Financial crisis threatens VTA expansion plans

During the summer months, the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) took controversial actions to borrow funds to avoid cuts and continue work on its BART and light rail capital projects.

At its August meeting, the VTA board approved a plan to bond against Measure A (the transportation sales tax approved by voters in 2000) by a 7-5 vote. The plan would prevent a proposed 21% cut in bus and light rail service scheduled for January 2004, while increasing VTA's expenditures for capital projects. Transit advocates and the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, who asked that transit cuts be averted, raised concerns about the plan. Only $80 million out of the approximately $550 million plan would go towards preventing transit cuts. $170 million would fund preliminary engineering for the BART extension from Fremont to San Jose. Questions were raised about VTA's ability to construct the extension given the agency's dire financial situation. Some warned that funds bonded for the extension would lead VTA into worse financial hardship in the future. VTA still plans to cut 3% of its service this January. Recent economic projections predict that year 2000-level numbers of jobs will not return to the Valley until 2009 or 2010.

Supervisor Blanca Alvarado asked VTA General Manager Pete Cipolla why the bonding package included funding for BART. Cipolla answered that VTA must continue preliminary engineering to maintain the staff to work on the project.

On October 6, VTA approved two Minimum Operating Scenarios (MOS) to include in the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the BART extension. VTA developed these phased plans to satisfy a request by Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to reduce the cost of the project. One MOS plan, as recently approved by VTA's Policy Advisory Board, includes building the full length project in the first phase, minus two stations (Berryessa, Civic Plaza/SJSU; Alum Rock also would have been eliminated but was added back following political outcry).

BayRail Alliance urges San Franciscans to vote Yes on Proposition K on the November 4 ballot. Prop. K would extend the city's transportation sales tax for another 30 years to generate an estimated $2.4 to $2.8 billion. About 24% of the revenue would be dedicated to transit capital projects. 37% of the revenue would go to transit infrastructure maintenance. The rest would fund paratransit operations, street maintenance, and traffic safety programs. Major capital programs in the plan include Muni bus rapid transit, Third Street light Rail and Central Subway, a new Transbay Terminal with a Caltrain downtown extension and Caltrain electrification. With the revenue programmed for Transbay Terminal/Caltrain extension ($270 million) and for other capital programs, SFCTA would leverage additional state and federal funds.

Prop. K requires a two-thirds majority to pass.
The chart on the upper right is based on a spreadsheet distributed by VTA staff to VTA’s ad-hoc committee in September. For the first 22 of the 30 years of Measure A, the only color needed to portray the situation is red. Under this scenario, Measure A would not have a positive ending balance until just before it sunsets in 2036. Instead of building many projects, Measure A funds would be used to pay about $3.4 billion in interest and to retire the debt.

Even the initial MOS contrasts with common practice on similar projects locally and nationally. More typically a project would be truncated and project costs scaled back more drastically. The initial MOS reduced costs by only 10% but also reduced ridership by about 10%. The new MOS proposals scale back the project even less. It remains to be seen whether FTA will accept these proposals for consideration. FTA has stated that it will provide no more than $500 million toward any one project; VTA has been seeking $973 million. The new scenarios would cut less than $400 million from the cost of the project.

Moreover, recent spreadsheets from VTA staff, as presented to VTA’s ad-hoc financial stability committee and board, show that the BART project cannot be built without additional local funding. They show that even an additional 1/4 cent sales tax would not be enough. However, it’s highly unlikely that Santa Clara County voters would approve an additional sales tax just to build the BART project. Many are angry and disillusioned with VTA’s current inability to deliver on its 2000 Measure A promises.

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The lower chart is also based on the same VTA spreadsheet, but with the following assumptions:

1) the San Jose BART extension project (both costs and anticipated revenues from grants) is stricken from the project list;
2) Downtown-East Valley light rail extension is delayed five years, with the costs inflated by 4.75% a year;
3) no new taxes, such as another sales tax, are collected; and
4) bonds are issued as assumed by the VTA in 2003, even without going forward with the BART project.

BayRail Alliance believes that fast and convenient transit service at much lower cost is readily achievable in the BART corridor using more suitable technology.
From the Editor’s Desk
Caltrain-SFO connection: examining the options
By Andy Chow

Since its June 22 opening, the BART extension to Millbrae/SFO has attracted far fewer riders than anticipated. As a result, SamTrans is trying to renegotiate with BART its financial responsibility for the operation of the extension.

Various letters and articles in local newspapers soon after the extension’s opening documented the problems with the connection provided by BART’s SFO-Millbrae service, compared to the free shuttle bus which operated prior to the opening.

Years before the extension opened, those of us familiar with the $1.6 billion project anticipated many of these problems. They are the consequences of politically motivated design decisions. Facing this reality, BayRail asked specifically for integrated ticketing and timed connections. However, Caltrain and BART failed to provide either. The SFO-Millbrae service operates every 20 minutes. This is incompatible with Caltrain’s 30-minute headways during midday, or with the rest of the BART system, with 15-minute headways.

On the fare side, Caltrain passengers heading to or from the airport are required to purchase a BART ticket through its machines, in addition to their Caltrain ticket. Although Translink could provide integrated ticketing for some passengers, the new BART ticket machines and fare gates are currently incompatible with Translink. BART could provide more convenient connections by adjusting its SFO-Millbrae train frequency to operate every 30 minutes, timed to coordinate with Caltrain.

One proposal to remedy the lack of integrated ticketing would be for Caltrain ticket agents to sell $1.50 BART tickets to Caltrain passengers heading to the airport. However, this is only a partial remedy, as it doesn’t address the needs of passengers with multi-ride tickets, or those traveling from the airport. The design of Caltrain ticket machines may not permit them to dispense BART tickets.

Better way to SFO

The best-kept secret for transit to SFO from the south is SamTrans’ express route KX. KX runs between San Francisco, SFO and Palo Alto. The fare between SFO and points south is $1.25, or free for riders with a Caltrain monthly pass with two zones or more.

At SFO, KX serves directly to the terminals. KX stops on the lower level of Terminals 2, 3, and the International Terminal. The Terminal 2 stop is a short walk from Terminal 1.

KX connects with Caltrain at the Belmont and San Carlos stations and takes the 101 freeway between Hillsdale and SFO. Passengers headed to SFO via Caltrain may transfer to KX in Belmont as an alternative to BART. On weekdays during midday, the northbound KX is scheduled to depart the Belmont Caltrain station about five minutes after the northbound Caltrain. Although the transfer time is longer for southbound connections, the timing is nonetheless consistent as KX also operates every 30 minutes. Overall, travel time via KX is competitive, if not faster, than via the BART connection at Millbrae.

I am enclosing a contribution to help fund BayRail Alliance’s programs.

___ $35 Regular  ___ $50 Sponsor  ___ $100 Patron

___ $250 President’s Club  ___ $ ________ Other

___ $15 Student/low income

We are supported entirely by member contributions. Voting memberships start at $15 or $35, as applicable. As we engage in lobbying, dues are not tax-deductible at this time.

Name: ______________________________________________________________
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I can help by:

☐ Calling or writing local public officials when you tell me about important transportation issues.

☐ Volunteering two hours a month (or more)

Mail to the address listed on the back, or contact us toll free at: (866) 267-8024
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BayRail Alliance, formerly Peninsula Rail 2000, is a 20-year old, all-volunteer, entirely member-supported transit group working to promote the creation of a modern rail network to serve the greater San Francisco Bay Area. BayRail is not affiliated with any rail or transit agency, contractor or vendor.

Our goals include: converting Caltrain from diesel to electric propulsion; increasing Caltrain frequency to at least once every ten minutes at peak times and every half-hour at off-peak times; extending Caltrain to downtown San Francisco and to the East Bay via the Dumbarton Rail Bridge; expanding ACE and Amtrak Capitol Corridor; and building the proposed high speed rail line connecting the Bay Area and Southern California.

BayRail Alliance, formerly Peninsula Rail 2000
3921 East Bayshore Road
Palo Alto, CA 94303
e-mail: info@bayrailalliance.org
http://www.bayrailalliance.org
forwarding and address correction requested

BayRail Alliance

Caltrain requests input on proposed Baby Bullet timetable

Caltrain plans to hold six public meetings to receive input on the proposed timetable changes, which includes the extensive overhaul of the Caltrain weekday timetable. The new timetable includes Baby Bullet express, limited-stop and local service changes. It also includes a new schedule for weekend service.

The new timetable is expected to take effect in spring 2004, following the completion of the CTX construction project.

Visit www.caltrain.com for the proposed timetable.

Meeting dates, topics, and locations are subject to change without notice.
For latest information: www.bayrailalliance.org.

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Executive Editor: Andy Chow
Copy Editor: Russell Reagan
Contributor: Margaret Okuzumi,
Photos: Andy Chow

Caltrain J PB and CAC meetings:
November 6 - 10:00am
November 19 - 6:00pm

Location for BayRail Alliance General Meetings:
BayRail is considering changes in meeting location and dates. Visit www.bayrailalliance.org for updates.

Location for Caltrain JPB and CAC Committee Meeting:
SamTrans administrative office, 1250 San Carlos Avenue, San Carlos, one block west from San Carlos Caltrain station

Other events:
October 28: 6:30 pm
Municipal Service Building, 2415 University Ave., East Palo Alto
Caltrain Baby Bullet schedule meeting

October 29: 6:30 pm
SamTrans admin. office, 1250 San Carlos Avenue, San Carlos
and San Francisco 4th & King Caltrain station

October 30: 6:30 pm
Council Chambers, 500 Castro Street, Mountain View
and San Jose Diridon Caltrain station

November 4: 6:30 pm
Council Chambers, 7351 Rosanna Street, Gilroy

Submissions:
We welcome submissions via email. Please include your name and phone number, and send your submissions to andychow@attbi.com.
We especially encourage submissions that include information on what interested readers can do and any photographs or other graphics.

BayRail Alliance
formerly Peninsula Rail 2000
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Palo Alto, CA 94303
e-mail: info@bayrailalliance.org
http://www.bayrailalliance.org
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