PRESERVING THE AMERICAN DREAM
RECOVERING FROM SMART GROWTH
SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

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A SHORT HISTORY OF SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA TRANSIT:
IS VALLEY TRANSIT THE WORST TRANSIT AGENCY IN THE U.S.?

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Map of Rail Improvements

Rail Projects

1. Commuter Rail — Union City BART to San Jose
2. BART — Fremont to Warm Springs
3. Caltrain — upgrade and increased service (SF to Gilroy)
4. Muni Metro Central Subway — Chinatown extension
5. BART — Oakland Airport connector
6. Altamont Corridor Express (ACE) — increased service
7. VTA — Vasona Light Rail extension (downtown Campbell to Winchester Station)
Muni Metro Central Subway – Chinatown Extension

• Phase II Extension of Third Street Light Rail – which, at $557.9 million for 5.4 miles, set the FTA record for lowest percentage of new riders – .9%

• The Extension now projected at $1,411 million for 1.7 miles – $830/mile

(Located in Congressional District of the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives)
Project Background –
Approved CEQA Project

**BART to Milpitas, San Jose and Santa Clara**

- 16.1-mile extension
- 6 stations (plus 1 future)
- 2 at-grade
- 3 subway
- 1 aerial
- 1 optional at-grade
- Maintenance facility in San Jose/Santa Clara
- 6 minute headways
The Berryessa Alternative is the project being evaluated in the federal New Starts funding process.
A Bit of History of this Project

• In spirit, can be traced back decades

• 1998 San Jose Mayoral election – Ron Gonzales made it the highlight of his successful campaign

• In November 2000, VTA put sales tax for BART extension on ballot – won with 70+%

• Even with incredibly booming economy, insufficient funding to build and operate – and financial situation is now much worse
In its 1998 Regional Transportation Plan, MTC modeled the cost per new rider for this then $5+ billion dollar capital project at $100 per new rider – that’s $200 per day, $1,000 per week, and $52,000 per year or each passenger.

When VTA did its modeling, it got it down to “only” $22/new rider – by assuming that downtown SJ would grow to about 80% of downtown San Francisco, adding 340,000 home-to-work trips, >10% on BART, most of the rest – you guessed it – added to the roads (about 14 freeway lanes worth, under very conservative assumptions).
A Bit of History of This Project III

• One of the keys to understanding South Bay transportation is understanding that the Central Business District is not a major transportation destination – this is one of the best examples of “everyone going from everywhere to everywhere” travel in the U.S.

• Then factor in geographic limitations – the Bay and mountains

• … and then add “smart growth” and …
A Bit of History of This Project IV

• You wind up with a rather difficult transportation situation, often made worse by the, “We’re, Silicon Valley, the place that is coming up with the ideas that are moving the world, and we have the ability to solve all the world’s problems by developing plans to make good things happen and then throwing money at them with both hands,” attitude.
A Bit of History of This Project V

• Santa Clara County has always favored a, umm, “innovative solution” approach, to transportation problem solving:
  – Example 1: Propane-fueled buses
  – Example 2: Self-designed bus wheelchair lifts
A Bit of History of This Project VI

• The compensation and benefits practices of Santa Clara County governmental units have led to its unofficial nickname in California governmental circles of “Santa Claus County:”
  – PERS, with VTA paying the “employee” contribution, and OASDI
  – Generally, highest or second highest operator hourly wage in U.S.
A Bit of History of This Project VII

• History of Valley Transit:
  – 1973 – Santa Clara County Transit District takes over three failing private bus concerns
  – Succession of one-half cent sales taxes for transit and roads
  – 1995 – Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) formed to replace SCCTD, also to take over as County Congestion Management Agency
Norman Mineta

• Mayor of San Jose, 1971-75 – Father of Santa Clara County “smart growth” by creating development free areas in East and South San Jose

• U.S. Congressman, 1975-95:
  – Chair, Public Works and Transportation Committee
  – As key member of this Committee, pushed through requirement that UMTA execute agreement funding first light rail line – one of the key actions that led to current Federal process of “earmarking” all “new starts” grants.

• Secretary of Transportation, 2001-07
A Bit of History of this Project VIII

• The Santa Clara County Light Rail System – the answer to mobility needs (but, what again, is the question?)

• VTA determined to keep designing BART to San Jose, spending hundreds of millions of dollars – even through there is absolutely no guarantee of the funding to build it – while the rest of the transit system goes downhill
A Bit of History of This Project IX

- Approval of First Line – basically North-South through CBD – took years to get Federal funding because of poor performance
- Opened in stages, beginning in 1987, because of environmental clearance challenge, which required redo of EIS/EIR that delayed Southern leg – which was/is primarily residential
A Bit of History of This Project X

• VTA, led by the former Mayor, kept pushing for approval of the entire project – and getting nowhere

• Finally, there was a meeting in DC where the Secretary of Transportation – Norm Mineta – told VTA to break it into somewhat more manageable pieces, which is why the first leg is now under study
A Bit of History of This Project XI

• After the “dot.com” collapse, sales tax collections collapsed along with the local economy – instead of 5+% annual increase, real decreases of >15%

• VTA response was to increase base fare 59%, monthly passes 86%, and day passes 139%, from 1998-2005, and cut service by 20% – while continuing to take the newly enacted sales tax funds for rail system expansion

• VTA ridership fell 31% from 2001 to 2006
Current VTA System

- Bus – ~82 routes, ~550 buses, ~100,000 daily unlinked passenger trips (UPT)
- Light Rail – 42.2 miles of track, two main lines and a shuttle, 100 vehicles, 62 stations, ~26,000 daily UPT
- Joint Ventures – ACE, Caltrain, Capital Corridor commuter rail
- Cooperative inter-county bus service w/AC Transit, Santa Cruz, and Monterey-Salinas
Performance Measures I

• Let’s see how VTA light rail and bus operating statistics compare to the FTA “Top 50” transit operators – 19 light rail operators and the 20 largest of the 46 bus operators (2005 Reporting Year)
Performance Measures II

• Metrics:
  – Productivity – Average Passenger Load
  – Cost Efficiency – Cost and Subsidy per Revenue Vehicle Hour
  – Cost Efficiency – Farebox Recovery Ratio
  – Cost Effectiveness – Subsidy per Passenger and per Passenger-Mile
SCVTA has the third-lowest Average Passenger Load of the nineteen.
FTA "TOP 50" LIGHT RAIL OPERATORS 2005 (19)
Cost, Revenue, and Subsidy per Revenue Vehicle Hour

SCVTA has fourth highest cost and fourth highest subsidy.
FTA "TOP 50" LIGHT RAIL OPERATORS 2005 (19)
Farebox Recovery Ratio

Agency

SDTI MBTA MT Tri-Met UTA SEPTA RTD Bi-St Weighted Ave. Simple Ave. MUNI SacRT NICT LA-MTA PAT GCRTA MTA-DC M-MTA SCVTA DART KC-DOT

Farebox Recovery Ratio

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60%

53.9% 47.2% 44.2% 42.4% 42.0% 26.0% 25.7% 4.5% 21.4% 21.2% 17.5% 15.8% 15.5% 14.4% 13.9% 13.1% 12.2% 12.2% 10.2%
La-MTA's performance is well below average.

(Subsidy/Passenger Mile = $4.89)
LA-MTA is second highest of the twenty. (NYC DOT Passenger Mile data appears to be very incorrect.)
FTA "TOP 20" + VTA MOTOR BUS OPERATORS 2005
Cost, Revenue, and Subsidy per Revenue Vehicle Hour

VTA has the second-highest cost per hour and the second-highest subsidy per hour.
FTA "TOP 20" + VTA BUS OPERATORS 2005
Farebox Recovery Ratio

VTA is second lowest.
FTA "TOP 20" BUS OPERATORS 2005
Subsidy/Passenger & Subsidy/Passenger Mile

Subsidy/Passenger Mile

$0.30 $0.40 $0.50 $0.60 $0.70 $0.80

$0.90 $1.00 $1.25 $1.50 $1.75 $2.00 $2.25 $2.50 $2.75 $3.00 $3.25 $3.50 $3.75 $4.00

Subsidy/Passenger

NYCDOT (Invalid Passenger Mile data)

Simple Ave.

NYCT

MBTA

WMATA

CTA

Tri-Met

PAT

DART

C-CTA

OCTA

MTA-HC

MT

AC

PAT

NYCT

SEPTA

MARTA

MDT

MTA-HC

LA-MTA

NJTC

Weighted Ave.
FTA "TOP 20" + VTA BUS OPERATORS 2005
Subsidy/Passenger & Subsidy/Passenger Mile

NYCDOT (Invalid Passenger Mile data)
Simple Ave.
MBTA
NYCT
SEPTA
OCTA
LA-MTA
NJTC
CTA
SEPTA
LA-MTA
MTA-HC
MTA
DART
AVT
PAT
MARTA
AC
RTD
MDT
KC-DOT
SCVTA

Subsidy/Passenger
Subsidy/Passenger Mile

$0.30 $0.50 $0.70 $0.90 $1.10 $1.30
$0.50 $0.70 $0.90 $1.10 $1.30
$0.70 $0.90 $1.10 $1.30
$0.90 $1.10 $1.30
$1.10 $1.30

$1.00 $1.25 $1.50 $1.75 $2.00 $2.25 $2.50 $2.75 $3.00 $3.25 $3.50 $3.75 $4.00 $4.25 $4.50 $4.75 $5.00 $5.25 $5.50 $5.75 $6.00
Overall Operational Assessment

• Average Passenger Load – LR Third Lowest, Bus Lowest
• Cost/Subsidy per Vehicle Revenue Mile – LR Fourth Highest, Bus Second Highest
• Farebox Recovery Ratio – LR Third Lowest, Bus Second Lowest
• Subsidy/Passenger & Passenger-Mile – Highest
Density and Transit System
Modal Selection I

• The great advantage of bus transit is its relatively low capital cost, which leads to flexibility – while bus can be used very effectively in high transit demand corridors, it is a mode that can be useful in lower demand areas and lines.

• Rail, on the other hand, because of its high initial capital cost, should only be considered where there is great density – not of population, or jobs, but of trips.
Density and Transit System Modal Selection II

• In Santa Clara County, where the density of trips is so low that the bus system is very arguably the least productive and cost-effective in the U.S., the adopted response was to build light rail – which requires far more trip density to begin to make any sense.

• When that utterly failed, even after redesigning the bus system in an attempt to force riders to use it, the adopted response is to build heavy rail – and to do so largely as subway, its most expensive form.
IS VTA THE WORST TRANSIT SYSTEM IN THE U.S.?

• Terrible operating statistics, worst of any major American transit operator

• Persists on proposing – and adopting – ever successively more ill-logical transit plans

• Persists on continuing to implement such plans, even when it is totally acknowledged that the fiscal resources do not exist to do so

• Willing to destroy existing transit system, and the riders who depend upon it, in pursuit of this “dream”
So, IS VTA THE WORST TRANSIT SYSTEM IN THE U.S.?

I don’t know for sure, but if there is a worse one out there, I hope I never find it.