

## **Guest Column | Fifth District May Highlights: Community Events, Progress on Key Issues and Budget Talks**

Press Banner

May is shaping up to be busy in the Fifth District with several great community events and notable progress on important issues.

On May 11, the 27th annual Queer Youth Leadership Awards will be at Scotts Valley High School. This is a special opportunity for our County's queer youth and their allies to celebrate accomplishments, and it reminds us how important it is for school campuses to be safe spaces for queer and trans kids. Learn more at [qyla.org](http://qyla.org).

Also on May 11, the City of Scotts Valley and the County of Santa Cruz will join dozens of other entities supporting the All-County Clean Up Day organized by Pitch in Santa Cruz County, which encourages community members to organize clean-ups targeting litter and illegal dumping. Learn more at [pitchinsantacruz.org](http://pitchinsantacruz.org).

Another organization focused on beautifying our environment is the Valley Women's Club of the San Lorenzo Valley and its Native Habitat Restoration Program. My office has contributed \$10,000 in County single-use cup fee funds to new VWC restoration projects at Boulder Creek Elementary School, Felton Covered Bridge Park and the San Lorenzo Valley Museum.

And, as we head into the dry part of the year, I urge residents to attend a May 14 Community Wildfire Preparedness Workshop featuring speakers from the Scotts Valley Fire District, Cal Fire and United Policyholders. The free event will be from 6-8pm at the Scotts Valley Community Center, 360 Kings Village Road, and topics will include insurance, preparedness and evacuation.

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May will be a busy time for the Board of Supervisors as well, with budget hearings set for May 21-22. Fiscal Year 2024-25 will be lean as we await reimbursement from federal agencies of \$144 million in County costs related to Covid, the CZU Fire and multiple storm events. In fact, we anticipate needing to borrow up to \$85 million to ensure we can maintain core services for the community while we seek payback for our disaster response costs.

Lastly, I would like to address an issue that has received a great deal of attention in recent weeks: the Rail Trail. The future of the 32-mile rail corridor has been one of the most contentious in my nearly 12 years on the Board.

On March 26, I made a motion, which passed 3-1, in favor of approving the Environmental Impact Report for Segments 10 and 11 from Live Oak to Aptos but holding off temporarily on other steps for building the “ultimate trail configuration,” which is a bike and pedestrian trail next to railroad tracks that may eventually provide passenger service. We needed clarity about the broader financial implications, considering the project is \$27 million over budget amid a limited pool of local funds to match grants for future segments and pay for maintenance.

However, after the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission voted April 18 to reaffirm its commitment to the project—and after Commission staff provided a much more complete financial analysis—the Board voted 4-0 on April 30 to approve Segments 10 and 11 and related agreements, including a \$68 million California Transportation Commission grant that had been mischaracterized as being in jeopardy while we conducted the additional due diligence.

County and RTC planners predict the funding gap for Segments 10 and 11 could be closed with value analysis on designs, approval of a pending \$20 million federal grant, and successful negotiations with Roaring Camp Railroads to bear the cost of moving historic rails that are unsuitable for future rail service.

Still, questions remain unanswered, such as an estimated \$400 million to \$500 million for the rail or trail in South County, which has raised equity concerns that beg to be addressed. What’s more, the RTC reports that maintenance of the Rail Trail corridor will cost \$66 million between now and the end of Measure D in 2047.

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Passed by voters in November 2016, Measure D provides local funding for roads, Highway 1 improvements, METRO, ParaCruz and rail. Measure D's Active Transportation Program (ATP) will have \$97 million remaining after meeting \$77 million in commitments related to the Mid and North County ultimate trail segments. Reserving most of the rest of those ATP funds as matching funds for South County projects and overall corridor maintenance would be prudent, as will be considered during the June 6 RTC meeting.

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