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My turn: Folsom to Diamond Springs by train — a constructive way forward for everyone

The Sacramento Placerville Transportation Corridor–Joint Powers Authority (SPTC-JPA) represents the interests of the joint owners, and serves to manage the activities upon and integrity of the corridor to the benefit of all.

Following the award of a letter of intent in 2008 giving the Folsom, El Dorado and Sacramento Historical Railroad Association the opportunity to develop plans for an “excursion rail service” on the SPTC-JPA owned transportation corridor, development has been swift.

In less than three years regular excursion trips are running between Folsom and Latrobe Creek (soon to extend to Latrobe) and Shingle Springs to El Dorado township.

Thanks to the work of a dedicated and growing band of volunteers, the El Dorado and Folsom public are now able to sample the unique sights and sounds of the beautiful foothills scenery in a managed way, with no danger of trespassing on ranchland or upsetting animals or landowners.

A recent run saw a “real live” cattle drive, turtles in Carson Creek, jackrabbits and a variety of bird life, all from the comfort and safety of a train and without adversely affecting the routine of the rural landscape.

The railroad prevents discrimination against those who are unable to ride a bicycle or walk long distances. Everyone has the opportunity to experience the beauty of the corridor.

The corridor remains largely passable thanks to the tireless work of volunteers from FEDSHRA, who continue to regularly remove brush, improve drainage and maintain the integrity of the track.

A separate, not for profit organization has been developed in consultation with FEDSHRA and the SPTC-JPA to develop the excursion train operation and be responsible for the maintenance and integrity of the corridor, the Placerville & Sacramento Valley Railroad.

After a period of negotiation through which the SPTC-JPA staff determined reasonable requirements and responsibilities and P&SVRR developed a plan acceptable to the SPTC-JPA, a five-year license has been agreed upon between SPTC-JPA and the P&SVRR to develop an excursion service between Folsom and Diamond Springs.

As a consequence of these negotiations, P&SVRR was given permission by El Dorado County Department of Transportation to conduct heavy maintenance on a washout west of Latrobe that split the corridor, making it unsafe for rail and other potential users.

The repair of the washout was conducted in full agreement with DOT and actually exceeded the required specification in that two extra culverts were inserted to prevent future washouts and at a length that could assist any future trail built alongside the railway.

The repair was carried out at no cost to the county taxpayer — the funds coming from donations of money, time and resources from railroad supporters.

The railroad interests continue to believe in the concept of multiple-use for the corridor, the one obvious prerequisite being that the corridor shall remain a railroad. The basis for this is clear. At this time, the track is in remarkably good condition and the right-of-way requires a minimum of remedial work relative to value. Running through trains from Folsom to Shingle Springs, Diamond Springs and El Dorado motivates the volunteers to invest time, money and resources for the benefit of the whole community.

Rushing to remove something of such immense dollar value to the community and replacing it with something of far less dollar value with less overall utility, even though it will cost many millions of dollars and take many years to complete to the stated desired specification, is a difficult concept to comprehend.

The repair of the washout shows clearly the capabilities of the P&SVRR – “they said it couldn’t be done,” “it was too expensive,” but the repair was accomplished in less than one week, and at a fraction of the commercial cost — again saving local taxpayers money. A new trail was also created alongside the railway for vehicle access, which shows exactly how easy it is to build trails alongside the railway —again, at no cost to the El Dorado County taxpayer.

The P&SVRR volunteers ask that the Folsom trails experience be examined as an example. Folsom trails are top class and in many instances cross the railroad and run alongside the tracks. I believe this is easily achievable in El Dorado County to the benefit of all.

In order to satisfy the SPTC-JPA that the P&SVRR is a fit and proper organization with which to enter an agreement certain criteria have been met, including the appropriate level of liability insurance, adherence to appropriate Federal Railroad Administration and California Public Utilities Commission rules and regulations, and specific SPTC-JPA requirements. Safe operation is the primary concern, whether working on maintenance or carrying passengers.

Though of course the priority of the FEDSHRA and P&SVRR is to develop the railroad aspects of the corridor, it is the intention to assist in trails construction where possible and appropriate. Also, while fundraising efforts are geared toward railroad development, any initiatives for joint fundraising for the corridor will be supported by the P&SVRR. One of the valuable uses of the railroad is to move large quantities of brush, earth or other materials along the corridor, cheaply and efficiently. This can only help support trails building and management, and lower the footprint of any construction or repair work.

Throughout the United States and the rest of the world, railroad grade crossings operate safely for all modes of transport including bicycles. Thousands of bicycles cross railroad tracks on grade crossings without incident every day. Clearing the flange-ways on some grade crossings will be required to run through trains and the P&SVRR will assist DOT in efforts to accomplish this. All other maintenance can and will be carried out by the P&SVRR volunteer resources.

The goal as specified in the P&SVRR adopted business plan, is to run a 150th anniversary train to Shingle Springs in 2015. In the meantime, improvements and upgrading will be actively pursued along the length of the right-of-way, and services will extend with requisite development.

Latrobe and Shingle Springs are identified as the major centers for railroad activity and events, with passengers also boarding in Folsom. The ticket agent for the P&SVRR is based in Shingle Springs. As the P&SVRR is a not for profit corporation, all funds from whatever source will be invested into the development and improvement of the corridor.

The P&SVRR operation will also ultimately bring visitors to and enhance the experience provided by the EDWRF operation in the town of El Dorado, creating an attraction of major significance.

The SPTC-JPA five-year license offers all potential users the opportunity to benefit from the corridor. Improvements (like the washout repair) will continue to be made by the P&SVRR. If, in five years time, the railroad has not succeeded, the corridor will be in a far better condition from which to develop other “trails” uses and therefore will be a far more cost effective outcome for El Dorado County.

The five-year license period also allows the development of an effective trails volunteer group to manage and maintain the Camino trail, gain experience and prove itself capable, under the direction of DOT, while the P&SVRR expertise improves, manages and maintains the corridor from Folsom to Diamond Springs (in partnership with the El Dorado Western Railway Foundation and FEDSHRA.

Once the rails are gone, the cost of replacement means they are not coming back.

Support for the five-year license and vocal support for multi-use including the railroad will benefit all El Dorado County taxpayers and offer the best test of the true potential of multiple-use along the corridor, especially at a time when money is tight, staff are being laid off and the economy continues to falter.

The five-year license allows supervisors, officers of the county, residents and the public at large to ensure such important decisions are not taken lightly, and to base decisions about the future of the corridor on direct experience over a reasonable period rather than as a result of unscientific and subjective pressure group rhetoric and hastily arranged plans.

Together we are stronger, and everybody wins — including all the people of El Dorado County.

Philip S. Rose is president of the Placerville & Sacramento Valley Railroad.

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