

Federal panel rejects Skunk Train owner's bid to acquire abandoned rail line north of Willits

By [Mary Callahan](#)

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Robert Pinoli, owner of the Skunk Train Railroad, stands in front of a section of tunnel which collapsed along the line between Fort Bragg and Willits. (JOHN BURGESS/ PD FILE, 2013)

The federal board that oversees U.S. railroads has firmly rejected a bid by Mendocino Railway, owner of the popular Skunk Train in Fort Bragg, to take control of a 13-mile stretch of abandoned railroad extending north from Willits in the Eel River watershed.

The decision announced late Thursday by the Surface Transportation Board signaled an end to months of uncertainty about future use of the railroad and opens up a clearer path for ambitious plans to convert the entire line from rail to multiuse trail.

Great Redwood Trail town hall meeting on master plan

Monday's virtual town hall runs from 6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

Participants can attend by video on YouTube, at sd02.senate.ca.gov/video or on [Facebook](#).

They also can dial in by phone at 1-669-444-9171 and enter the webinar I.D.: 863 9035 5500.

Questions and comments can be submitted online at bit.ly/3MZRYOn.

“Now we can move forward without impediment,” said Caryl Hart, chairwoman of the Great Redwood Trail agency, created to develop a hiking/biking/equestrian trail spanning 320 miles from San Francisco Bay to Arcata in Humboldt County.

“This has been a cloud that has been hanging over us,” Hart added. “Now that cloud is lifted, and it’s just blue skies ahead.”

State Sen. Mike McGuire, a vocal champion of the trail, said the board’s decision amounted to “a momentous day for the future of the North Coast and the Great Redwood Trail.”

The Surface Transformation Board “was extremely clear and concise in their decision,” McGuire, D-Healdsburg, said in a written statement, “and we are grateful for all of the work they have put into making the Trail a reality. Obviously, we’ll be on the lookout for any potential Hail Mary attempts to appeal and we’ll be at the ready to beat them back in the coming few weeks.”

McGuire and the trail agency already had a town hall meeting planned Monday night to kick off master planning for the trail.

“With this proposal soundly rejected by the federal government, I’m thrilled that we’ll once and for all start moving dirt and getting large swaths of the Great Redwood Trail built,” he said.

The Surface Transportation Board said Mendocino Railway did not sufficiently prove it had the financial means to cover its \$5.48 million bid to buy the 13-mile stretch nor the additional funds needed to rehabilitate it.

Its own inspectors estimated repairs at \$7.24 million to \$8.9 million. The railway also would need to maintain and operate the track.

The line has been unusable since a drenching storm in 1998 washed out steep sides of the Eel River, sending segments of train track to the canyon below and collapsing tunnels.

The North Coast Railroad Authority, a now-defunct public agency that controlled the railroad and made some preliminary investments in repairs, had projected the cost of restoration at \$2.3 billion or more some years ago, though Hart said the real cost is lower.

But the federal board said it took seriously input from McGuire and others characterizing the track “as susceptible to repeated landslides, tunnel collapses, and repetitive rehabilitation.”

Still, before the railroad could be formally abandoned and “banked” — so it still could be used, theoretically, for rail transportation at a later date — and its conversion to a public trail allowed like others around the nation before it, the Surface Transportation Board was required to allow for offers from anyone who might want to finance its continued use for rail.

One such effort [was thwarted](#) when the federal board rejected efforts by [a mysterious Wyoming company](#) to take control of 176 miles of line that many feared would be used to run Rocky Mountain coal through North Coast communities and the rugged, remote Eel River Canyon.

In rejecting the smaller scale Mendocino Railway bid, the federal board also turned down the company’s proposal to acquire just the rail right of way so that the Great Redwood Trail could run alongside it.

Mendocino Railway President and Chief Executive Officer Robert Pinoli said he was disappointed in the decision. The railway has grown its [stake in both commercial freight rail and real estate in the region](#), and Pinoli cited those interests as well as those of a prospective client who reached out hoping to arrange for rail transportation of its gravel from the confluence of Outlet Creek and the Eel River to Willits in Mendocino County.

But he said the rail company would not appeal.

He blamed the defeat on Mendocino Railway’s own failure to “do a good enough job demonstrating we have the financing” to operate the rail even though, at the railway’s request, the federal board agreed to keep most of the accounting details private.

He also chastised McGuire for leading the opposition to a commercial venture along the line, and suggested the trail was no different from “a bridge to nowhere” at taxpayer expense, citing early estimates of low usage.

“We gave the Surface Transportation Board the opportunity to allow the baby to be split, so to speak, where rails and trails could exist together, and they refused to consider it. And what’s even more frustrating is we have for years been working in good faith with Senator McGuire, and he has completely shit on the idea of rails and trails and it’s a real disappointment,” Pinoli said. “You can’t tell me that you’re a champion of the environment and a steward of all things good and then foreclose on commodities moving by rail.”

McGuire said in response, “The Surface Transportation Board made a data-driven decision. All sides made their case, and the board reviewed hundreds of documents about this project over the past year.”

“The STB made it very clear by tossing out Mendocino Railway’s filing that they didn’t have the finances to build out the line and they weren’t qualified,” he said. “Now that we have this chapter behind us, it’s time to start building out this spectacular public gem of a trail that will benefit generations of Californians.”

A preliminary study released in 2020 by the California State Transportation Agency said the Great Redwood Trail could cost as much as \$1 billion to build, and another \$4 billion to address environmental impact.

McGuire at the time dismissed those figures as “hogwash” and “not based in reality,” and transportation officials stressed the figures were “preliminary” and “variable.”

The master plan, expected to take two to three years, is meant to provide a more detailed examination of potential costs.

In Sonoma and Marin counties, the trail will double as part of the foot and bike path planned to accompany SMART’s 70-mile passenger rail line from Larkspur to Cloverdale.

Hart said the future trail is expected to have tremendous appeal, not only to those seeking to walk or ride on the trail, but those seeking access to the Eel River for kayaking, rafting and other uses.

The trail will take visitors to Founder’s Grove in Humboldt County, campgrounds at sites along the way, including the 30,000-acre [Eel River Canyon Preserve](#), acquired by The Wildlands Conservancy last year and set to open for public access in the coming years.

“The whole goal here is an economic transformation of the North Coast,” Hart said.

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