

# Marin's Vote on 101 Rail: NOT SMART

by Lauren Hilliard

Anyone who has sat in jammed North Bay traffic on Highway 101 can testify that this is not the most enjoyable experience. In fact, over three-quarters of Sonoma and Marin County citizens surveyed say they are willing to fund a passenger rail system to relieve congestion. However, there are significant hurdles between the vision and the reality of rail service.

Assembly Bill 2224, effective January 1, 2002, transferred ownership and passenger operating rights on former NWP tracks to the Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit (SMART) District in Sonoma and Marin Counties. The goal of the SMART project is to provide passenger train service to Sonoma and Marin County residents in the corridor parallel to Highway 101.

The SMART District consists of a 12-member Board consisting of elected officials: two County Supervisors, three appointed City Council members from each county and two representatives from the Golden Gate Bridge District. The SMART District is responsible for planning, engineering, evaluating and executing passenger train service and corridor maintenance from Cloverdale to a terminal with ferry connections to San Francisco.

According to current plans, operation for the 75 mile corridor could begin by 2007 and provide service to 14 stations, nine in Sonoma County and five in Marin County. Current operating assumptions project service frequency at 30 minute intervals during peak periods with 12 to 16 trains per day.

Caltrans data shows that southbound Highway 101 between Sonoma and Marin Counties is the fourth most congested freeway in the Bay Area weekday mornings. Travel time from Santa Rosa to San Rafael during morning commute hours is about 70-80 minutes. The same trip by train would take no more than 55 minutes.

SMART proposes a \$200 million program of capital improvements and equipment for the Cloverdale to San Rafael segment and service with estimated operating costs of \$9 million annually. SMART describes the program as being less costly than widening Highway 101 from 4 to 6 lanes the short distance between Petaluma and Novato. While there is an anticipated operating revenue source of \$3 million from fares, the proposed shortfall sources of \$6 million will need to be covered by the Direct Sales Tax Measure.

Results from an extensive polling by Sacramento-based J. Moore Methods found 76 percent of Marin County voters and 77 percent of Sonoma County voters would support a one-quarter cent sales tax increase to fund the SMART project. Since 1990, three sales tax initiatives with funds for rail have failed in Sonoma County and two in Marin. Support of a sales tax has increased as congestion on Highway 101 has grown.

However, on June 16 an attempt to put a sales tax measure on the November 2004 ballot failed. Even though the residents of Sonoma and Marin Counties are willing to pay for a rail line, only one of four Marin members of the SMART board voiced support for the proposed sales tax needed to implement this vision. That all five Sonoma County SMART representatives endorsed putting the rail tax on the November 2004 ballot shows how sharply divided the two counties stand on implementing the vision of passenger rail.

While Marin is not in favor of placing the sales tax initiative on the November 2004 ballot, Marin representatives on the SMART Board stated their commitment to put a quarter-cent tax measure for rail on the November 2006 ballot. However, even if the SMART board endorses the sales tax measure in 2006, the board of supervisors from each county will still need to vote in support of it before the initiative can be presented to the public.

Sonoma County SMART member and Cloverdale City Councilmember, Bob Jehn, believes that it is very likely that the support for a rail tax may be even higher in two years than current polls indicate. Furthermore, Jehn notes that traffic congestion along Highway

101 is not likely to improve in the next two years, and that voters will be even more supportive of alternatives to using the automobile to travel the 101 corridor.

Although the decision has past, many observers feel strongly that there were advantages to having a November 2004 tax measure over the one in 2006. In addition to a ballot measure during the upcoming controversial, presidential election drawing significantly more voters to the polls, there would be continued negative impacts on the environment if the vote was to wait an additional two years.

Steve Birdleough from the Friends of SMART noted in his statement to the SMART Board that people are becoming more concerned about the effects of air pollution and greenhouse gases and the price of gasoline. Furthermore, rail service is an antidote to all of those problems, and we have delayed it too long.

While pushing the plan back adds to environmental problems, it gives time for public support to grow. Lionel Gambill, a longtime rail advocate from Santa Rosa, points out that since 1998 many people who opposed SMART have altered their views as the development of studies and documents related to the plan progress. The Commuter Rail Implementation Plan; ridership, revenue, and cost studies, and completed environmental studies will all influence voters in 2006.

The Sonoma County Transportation Authority is planning to put a sales tax measure on the Sonoma ballot this November that could include enough money for SMART to stay alive and continue its work until 2006. Much of the frustration toward Marin seems to lie in the funding of the project, as Sonoma County has struggled to keep SMART going over the past few years while Marin County continued to postpone any advancement.

Marin County SMART board members say there is not sufficient information regarding environmental effects of the proposed rail line. Interestingly, Marin has expanded its segment of Highway 101 from four lanes to eight lanes over the past two decades with plenty of financial support and no environmental reservations. Sonoma County, on the other hand, mostly retains the four-lane freeway that existed in 1957.

Environmental impacts from a passenger rail system have been proven to be significantly less damaging than those of a highway expansion. Air pollution is just one example of negative impacts of roads compared to rail. The convenience of auto mobility often

increases the distances that people are willing to travel from the home to workplace. As a result, longer and more frequent vehicle trips result in increased emissions.

Auto-caused sprawl is another impact cited by transportation and land-use planners. SMART's Transit Oriented Developments will attract a higher density population, preserve open space and agricultural land, and result in less sprawl. The proposed 70-mile bike/pedestrian path running parallel to the tracks provides the alternative to bike or walk to the train stations.

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's revised budget reinstated funding for transportation projects such as SMART which had been cut in his original spending plan issued in January. However, SMART risks losing about \$30 million in state funding for the project if the sales tax measure is not passed in 2004. Bob Jehn was quoted in a May 20 Press Democrat article as saying, "The gods in the transportation arena help those who help themselves. That's the clear message from Sacramento."

The Transportation Authority of Marin (TAM) hopes to place a half-cent sales tax on the November ballot to fund a mix of roads and buses – with more than half going to Golden Gate Transit, a \$20-30 million HOV lane from San Rafael to Larkspur, and the remainder to local transit. However, polls indicate support of the Marin tax is below 50%, far short of the needed two-thirds.

There was concern in Marin that the approval of SMART's quarter-cent sales tax would have prevented Marin County's tax from taking place. If Marin County residents vote in support of their local tax, the future of approving a regional tax for both the counties will become more unlikely as voters will probably not be willing to pass an additional sales tax increase a few years later.

The Sonoma County Transportation Authority's Deputy Director of Projects and Programming, Patrice M. Siefers, noted that the rail line is conveniently located in both counties to serve downtowns, major employers, shopping areas, and tourist venues.

She also pointed out that starting a train on existing tracks is economical and environmentally responsible, and that it is also not possible for Highway 101 to meet all travel demand. "History is instructive, and assembling a new right of way after their highway widening fills up will be impossible due to land prices and public opposition to ripping down businesses and homes," Siefers noted.

Siefers also stated that the greatest difficulty in a rail project lies in gaining access to the railroad line by lease or purchase. SMART already passed this hurdle when the state bought the right of way for freight rail purposes and the Bridge District bought it for passenger rail. "If you review new start rail services in California over the last 15 years, it is always one county that moves the project along and pays for it with the other counties come along later and reimburse the county that got the service started," Siefers said.

While the idea of running the rail line just through Sonoma County has been talked about at great length, there is not strong support for this idea. Bob Jehn thinks the voters of Sonoma County would not support a rail tax for this idea, because all the studies projecting ridership levels which would support economically viable rail service depend upon service in and through the two counties. The Sonoma County Transportation Authority's position is that this is a two county project and a two county responsibility.

With the failing of another proposed rail tax, it is important for citizens of Sonoma and Marin Counties to voice their support for SMART over the next two years. According to The Transportation Authority of Marin's website, this agency has been designated as the Marin Congestion Management Agency – established to address Marin's unique transportation issues. Are Marin's unique transportation issues non-regional? Could they propose two quarter-cent sales taxes to fund both a local bus system and a regional rail project? Let them know you think:

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