



**Letter of Explanation for Better Newspapers Contest  
Category 2: Public Service Journalism**

**Santa Cruz Rail Trail ‘Tracker’**

On June 7, 2022, voters in Santa Cruz County were asked to decide whether to continue a decades-long effort to bring rail transportation to their stretch of the coast.

The Santa Cruz Rail Trail was envisioned as a pedestrian/bicycle pathway running the length of the county alongside the Santa Cruz Branch Line tracks. Unlike some rail-trail projects that replace tracks with a trail, the Santa Cruz Rail Trail project envisioned a passenger train from the outset.

The Greenway Initiative on the June ballot would have removed all mention of rail planning from the county's General Plan—possibly putting an end to recent planning that involved electric light rail. The issues surrounding the decision were complex and the campaign heated. On one side were individuals and organizations who'd been working on the rail trail for decades, and on the other a passionate group of rail opponents led by one of the county's wealthiest residents.

California Local created an editorial package gathering information from stakeholders on both sides of the issue. Branded as a Tracker—a portal for information about an ongoing public process—our Rail Trail package included the following:

- “Explainers” written by our team that put the vote in context.

- Prominent links to articles from our six local partner publications who are members of the [California Local Media Alliance](#).
- Links to relevant articles from multiple local news sources.
- A [resource list](#) with descriptions and links to primary source documents and other reference material.
- Prominent links to relevant governing bodies, including the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission (SCCRTC).
- Prominent links to related community groups on every side of the issue.

## **Engagement**

- Along with other original source documents, we created and published transcripts of remarks by SCCRTC Executive Director Guy Preston and commissioner Andy Schiffrin.
- We published columns on the topic by mountain-bike pioneer [Keith Bontrager](#) and tech hero [Lloyd Tabb](#).
- Longtime local civic leader Fred Keeley chose California Local to publish a widely read [Op Ed supporting the Rail Trail](#).

## **Public Service Effect**

In the face of a \$462,724 anti-rail campaign that included a lot of rancor and misinformation, Santa Cruz County voters [overwhelmingly rejected](#) the Greenway Initiative (73.21% to 26.79%).