

BABY BULLETS SET RECORD PACE



By Alan C. Miller

Ceremonies held Friday June 4 celebrated a return of weekend service on Caltrain, and the much anticipated Baby Bullet service, offering five daily trips in each direction with an express schedule of only 57 minutes between San Jose and San Francisco.

These trains stop only at the six Caltrain markets estimated to have the greatest market potential during commute hours: San Francisco, Millbrae, Hillsdale, Palo Alto, Mountain View and San Jose. Nearly a quarter of existing passengers already traveled in various combinations between these stops during commute hours.

The featured speaker at the ceremony, State Senator Jackie Speier, who conceived of and secured funding for the project, thanked her transportation staffer, Brian Perkins, for his long hours in seeing the project through.

In an era of massively over-priced rail projects, stalled progress on plans on the books for a decade, and cost overruns, this project is an instructive exception, because it shows how incremental improvements to existing

rail systems can provide quantum leaps in service, speed, public acceptance and reliability.

All indications are that the Bullets themselves are a raging success. During June, the Bullets averaged about 550 riders per train, and continued to post ridership increases even as press trips and joy riders from the initial days of service tapered off. Caltrain expects the Baby Bullets to reach maximum seating capacity with existing equipment by Labor Day.

The real question, however, is how many riders the system has gained overall, especially with the slowing of local trains by a couple of minutes. Are the Bullets just taking people off local trains? Chief Operating Officer Mike Harvey explains that with an open system, monthly passes, and weekend service resumption, exact passenger counts take time to compile.

Harvey said that revenue trends do show an overall increase, and he is confident an overall system ridership increase has been realized even in the first month. He noted

resumption of weekend service has been wildly popular, and passengers are finding Sunday travel convenient and attractive with the new hourly schedule.

The new physical plant, with stretches of passing track in Sunnyvale and Brisbane to allow expresses to overtake locals, is working like clockwork, with a 97% system on time record for June. Mr. Harvey said focusing on keeping the expresses moving forces the dispatching and operating personnel to operate the railroad with increased precision, and the result is better on time performance overall. He said there's a new enthusiasm in the operating department, and people are excited by the challenge.

The operations personnel made a pledge to the board to review the operations of the system after six months. There may be opportunities to speed the locals back up by a few minutes or adjust schedules to reflect actual operating conditions after six months.

Observers also are hoping that the fast trips can be operated more frequently, now that the concept is a proven performer.

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Pete Rogers, Central California Coast Rail Council, speaking on:

- Status of a revived "Daylight" train between LA & San Francisco
- Efforts to revive a "Lark/Spirit of CA" overnight coast rail service
- Surfliner service expansion to San Luis Obispo: details on the new train.
- Booming buses on SLO-Bay Area route

Tyrone Bland, Amtrak Director of Government Affairs West

One of our most popular speakers at the 2003 Conference, we have asked Mr. Bland back to speak on the state of Amtrak, long-distance routes serving California, the California Rail Program, working with David Gunn, and a few anecdotes from his travel-intensive position.

Status of the troubled California High-Speed Rail Project and incremental alternatives to link north & south should the project collapse.

Panels and presentations on the progress of Bay Area rail projects:

Including Chuck Harvey of Caltrain talking about the wildly successful Baby Bullets, additional speakers pending on ACE, SF MUNI and more.

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