

Date of Hearing: August 20, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

SB 727 (McGuire) – As Amended May 23, 2025

Policy Committee: Transportation

Vote: 16 - 0

Urgency: No

State Mandated Local Program: Yes

Reimbursable: No

SUMMARY:

This bill explicitly designates the Great Redwood Trail Agency as a subdivision of the state and makes numerous, disparate changes to statutes governing the agency's powers and administration.

Relevant to the work of this committee, the bill empowers the agency to receive funds from the State Coastal Conservancy or any other state agency as may be appropriated by the Legislature.

FISCAL EFFECT:

Potentially significant cost pressure, likely in the millions of dollars (Proposition 4 bond funds or other funds), to provide funding through the State Coastal Conservancy or other state agencies to the Great Redwood Trail Agency.

COMMENTS:

Beginning in the late 1800s, a rail line operated over more than 300 miles, from Humboldt in the north to the San Francisco Ferry Building in the south, mainly hauling redwood lumber and passengers. By the 1980s, the Northern California timber industry was in decline, and the railroad that operated the northern section of the line—Eureka Southern Railroad—requested permission from the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) to abandon the line. The CPUC denied Eureka Southern's request, and, in 1986, the railroad filed for bankruptcy, leading to liquidation of its assets.

In response, to preserve the rail corridor, the Legislature enacted the North Coast Railroad Authority Act (NCRA), which authorized the newly created NCRA to provide passenger and freight railroad service in Humboldt, Trinity, Mendocino, Sonoma and Marin counties with specific focus on the Eureka Southern Railroad in Humboldt and Mendocino counties and the option of extending service into Del Norte County. In 1992, the NCRA began purchasing segments of rail and rights-of-way using various combinations of state funds and federal funds.

NCRA's rail operations have not been a success. For a brief period, NCRA operated freight service and passenger rail service. However, in 1998, severe storm damage and deferred maintenance led to landslides, collapsed tunnels and railcars in the Eel River, which led the Federal Railroad Administration to close a large northern section of the railroad. The railroad remained closed until 2011, when limited freight service began on a portion of the southern section of the rail line. Since then, NCRA has attempted to resume rail service on the northern leg of the rail line, leading NCRA into greater and greater debt.

In 2018, the Legislature enacted SB 1029 (McGuire), Chapter 934, Statutes of 2018, which requires NCRA to prepare for its dissolution and plan for the transfer of assets and liabilities. In 2021, the Legislature enacted SB 69 (McGuire), Chapter 423, Statutes of 2021, which created the Great Redwood Trail Agency (GRTA) to plan, design, operate and maintain a trail in Sonoma County.

The author describes the trail—the Great Redwood Trail—as, someday, providing:

a continuous, 320 mile long hiking and biking trail from the Golden Gate Bridge to Humboldt Bay, offering a world-class recreational public resource for generations to come. This important project will create economic activity across five North Coast counties, providing public trail access for thousands of visitors while helping to preserve unique and sensitive natural resources.

The author views this bill as making “technical changes to the Great Redwood Trail Agency’s enabling statute.”

The bill is supported by Marin County. There is no registered opposition against it.

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