

PD Editorial: North Bay freight gets back on track



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There were times we weren't sure it would ever happen. But on Friday evening, people gathered in Santa Rosa's Railroad Square to witness something unseen in more than a decade — a commercial freight train rolling through Sonoma County.

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- [Return Of Freight Service To Sonoma County](#)

It was a welcome sight.

The train hauling lumber to Windsor marked the culmination of a long, costly battle against numerous obstacles — some natural, some man-made, some purely nonsensical — to get freight trains rolling again.

In the long run, we believe it's an investment that will pay off in benefits to the local economy and the environment.

First, praise belongs to the North Coast Rail Authority and its supporters for their dogged determination to get freight back on track. The rail authority has spent countless hours — not to mention \$68 million in taxpayer funds — to repair a 62-mile stretch of rail connecting Napa County and Windsor, a segment that was shut down by federal officials in 2001 because of storm damage.

We also give credit to the members of the Novato City Council who agreed to a modest change in a settlement agreement this month, thus allowing the trains to roll. The settlement ended a lawsuit Novato filed to stop the rail line, which passes through a corner of Marin County. With its July 12 vote, the council showed a willingness to be fair-minded.

Certainly, restoring rail service won't be the magic bullet to rebuild the local economy. But it will be a tool that hasn't been available to the North Bay for years — a tool that has the potential to increase competitiveness, lower costs and, potentially, spur innovation.

Representatives from a variety of industries, from wine and agriculture to construction, have indicated their desire to use the freight line. Some already have.

John Williams, president of Northwest Pacific Railroad, which is leasing the rail from the NCRA, is predicting that the line will be hauling 2,000 to 2,500 carloads of cargo a year by the end of its second full year of operation. That would put the rail line in the black, he says.

Such activity will also make the county more green.

Studies show that freight trains are two to four times more fuel efficient than trucks, and freight trains emit one-third of the greenhouse gas as trucks. Moreover, one loaded freight car, on average, means four fewer trucks on the highway. In turn, that means less traffic on the North Bay's already congested roads.

For Sonoma County residents, the biggest impact will be getting accustomed to living with trains once again. No doubt there will be complaints. After all, it's been more than 13 years — 10 years in Petaluma and parts of south county — since Santa Rosa residents have had to wait at a flashing crossing gate or heard the sound of a freight train rumbling through.

Sonoma County residents will have to exercise caution and patience, especially if the rail line is used as often as its advocates say it will be.

We can only hope a busy rail line is a problem the county will have to confront some day.

