

CHARTING A PATH TO A BETTER FUTURE

Why You Need TRAC

If you're reading this newsletter, chances are you have an interest in seeing improved rail service in California. Whether it is for business or for pleasure, for riding or watching, for light rail or intercity rail, you like it when your government provides you with more trains.

As you can observe in the other articles, TRAC is busy trying to make California a better place for train riders. We try to get the word out on threats to Amtrak, we work on trying to see that our regional rail systems are well-run, and sometimes we even try to make BART work. We also lobby the government on your behalf for new train systems, including a lean, mean, high-speed rail system.

As you read this, our Executive Director is likely hard at work on your behalf—talking to the media about the importance of rail travel, talking to our public servants about keeping our rail systems operating smoothly, or simply running TRAC. A few volunteers are probably doing the same. Thanks to our tireless effort, we have seen enormous improvements in our rail systems over the last 15 years. In 1989, the Capitol Corridor, Surfliners and other rail systems were trains we wished for, not trains we rode. Since we passed Proposition 116 in 1990, these wishes

have become reality, and have fundamentally changed the transportation options for Californians.

At TRAC, we hope to facilitate even more significant improvements over the next 15 years. We are two blocks from the state capitol, and we will make sure your voice is heard. If you are one of the many Californians who would like to see more trains, running more places, with increased frequency, you should throw your full support behind TRAC, because we have an excellent track record of achieving your dreams.

Why TRAC Needs You

TRAC is a member-supported organization. We exist because 1500 faithful TRAC members send in their dues annually, and many make generous additional donations of time and money. TRAC is simply the voice of its members, focused and clearly articulated to the state of California. To do this, we need members.

Each and every member is important. The more members we have, the more projects we can be involved in, and the more weight our (and your) voice will have in government and the media.

If you are not a member of TRAC, we invite you to join. Your dues will help us improve your train riding experience. You

will also receive the California Rail News in the mail and be invited to our annual conference. We're not a social organization or a club—your dues go directly into fighting the battle to maintain and expand your publicly owned rail systems.

If you are already a member, we invite you keep your membership current, and consider making an additional contribution to help make TRAC even more effective. Or, alternatively, you can donate to our sister organization, the California Rail Foundation (CRN). CRN donations are tax deductible, and to towards research and education, including publication of this newsletter.

Donations are welcome from members and nonmembers alike. Small donations are our bread and butter—for us, they make the difference between having part time staff and having a full-time Executive Director. We would, of course, appreciate large donations. If you would like to see a significant, lasting improvements to California's rail systems, four or five-figure donations would make an enormous change in our effectiveness. Donations are welcome as cash, securities, or as a bequest in a will.

For more information on donations, call or email the TRAC office where consultant/volunteer Ted Buehler is putting together a program, or see coupon on page 2.

CAPITOL INFO SIGNS NEED MORE ATTENTION

By Alan C. Miller

Compiled from Passenger Observations (All descriptions occurred in the past several months, long after technicians ceased trying to fix the message boards).

There isn't much more frustrating than sitting at an unmanned, unenclosed station after your train was due to arrive, wondering when—or if—it will actually arrive. Do you run for that phone booth a few blocks away to call Amtrak's 800 number and risk missing your train? A long-awaited solution to this and other passenger-awareness problems was the Capitol Corridor message boards. In practice however, these message boards are often inaccurate, annoying, and useless.

Caltrain has a fine new system that can be used for comparison, similar to the new signs used by BART. The voices and attention tones are pleasant, and the signs are a pleasant red dot-matrix that uses many tiny bulbs that allows for a good graphic capability and range. The Capitol Corridor message boards, on the other hand, use large, white bulbs and have limited graphic capability. In fact, they appear very much like the message boards BART first started using in the 1960's and scrapped in the 1990's. One wonders if they were purchased at a BART fire sale.

Connected to the new system, the giant, big-orange-bulb sign board inside the Sacramento Station has been a dismal step-down from the old manual railroad sign-board it replaced. There are not enough slots for all the current Capitol Corridor trains to be listed, so some are simply omitted. Room for expansion? Not on this board. For non-Capitol trains, the board is even worse. "Actual" arriving times have a column, but it is never used, giving the impression all trains are on time. Wasn't train status the purpose of this system in the first place? When the afternoon sun shines on the sign from the south facing ceiling windows, the board is virtually unreadable. As if waiting for a return to its rightful place, the old manual sign sits in a back room, patiently.

The system seems to handle simple train delays fairly well. But any sort of odd behavior can be expected if a train is annulled, overtakes another train, turns en-route, breaks down, etc. One annulled train continued to approach a station on the screen until it finally

“arrived.” At this point, there was no train, but the “ghost train” finally stopped showing up on the screen. Another train passed a train that was broken down, but the system reversed their identities. Sometimes the system will announce a “system delay” for these occurrences, but these usually give little information on what is going on or when the train is expected. Worse, these “system delay” announcements, unfortunately fairly common, are broadcast throughout the system, even where they don't apply, giving the impression that there is a delay to the “entire system.”

What does “arriving” mean anymore? One passenger was heard saying to another, “After standing by the track for nine minutes, I decided their definition of ‘arriving’ is different than mine.” Trains have been seen “arriving” for 20-30 minutes. If a train gets stuck outside a station but is inside the “arriving” zone, the system fails to take notice that the train has stopped, and continues to flash “arriving.” At stations where you have to walk out to distant platforms, the five-minute “arriving” window may be appropriate. However at other stations near the tracks, passengers wait and wonder. At endpoint stations where trains originate, trains are announced as “arriving” when they aren't actually coming from anywhere; the word “departing” isn't in the system's vocabulary, which sometimes confuses passengers.

Speaking of which, the system isn't very user friendly or geared to passenger safety. Except for daily commuters, passengers rarely know what train number they are on or expecting. The announcement of a train's direction or destination would be of great help; most passengers don't know that odd-numbered trains are headed west. At multi-track stations, no announcement is made of which track to board your train, especially confusing when multiple trainsets are in the station. If a long-distance train or freight train passes through the station, no announcement is made to stay back from the tracks for safety. Sometimes automatic announcements are over-run by manual announcements by station agents, so that neither announcement is heard as they talk over each other.

On esthetics the system fails. The two-tone gong tones seemed designed to annoy, rather than request attention. To this day passengers are observed reaching to cover

their ears as the tones sound. This is in stark contrast to the pleasant Caltrain tone or the five-tone chimes at LAUS. At one station, the speaker is so loud it overloads the speaker and breaks the message up in inaudible crackling. In well over a year, this has never been fixed. Another announcement was heard clearly, but that was over five blocks away down a city street. One station had the tones disconnected inside the station because they were annoying passenger and employees. When a train's arrival time is adjusted by just a minute or so, the system automatically re-announces the new arrival time. In the wrong conditions, the train arrival time can be re-announced over and over every minute when the actual arrival time has changed little. The female voice doesn't intonate properly, sounding more like the jerky expressions of the old “time lady.” Contrast this to the male Caltrain voice that sounds almost like a live human voice.

Signs are often seen displaying no information, even as a train arrives. Sometimes the arrival time inside and outside the station conflict for the same train, confusing passengers. Trains have been seen displayed as still arriving, minutes after they have left, or arrive before they have been announced to do so. Connecting buses are not in the system at all. Advertisements jerk their way across the limited-graphics screens, often when train information is desired. These often seem to be for Raiders paraphernalia, very odd considering the station at the Raider's stadium that would allow Capitol Corridor passengers to reach the Raiders directly, hasn't been completed yet. While selling ads on Caltrain message boards may be appropriate and even beneficial to the advertisers, such advertising is an annoying waste on the Capitol Corridor's system.

Those running the San Joaquin service should place their message board sign funds in stasis until the problems with the Capitol Corridor boards are solved. Considering the two corridors share nearly half-a-dozen stations and many bus connections, it would make sense for the two corridors to work together on a single, modern, proven system that addresses all the concerns above and works for both corridors. In the meantime, the Capitol Corridor would probably do better to put up the old, hand-lettered train signs and continue to make manual announcements.