

Bay Area Regional Rail Study May Settle Pacheco Vs. Altamont Fight

by Gerald Cauthen
TRAC President

The Bay Area's Metropolitan Transportation Commission, located in Oakland, California, has begun a new Bay Area Regional Rail Study. The Study will project out 50 years. It will consider and evaluate existing and proposed rail systems as well as at unused rail rights-of-way. It will also examine the potential for transit-oriented development along the way and try to identify the opportunities for improving rail-to-rail and rail-to-bus connections.

Included in the Study will be the long-awaited comparison between the two alternative ways of bringing high-speed trains from the San Joaquin Valley into the Bay Area; namely, the Pacheco Alternative favored by elements in Santa Clara County and the Altamont Alternative, favored by many East Bay politicians and most environmental groups.

TRAC's position on the Pacheco v Altamont Controversy is as follows:

1.) First there must be an objective comparison of the two alternatives. (Thanks to the good efforts of State Senator Don Perata, Alameda County Supervisor Scott Haggerty, TRAC and many other groups and individuals, this will happen as part of the Study.)

2.) Then, with the results of the

objective analysis at their disposal, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and California High Speed Rail Authority must select the high speed route that best serves the interests of the entire Bay Area and the State of California.

TRAC will be watching this element of the Bay Area Regional Rail Study with particular interest.

The Bay Area Regional Rail Study, is a cause for hope. There are some positive signs that the Study, unlike many of the studies that have gone before, is based upon the right set of questions and therefore has a chance of producing the right answers.

Following are edited excerpts from the Study Scope:

The Bay Area Regional Rail Study is divided into two main parts. The first deals with the integration of passenger rail systems, improved interfaces between connecting services, expansion of the regional rapid transit network, and coordination of regional rail investment with transit-supportive land uses. The second looks at alternative ways of bringing high-speed rail into the Bay Area.

It is anticipated that these two elements will combine to provide a "fully integrated and seamless" Bay Area Regional Rail Plan leading to a "comprehensive, logical and

user-friendly passenger network".

These are good words, yet things are off to a somewhat contradictory start. As indicated, the Study Scope generally emphasizes the right points and generally gives the right direction to the consultants. Moreover, there is indication that MTC intends to elicit substantial public input throughout the study process. On the other hand there has been a surprisingly vigorous attempt on the part of the High Speed Rail Authority staff to control the makeup of the Study Advisory Committee. Carl Guardino, a fervent Santa Clara County promoter of the controversial BART-to-San Jose Extension and Pacheco high-speed rail alternative, has been quietly added to the Committee. At the same time the Planning and Conservation League, a powerful umbrella environmental group representing over 40 organizations including TRAC, has been denied the seat it previously held. The final outcome of this maneuver is not at this point clear.

The Bay Area Regional Rail Study gives reason to hope that long-standing Bay Area transit network problems will at last be addressed in a comprehensive and thorough manner. It is hoped that MTC will make certain that the results of the study are fair and objective. In any event, TRAC, together with other watchdog groups, will be paying close attention.

AMTRAK & SUBWAY® TEAM UP ON FRESH FOOD IDEA

Amtrak has taken a very positive step to investigate the feasibility of franchise food operations on its trains. Responding to customer requests as well as legislative direction, Amtrak has teamed with the Subway® restaurant chain, headquartered in Milford, CT to examine whether a popular franchise offering soups, salads, sandwiches and pizzas on board local trains can produce a favorable financial result.

A pilot project on short-distance Empire Corridor Amtrak trains between New York and Albany is testing this new on-board food service concept. On November 17, Amtrak Empire Service between New York City and Albany began to offer the new Subway® service.

According to Barbara Richardson, Amtrak Vice President, Marketing and Sales, passengers "previously indicated in research an interest in branded food items." Subway is the second largest fast-food chain in the world, having overtaken McDonald's in number of locations in the United States.

The trial program went into effect on Trains 236, 237, and 259 on November 17. By December 15, all New York-Albany local trains are expected to have Subway meals. Other Empire Service trains already have regular Amtrak food service.

Under the experimental four-month arrangement, Subway leases café car space from Amtrak. Two to three Subway employees prepare the food off-train at New York and Albany, load them onto the trains, and sell the food both from café cars and with at-seat service.

Poor financial results of food service operated by Amtrak caused New York to seek elimination of food service on local New York-Albany trains in July as part of a cost-cutting campaign.

Short-haul rail corridors, with tenuous revenue-cost ratios and high terminal costs, have had a particular problem supporting conventional food service.

"Subway restaurants have a reputa-

tion for maximum flexibility and being able to operate in areas that traditionally many other restaurants can't operate in." said Paul Landino, a development agent for the restaurant chain. "This is a perfect partnership for both of our companies, who each serve customers that are accustomed to fast, accurate service."

Amtrak has been directed by language in the new federal budget to "achieve savings through operating efficiencies including, but not limited to, modifications to food and beverage service and first class service." The USDOT Inspector General (IG) is to report to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees regarding savings from "operational reforms" on each route beginning on January 3, 2006.

Use of the newly appropriated funds is prohibited "to subsidize the net losses of food and beverage service and sleeper car service on any Amtrak route" if the IG cannot certify savings by July 1, 2006. No explicit benchmarks are specified, but the IG does the certifying so presumably has great latitude.

The Subway menu features a selection of the franchise's famous sandwiches, along with soups, salads, pizza, beverages, desserts and some standard Amtrak items. A Subway employee will also walk through the train, offering at-seat delivery to business class and coach passengers.

"With so many of our passengers already familiar with Subway, we expect this pilot will be a positive first for Amtrak," said Richardson. "We at Subway restaurants are proud to team up with Amtrak to offer Subway sandwiches to hungry travelers," said Landino.

Amtrak receives a portion of the gross receipts from sales, and does not subsidize the service. The service is not considered "contracted" food service, because Subway is effectively operating retail franchises aboard Amtrak, and its employees are not part of the train crew. This arrangement is

similar to that seen certain places in Europe, where private franchises operate non-subsidized food services aboard short-haul corridor trains.

From experience gained from the pilot project, Amtrak plans to seek competitive bids from qualified vendors later in 2006. A formal Request-for-Proposal (RFP) has not yet been issued, and Amtrak has not made any decisions concerning which routes may receive food service franchises.

The Amtrak California network of state-supported trains appears to be an attractive franchise opportunity, since it comprises about 60 daily trains in a relatively concentrated geographic area. The California food service is provided at present by Amtrak employees using a combination of foods supplied by Gate Gourmet and Gourmet Rail Services, Inc. (GRSI).

Competitively bidding a new franchise could be a fresh solution to the unattractive current Amtrak California arrangements. GRSI, chartered in late October 2004, managed to inherit the Amtrak contract for sandwiches and tray meals held by Chef Mario, Inc. without a new bid process just as that company went bankrupt a year ago. In its corporate filing with the Secretary of State, reviewed on November 29, GRSI lists a vacant building in Alameda, CA as its corporate headquarters.

Current food service losses appear to account for about \$5 million of the \$60 million annual losses on Amtrak California.

If a franchised operation is feasible for a private operator, it could dramatically improve the financial results of California intercity rail service, making possible several new trains. Caltrans is thought to be closely watching the Subway test, as the economics of California food service provision on Amtrak could certainly be improved.

LATE BREAKING NEWS: AN AMTRAK EMPLOYEE PROTEST HAS APPARENTLY HALTED THE SUBWAY EXPERIMENT, AT LEAST FOR PRESENT. AMTRAK'S WEB SITE STILL PROMOTES IT.