

# I Must Agree (Somewhat) with O'Toole in This Case

Contributed by Michael D. Setty  
 Wednesday, 26 March 2008  
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NOTE: This is a repost of an item from January 2007 which somehow didn't make it into the PTUS archives.

The Santa Clara County Valley Transit Authority has just released a Supplemental Environmental Impact Report (SEIR) regarding the proposed BART extension from Fremont to San Jose. This 16.1 mile extension is currently projected to cost \$4.7 billion, or \$292 million per mile—second only to the Los Angeles Red Line subway.

As readers of this blog know, I like Randal O'Toole as a person, but loathe his stand on transportation and urban development matters. But in the case of the San Jose BART extension, he is absolutely right about its absurd costs and excessive ridership projections. [Three comments also included].

As Randal points out today at his "Anti-planner" blog, there are many other alternatives to this overpriced project, including bus improvements. Original post by O'Toole: <http://ti.org/antiplanner/?p=37>

Ridership expectations for the San Jose BART extension suffer from same shortcomings as the less than successful SFO extension that opened in 2003. First, the VTA planners are projecting 39,000 daily boardings and alightings (e.g. station entries and exits, respectively) at the proposed BART terminus in Santa Clara, where connections to Caltrain and an automated shuttle to San Jose International Airport would be provided. But actual patronage at the BART Millbrae station—with a similar connection to Caltrain—fell short of projections by 70%-80%.

Other station volume projections are believable IF one takes them to be total boardings AND alightings, not just boardings. Currently, the two downtown Oakland BART stations see around 42,000-43,000 daily boardings and alightings with about 50,000 jobs within 1/2 mile AND being at the geographic center of the Bay Area, traversed by no less than BART routes from FOUR directions, PLUS extensive interchange traffic with buses. In contrast, downtown San Jose in total has perhaps 35,000 jobs plus the presence of 30,000 San Jose State University students. It's plausible that downtown San Jose might grow to 50,000 jobs by 2030. But I cannot believe that a BART station at that location would generate 46,000 daily entry and exits, the same volume generated by the much more intense development around the Powell Street BART station in downtown San Francisco.

As has been long advocated by some transit activists, a better plan would be to extend BART to San Jose along the old Southern Pacific Milpitas branch, which runs just east of the I-880 freeway. This route would reduce project costs by 50% to 70%, mainly because only about 1.3-1.5 miles of tunnel under downtown San Jose with a terminal at the "Diridon" train station would be needed, rather than 7 miles of tunnel under Santa Clara Street and The Alameda desired by VTA. This would be in line with likely patronage closer to 50,000 than over 100,000 daily riders. The \$3-\$4 billion or so saved could be used to substantially enhance existing bus, Caltrain and LRT service, and provide a few selected extensions of LRT (Stevens Creek Blvd.; another 3 miles to Los Gatos), plus Caltrain upgrades, where proven ridership already exists.

3 Comments

Hugh Jardonn:

Actually, Bay Rail Alliance has a much better alternative to the BART extension. See the following site:

<http://bayrailalliance.org/southbayrailvision/> Friday, February 9, 2007 - 01:51 PM

Anonymous:

The Bay Rail Alliance's idea for a Caltrain extension does not emphasize why BART to San Jose is a bad idea other than routing. Hence, they mention the routing being a bad idea and use that as a means to say no to BART; as if one can not occur without the other.

BART services a much larger body of the bay area than Caltrain. More noteworthy, it is the provider that services the East Bay; not Caltrain. Minimizing systematic differences (e.g. fare structure and fare discontinuity, etc.) and transfers is essential for numerous self-evident reasons.

A last point is that when a project is well planned (e.g. routing, etc.), the cost to construct it becomes more irrelevant because in the long-term, you are able to borrow from tomorrow and offset the capital costs of the project through receipts generated from ridership, etc.

BART should come to San Jose, not Caltrain. I does, however, need to be done with a better route. The route suggested by Bay Rail, which was originally produced by another person is the one that would be best. Saturday, October 20, 2007 - 08:38 PM

VTA Watch:

A BART extension is a bad idea besides the routing. It is the most expensive rail technology for the buck, and it prevents future expansion to places like the Central Valley. A Caltrain extension would permit ACE to share tracks and increase service to and from the Central Valley. You can't run ACE trains on BART tracks!

Although VTA could borrow money, it carries a huge cost. What VTA has refused o do is to account the financing cost into the project. With VTA's timetable for construction, it can cost more than a billion in financing cost. That means a billion less for other projects.

VTA not only has the burden to pay for direct costs like operators, electricity, VTA also has to pay a premium to the BART district. Such cost utimately hurt SamTrans, which is the partner for the SFO extension. Before the extension opens, BART and SamTrans expected revenue surplus because of the high ridership projection for the project. Once the ridership projections fail to materialize, SamTrans had the sole burden to pay for the shortfall. VTA for now is not able to operate the extension. Even if it has an extra tax, VTA bus riders will be the victims when VTA has to reduce bus operation to pay for the BART operation. Plus, VTA will not have control on costs since it will have little or no say in labor negotiations, etc.

Tuesday, October 23, 2007 - 02:48 PM