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East-west railroad would be game-changer

Monte Provolt/for the Times-Standard

Most Humboldters are not aware that the first operating railroad in California was built in Humboldt County in 1854. In fact, by the late 1800s, Humboldt County had more railroads than any other county in California. This was because of the need to transport large logs from the forests to the mills on or around Humboldt Bay. The local economy ran on timber, workers and their families required fresh food, and little of that could be imported. Humboldters needed to buy food from local producers. Luckily, at that time, the Eel and Van Duzen valleys were very rich in agriculture, orchards, dairy, and sheep. Cattle ranches also dotted the coastal plain.

The problem farmers, ranchers, and timber owners faced, was to get their goods to Eureka and the nearby logging camps.

Anything transported from those areas to Eureka had to be hauled over Table Bluff by wagon, one load at a time. This was very costly in time and money, it also put limits on what could be shipped to the Eureka area. The problem was solved when some far-sighted people in the 1880s proposed tunneling beneath Table Bluff, and building a railroad connecting Humboldt Bay to the Eel River valley. According to newspaper articles at the time, there were those who were against building the tunnel. Some thought the cost would be too great. Others believed it just was not possible. Despite the opposition, the tunnel proponents went ahead with the project.

Soon they had a tunnel through to Loleta. The railroad was built to the Eel River valley and from that point forward goods could be transported efficiently to the logging camps, the deep water port in Eureka and shipped out to the rest of the world.

Compare the situation they faced then, to our modern era in Humboldt County. Geographically, nothing has changed. Just as in the 1880s, we live on a deep water port, but have no efficient way to bring goods to it for export. Everything grown and made east and south of Humboldt must still be hauled across the coast range, one truckload at a time.

The extra costs in time and money makes it too expensive to consider shipping from Humboldt Bay to other Pacific Rim markets. In this way, there are many similarities between the Loleta tunnel project of the 1880s and the proposed east-west railroad of today. Connecting our deep water port to the Sacramento Valley and the national **rail** system would not only revitalize the economy of Humboldt County, but all of the northern half of California would experience an economic boost.

That is why so many people today wonder if an east-west railroad could be built.

Certainly there are many obstacles a project such as a new railroad would have to surmount. The logical first step is to do a feasibility study. This effort not only could identify potential users, but could also show possible impacts to the economy. In addition, route alternatives, environmental concerns, and related issues could be evaluated.

If this route were to be built it would be the first time that the Port of Humboldt would be directly connected to the eastern markets, without first having to travel over 300 miles south before making its way to the national **rail** system. The time and cost savings will be substantial and would pose a competitive advantage for the Port of Humboldt.

These facts alone warrant having a feasibility study done.

If you support the idea of **rail** returning to Humboldt County, tell your representatives you support having a feasibility study done, and ask why some officials are fighting so hard to stop the study.

Monte Provolt is a member of the East-West **Rail** Advocates, an ad hoc citizens' group, and resides in Eureka.

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