposals, and will seek input from its member governments before deciding whether to go forward with a tourist line.

"I think it would probably work," Segerdell said of the tourist train.

"The biggest obstacle is getting it to balance financially."

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Rick Fuson, 72, left, and Al Onodera inspect sections of the Placerville Branch line by Latrobe Road damaged by floods. The line is largely usable, a group pushing tourist trips says.

Sacramento Bee/José Luis Villegas



Bill Anderson, 66, of Folsom sees a chance to package trips to Apple Hill and area wineries in El Dorado County aboard a tourist train. Anderson's group of train buffs will work with the city of Folsom and county officials on a rail plan, and solicit proposals from other groups.

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