

Santa Cruz Sentinel

Hope For Transportation Future

Jeffrey Ringold:

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Like most places in California, Santa Cruz County continues to struggle with its transportation future. The latest chapter in that struggle was written by the Regional Transportation Commission, which decided not to place a transportation sales tax on the November ballot. Given the findings of a recent opinion poll, the commission's decision was not surprising. The poll revealed that the percentage of local residents opposed to any tax increase grew from 27 percent in 2004 to 38 percent in 2007; 30 percent "strongly oppose" paying to add carpool lanes to Highway 1, while 16 percent "strongly oppose" paying for train service connecting to Amtrak and CalTrain. A successful tax measure would require a two-thirds vote for approval.

Hidden in the rubble, the poll also found something remarkably positive, something extraordinary, something largely overlooked and unreported. While roughly 12 percent of respondents said they ride the bus, 13 percent carpool, and 13 percent ride a bike, a full 26 percent responded that they telecommute. The question about telecommuting wasn't even asked in the 2004 survey.

Given that telecommuting can cover distances all across the globe, given that it doesn't require hundreds of millions of dollars in new infrastructure, doesn't cause delays during construction, doesn't generate the emissions of cars or transit, and doesn't take years or decades to build, would it make sense to give it more consideration while we also consider big infrastructure projects?

The question is timely. The California Air Resources Board is charged with implementing AB 32, the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, which requires that greenhouse gas emissions in California be reduced to 1990 levels by 2020. What if the Air Board worked with major employers to identify employees who aren't needed on-site five days a week? What if half the employees in the state could telecommute two or three days per week? What seemed impossible just five years ago may prove entirely possible five years from now. A coordinated statewide program could quickly, significantly reduce congestion, improve air quality and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Santa Cruz County could work with neighboring counties now to spearhead such a program.

As with all things visionary, some businesses will be ready to move faster than others. Some will be concerned about supervising employees who work from home or telecommute centers. But what's the alternative? To pay billions in additional taxes to get their employees to work? To suffer diminished productivity while their employees sit for

hours in traffic? To pay even more in health-care costs due to the well-established negative health impacts of long commutes?

Our region is home to the greatest forces of entrepreneurial genius in the world. Why not put some of that genius to work to craft 21st century solutions to a 21st century transportation problem? Companies like Hewlett Packard, Polycam and Cisco are already out in front on advanced “telepresencing” technology.

Of course, telecommuting is not a panacea. As long as there are humans, there will be a need for human travel, and electronics will never be a substitute for face-to-face interaction. Nor is this an argument that we should or shouldn’t spend \$300 million to \$500 million or more to widen Highway 1 or build a passenger rail system in Santa Cruz County. Perhaps people will one day be willing to tax themselves to pay for those projects, or for statewide projects like high-speed rail.

In the meantime, we have a remarkable opportunity to move forward quickly at minimal cost, to do something that can make a noticeable difference at least eight to 10 years before any of those infrastructure solutions come on-line. Why not get started?

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