

## MCRS meeting will explore local rail option

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A proposal to initiate light rail service in Mendocino County will be discussed at 11:30 a.m. Sunday in the Little Lake Grange hall on School Street.

As envisioned by the Mendocino County Railway Society, the meeting could spark "a rail revival in Northern California that could ultimately lead to connection with the Bay Area by means of the Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit (SMART) project," says the MCRS' Laird Smith

SMART has allocated \$50 million for rail reconstruction to north of Cloverdale, he notes.

"Peak oil has caused Willits to rapidly try to convert to a localized economy spurred on by the Willits Economic Localization movement," says the MCRS' Richard Jergenson. And sustainability "has to include an inexpensive local transportation system that would rely little, or not at all, on oil or coal.

"Since the rails from Willits High School down to north of Cloverdale have deemed to be in public ownership since 1989, it seems a logical way to start using this in-place asset would be to have a demonstration project in Willits that meets local transportation needs with an intent to ultimately link up with SMART," he says.

Smith notes the Skunk Train does not own the rails through and south of town. "Recent owners of our treasured tourist train have never really addressed what the rails used to do: provide transportation for people as well as goods, not just tourists," he says, adding, "Skunk equipment is outmoded and not energy-efficient anyway."

Low-cost equipment exists to make a local rail system a reality, Jergenson claims, "most notably the Siemens Regio Sprinter, which ran on the North Western Pacific Railroad tracks in 1996 and is in service worldwide, and a solar-electric vehicle named the Soltrain which ran from Fort Bragg to Willits and back again, and then down to Ukiah" in the early 1990s.

Willits' history as a railway town started because of logging, he points out. "The rails are no longer needed for shipping timber and are only being used for tourism. Now they are becoming more needed for transportation around town and to bring commodities into towns along the Bay Area-to-Willits route.

"This need is a reality because trucks are going to be more and more limited in their ability to supply the town's commodity needs as a result of the already steadily increasing oil/gas prices," Smith asserts.

The railroad "was our past. Now it can be our future salvation...to not only localize but maintain some contact with the outside world for as long as we can and receive needed goods while cottage industries are developing to make this area sustainable on its own."

To Smith, Jergenson and the MCRS, "It seems clear a turning point has been reached where we must look to the past to find our way to a sustainable future. Light rail is one of the needed components and the SMART project is underway already."

Area residents are urged to attend Sunday's informational meeting, but Smith asks participants to consider

joining the MCRS. "It will take more than a few dedicated people to get light trains on those tracks.

"You might want to come for the Grange breakfast (\$5) and stay afterwards for the meeting," Jergenson adds.

Information: Jergenson, 459-6362.

