



San Jose responds to VTA board grand jury findings

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In the aftermath of this summer's grand jury investigation into the Valley Transportation Authority's governance structure, San Jose officials think VTA should be on the hook for coming up with improvements.

After the VTA Board of Directors approved a response last week, the San Jose City Council on Tuesday will vote to approve a response from the city side of things. The agencies are legally required to respond to the report's claims.

The city disagrees with some of the major points from the grand jury: that the VTA board lacked experience, continuity and leadership, and that those on the board were too distracted by their other elected positions to fully focus on the region's transit issues.

The VTA board is made up of elected officials from across Santa Clara County, with 5 directors from San Jose, 1 from Los Altos (Hills)/Mountain View/Palo Alto, 1 from Campbell/Cupertino/Los Gatos/Monte Sereno/Saratoga, 1 from Gilroy/Morgan Hill, 2 from Milpitas/Santa Clara/Sunnyvale and 2 from Santa Clara County. The Board of Directors is not elected, but rather appointed by cities and towns in their groups.

The response points to VTA's complex role planning traffic mitigation, highway construction, pedestrian needs and long-range planning as a reason why the governance structure might need to be more complex.

San Jose officials said simply judging the effectiveness of transit management "is a narrow view of the immense roles and responsibilities VTA has, and the stewardship required by board members." By this token, officials say having directors from across the region who know their individual constituencies is a strength instead of a weakness.

San Jose also takes umbrage at the claim that the city is overrepresented on the VTA board, stating that "it is natural that a plurality of seats at VTA are elected officials whose jurisdictions include San Jose."

City leaders also applauded VTA's recent plans to roll out studies to "determine the technologies that are best suited to supplement or replace its current transit services," and praised cost-cutting efforts taken to control already-approved projects like the Eastridge Light Rail extension.

"(The ongoing efforts of VTA) could improve service and reduce capital costs associated with maintenance and construction for needed projects, including a grade separated transit connection

from Alum Rock Light Rail Station to the Eastridge Transit Center, which has been a priority for voters and residents,” the draft response from San Jose’s Director of Transportation John Ristow states.

Although many of the grand jury findings were unsurprising to those who have watched the VTA board over the years, some defensiveness on the part of involved agencies may be warranted.

“(The grand jury) cites right-wing think tanks such as Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation, and Hudson Institute that have long been pessimistic about public transportation, making a fallacious argument that traditional public transit is obsolete compared to new Silicon Valley models,” local transit advocate Adina Levin, of Friends of Caltrain and Seamless Bay Area, told San José Spotlight.

If the City Council approves the draft letter, they’ll be kicking the can down to the VTA officials to deliver suggestions related to the audit by the end of the year.