

\$4 BILLION BART TO SAN JOSE: FASTER OPTIONS COST FAR LESS

by Margaret Okizumi

To hear some tell it, Santa Clara County transportation will collapse if voters don't approve yet another sales tax in November 2006 to extend BART to San Jose. Some talk as if sinking \$4 billion or more into BART will solve all of our transit woes.

Not so, say the Federal Transit Administration, the Santa Clara County grand jury and the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) Policy Advisory Committee. They have all advised VTA to scale back or suspend the project. Pro-transit and environmental groups such as the Sierra Club, the Transportation and Land Use Coalition, and BayRail Alliance agree: The BART project spells disaster.

The latest VTA financial projections show that even if voters approved a new tax for BART in 2006, money will be tight. But if we drop BART, we can start building a larger network of rapid transit today, even without another new tax.

We've already seen how the BART-to-Millbrae extension has failed to deliver projected ridership, while it has delivered costs much higher than expected. If we want to bring appealing, convenient and cost-effective public transit to Santa Clara County, we need to lose our BART myopia and consider more sensible investments. Many rail projects cost a lot less than BART, can be built much sooner, and would better meet our transportation needs.

For example:

- A \$100 million capital investment in Caltrain has made the rush-hour train commute between San Jose and San Francisco competitive with the car. Additional investment to electrify and upgrade Caltrain would transform it into an even faster rapid-transit service, while BART -- with its lack of express service -- will forever be slower.
- The Altamont Commuter Express (ACE) rail line, originating in Stockton, already transports riders between Pleasanton, Fremont, Santa Clara and San Jose faster than BART ever could. Relatively small investments would increase ACE's frequency and speed.
- VTA could also boost the popular Amtrak Capitol Corridor train service, which currently carries riders between San Jose and Sacramento with stops in Fremont, Hayward and Oakland.
- A Union City-San Jose commuter rail line would be compatible with the existing Caltrain network, and could connect commuters as far away as Santa Cruz and Gilroy directly to Milpitas and Fremont. For about 5 percent of what BART is supposed to cost, we could have a new rail line that traverses the entire eastern half of the county from north to south.
- With Dumbarton rail, riders from Union City and Newark would enjoy a scenic

commute across the bay to Menlo Park, Palo Alto, Mountain View, Sunnyvale, Santa Clara and San Jose -- starting at less than 1 percent of BART's cost. While initial service will consist of just a few trains during peak hours, it could readily become a rapid Transbay Bullet with additional investment.

- High-speed rail to San Jose from Los Angeles over the Altamont Pass, with a stop at the Mineta San Jose Airport, would be a vast improvement over BART. While high-speed rail isn't cheap, it's a bargain at \$45 million per mile compared with BART's \$250 million-per-mile cost. It would carry more riders than the BART extension and cost Santa Clara County residents less, while providing superior speed and amenities.

What can we do with the \$4 billion we already have from the voter-approved 2000 Measure A? A lot, if VTA stops chasing BART.

For world-class transit in Santa Clara County, join environmental and transit groups in demanding that VTA look beyond the BART myth. Together we can build a brighter future for public transit, instead of funding transit woes with a new sales tax.

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ALTAMONT: TRAC WANTS OBJECTIVE STUDY

The following is based on testimony by TRAC Executive Director Alan C. Miller at the High-Speed Rail Authority board meeting held at the State Capitol in Sacramento on November 16, 2004.

In mid-September a reporter called me and said, "Altamont is going to be studied by the Authority. Isn't your group thrilled?"

I had to think about that.

In mid-September, there was a Mercury News article in which Rod Diridon said that state lawyers had advised the agency that the study should be expanded to include the Altamont Route "to reduce the risk of losing a lawsuit". That's really not the reason we want it studied.

In the Mercury News in May, Diridon said that he hiked in Henry Coe Park with

"opponents." I didn't remember taking a hike with Mr. Diridon. Neither did anyone at the Sierra Club, PCL, TIE, the Nature Conservancy or the Audubon Society.

So I did some digging and found that it was the "Friends of Coe." The same group--the "opponents"--that came up with a new alignment [of which] Diridon said, "I am happy that we have found a potentially better route."

This "potentially better route" is Pacheco Pass. . . with a really bad access to the Central Valley. Where, instead of going south toward Los Angeles when you get out of the hills, you go northeast And where do you go? Well, even the website of the Friends of Coe said that part of the reason they chose that route was so that it would satisfy the group in Merced that wants a maintenance base at

Castle Air Force Base.

So this could be called the "connect-the-dots" route, the dots being the special and regional interests. Just because a group from one town--whom the Oakland Tribune identified as investors who would stand to benefit from a maintenance base--send representatives to lots of meetings, does not make that a reason to run trains to Atwater at any cost.

The Stockton Record a few days ago quoted [HSRA Staffer] Dan Leavitt as saying 'the physical location of Altamont Pass would make it tricky to run a high-speed train partly because the turns are far too sharp for high-speed rail to operate'. He also said they need 1.7 million to study the feasibility of Altamont Pass.

The problem that TRAC has always had is that Altamont Pass was not studied

on the same par as the other routes, including the study by QUANTM of optimized alignments for other routes that removed things such as "sharp curves." HSRA staff is already trying to put the Altamont Pass route at a disadvantage by its assumptions.

Similarly, anti-Altamont comments were made in the press by Doug Kimsey, Planning Manager at MTC [that] will conduct the Altamont study.

Another quote from Diridon, "I am disappointed that we have to go back and study Altamont because I think it is deficient."

So are we "thrilled"?

We **would** be thrilled if we had a belief that the Northern Mountain Crossing would be studied by a board and a staff that would **start** from a position of objectivity.

