

BART needs driverless trains; VTA should halt S.J. extension

By Marc Joffe

Metropolitan Transit Commission polling shows that voter support for a half-cent sales tax to fund local transit is a few points shy of the two-thirds majority needed for passage. While transit advocates may conclude from these results that they can get over the top with additional voter education, a better option is to improve transit before asking voters for more money.

Bay Area voters are usually quite open to tax hikes that support government services, but at some point they may become exhausted. A half-cent increase would raise overall sales tax rates to 10% or more in much of the Bay Area and more than 11% in some Alameda County cities. Meanwhile, the MTC poll found that three-quarters of voters use transit rarely or never. Raising the price of necessities to sup-

port a service that is not vital to their daily lives may not be an attractive proposition for many voters.

Rather than lobbying for interim state support and then asking residents to pay an additional \$800 million annually to continue business as usual, BART and sister agencies should implement reforms that encourage transit use and improve stewardship of taxpayer and rider revenues. BART has taken promising first steps by hardening fare gate and increasing inspector general funding — albeit without sufficient independence and power — but much more needs to be done.

Here are some measures BART should consider, a couple of which also are applicable to Muni, Caltrain and Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority:

First, BART should achieve five-minute headways on all lines throughout the day by add-

ing two-car driverless trains. Long waits and cancellations due to a shortage of operators is a major barrier to attracting riders. Driverless trains have proven themselves in Vancouver, Singapore and Paris. And even BART already has driverless service on its Oakland Airport connector. To preserve jobs the driverless trains could initially supplement longer, operator-controlled trains rather than fully replacing them.

Next, riders should not be subject to unpleasant sights and odors, let alone crime and harassment. These quality-of-life issues explain why many remain in their cars despite the horrific congestion on many Bay Area freeways and bridges. BART has created a code of conduct, but it should go further by prohibiting more anti-social behaviors (such as occupying multiple seats), posting the code at all fare gates

and strictly enforcing its provisions.

BART should also terminate other postemployment benefits including retiree health care coverage. For many BART retirees, generous pension benefits should be sufficient to cover the cost of health insurance. Others should take advantage of federal and state subsidies available through Covered California. In the fiscal year ended June 30, 2022, BART spent \$31 million on OPEBs which instead should go to operations.

Finally, BART should stop work on all extension projects, including the San Jose extension (funded by VTA) and Link21, which is investigating the addition of an unneeded second subway tunnel between Oakland and San Francisco. With voter approval, money being spent on these projects should be diverted to operations and maintenance.

When I asked transit advocates about this point, they responded that giving up extension projects would mean forfeiting the opportunity to compete for federal funds. This is an understandable but counterproductive perspective. While federal funds may seem like free money to BART and other Bay Area agencies, it comes at the cost of projects in other cities with projects that will benefit more passengers.

These four measures will increase ridership while reducing costs unrelated to providing quality, reliable service today. They may even reduce agencies' fiscal gap enough that they can get by with only a quarter cent sales tax increase rather than the half-cent MTC is currently contemplating.

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