April 8, 2014

The Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission
1523 Pacific Avenue
Santa Cruz, CA 95060

Re: Draft 2014 Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Plan

Dear Commissioners:

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the completed draft plan.

Applause is due

The Draft 2014 Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Plan presents an innovative, generational shift in transportation planning for Santa Cruz County, and the Campaign for Sensible Transportation (CFST) would like to begin by commending this Draft as the smartest, most adaptive planning framework yet produced by the RTC. In addition, we offer here some suggestions for how this Plan might do better.

To begin with, the Draft RTP introduces sustainability and the “triple bottom line” (people, prosperity, and planet) as principles to help guide new approaches to meeting our county’s transportation challenges.

In its “Vision for 2035” (Ch. 4) this Draft Plan rethinks and reconceptualizes conventional transportation goals. Instead of a primary focus on just moving more cars around on more roadways, the plan sets three conceptual goals that begin with “improve people’s access to jobs, schools, health care and other regular needs in ways that improve health, reduce pollution, and retain money in the local economy.” We believe this is a much better definition of success.

The plan provides outcomes-oriented “sustainability policies” (Fig. 4.2) and identifies measurable outcomes, called targets (Fig. 4.3) that lead toward the conceptual goals.

Reduction of greenhouse gas emissions receives more methodical attention than in past plans.

With all this, the Draft RTP provides an improved policy framework which, if used well to guide decision making, could result in better transportation projects, and outcomes that are a better fit to the future. When conditions change, having a good set of first principles is a good place to start from.
Complexities are the new normal

It has become harder to predict the future for transportation planning purposes, including when considering the long-term life cycle of transportation projects proposed in the 21 year timeframe of this plan.

The complex mechanisms of pending climate change are becoming better described by climate science. It is clear, change will be driven by our planet’s growing in-out solar radiation energy imbalance, with only temporary masking provided by the oceans, which have absorbed roughly 93% of the excess heat over the last 40 years.

Yet, human society’s response so far lags greatly behind what the climate scientists are saying is needed.

As a result there is a more profound risk to our economic future, with heightened risk of impacts to agriculture, water supply, employment, political stability, and human migration. Especially if society catches up with the science, and/or when further impacts such as weather extremes catch up with society, then transportation planning, transportation infrastructure, and transportation energy supply could be greatly affected or redirected by new regulatory actions, such as an incremental carbon tax or other additions to fossil fuel costs, and steeper, science-based GHG reduction mandates.

CFST advocates a greater response today, at much less ultimate cost, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, lessen climate risk, and lead toward a sustainable transportation future.

As an example of a GHG reduction pacing informed by climate science, a recent scientists’ consensus report calls for GHG reductions of 5% per year, year following year, from now until 2050, in order to stabilize atmospheric CO2 at 450 ppm by 2050 and in so doing have a 50-50 chance of limiting global temperature rise to two degrees Celsius. This metric was presented in the May 2013 report, titled “Scientific Consensus on Maintaining Humanity’s Life Support Systems in the 21st Century: Information for Policy Makers”, signed by more than 500 scientists from 44 nations, which is available online at http://mahb.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Consensus-Statement-For-Web-6-02-13.pdf (This link is clickable.)

Meanwhile, the Draft RTP briefly explains the existing regional transportation greenhouse gas reduction target of 5% by 2035 relative to 2005, saying this was set by the California Air Resources Board (CARB). However, several years ago this shamefully meager target was in fact proposed to CARB by the AMBAG Board of Directors in a largely political, non-science-based Board vote, stepping in after the preceding target setting process between AMBAG staff and CARB went off track and failed to set any reduction at all.

So, while it is somewhat an improvement that the Draft RTP is projecting a GHG reduction on the order of 16%, akin to the 15% target of the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG), we see this target as grossly inadequate compared to what the climate science findings are calling for.
Crucial choices lie ahead

CFST recognizes that the success of the 2014 RTP will depend on funding access plus funding decisions and similar decisions yet to be made at future meetings of the Regional Transportation Commission. The List of Projects in the RTP is somewhat like a menu, from which some hard choices will be made.

CFST continues to oppose allocation of funding for further widening of Highway 1, whether auxiliary lanes or through lanes. In the Appendix E Project List, we see the tens of millions of dollars per project for sequential auxiliary lane projects on Highway 1, on the constrained funds list. We consider it far better for cost-effective congestion relief to provide improved transportation alternatives, especially targeting the many short-distance solo-driver trips on Highway 1, which are most susceptible to mode switching.

The burden of proof before adding more Highway 1 lanes, should be on solidly demonstrating the evidence (we see none) that adding lanes on Highway 1 would provide cost effective long-term congestion relief and reduction in GHG emissions, in particular with long-term generated traffic taken into account, and when compared to other infrastructure investments.

A number of CFST members tell us they would find unacceptable, a sales tax ballot measure that includes in the potential uses any funds for widening Highway 1.

With the rail corridor now in public ownership by the RTC, the potential for transportation solutions stemming from this corridor is high, including to provide some alternatives to some driving trips on Highway 1. As anyone participating in the planning process for this rail corridor has seen, the public enthusiasm is impressively high also.

We have added to this letter a map showing the population densities in Santa Cruz County (based on the 2010 census data), on which is superposed the county’s rail lines. This map illustrates that our rail lines, especially the newly acquired 32 miles of rail corridor, link a number of highly populated census tracts—certainly one requirement for ensuring public use of passenger rail service.

We appreciate the incorporation of health and equity concerns into the RTP, and see projects that provide improved infrastructure for active transportation as a key to this. Please take note of the California travel survey (Fig. 3.15) which shows already significant mode share increases in the rates of walking and biking in California. We agree with the RTP’s localized findings from Fig. 3-17 showing mode share by city of residence, that “people’s travel preferences are influenced by the type of land use and transportation facilities that are available in their community.”

CFST urges the RTC to make good on the positive potential contained in the Draft 2014 RTP.

Sincerely,

Peter Scott, Co-chair          Paul Elerick, Co-chair          Jack Nelson, member

The Campaign for Sensible Transportation