



SPUR

San Francisco | San Jose | Oakland

Board of Directors
Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority
3331 N. 1st Street
San Jose, CA 95113

May 31, 2017

Re: VTA Board of Directors Meeting (June 1, 2017)

Dear VTA Board of Directors:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the 2016 Measure B Program Area Guidelines, fare policy updates and budget. SPUR was a strong supporter of Measure B and raised funds for the campaign. We have also advocated regionally for more integrated fares and for transit funding sustainability.

Agenda Item #6.17 (Measure B)

- 1. We recommend that VTA adopt a VMT policy, and use VMT as a performance criterion for all eligible Local Streets and Roads, Highway Interchanges and Expressways programs.**

State legislation will soon replace Level of Service (LOS) with VMT as the primary metric for evaluating transportation impacts through the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). This is because level of service has generated more auto congestion, especially for travel across city boundaries, since it only addresses very localized auto congestion. Reliance on LOS has also made it harder to create walkable and transitable places—the types of places that Santa Clara County needs to create in order for VTA’s transit ridership to grow. If a key objective of VTA’s fiscal and service strategy is to grow transit ridership, it does not make sense to continue funding investments that are mitigations for level of service impacts or that could further exacerbate our car dependence.

We believe that one of the most impactful things that VTA can do to change mobility over the life of the sales tax in the county is to include vehicle miles traveled (VMT) as criteria in roadway spending.¹ Doing so would allow more spending on mobility by transit, by bike and by foot.

¹ Please see SPUR’s additional Measure B program-level recommendations here:
<http://www.spur.org/publications/policy-letter/2017-04-26/spur-comments-measure-b-program-area-guidelines>

2. Add other system performance metrics that could be used to screen these projects, such as total person throughput (not vehicle throughput), safety, equity, and accessibility. Some may be covered by the Complete Streets requirement but others are not.

3. Front-load the investments in the bicycle & pedestrian program and the Caltrain Grade Separation program. We recommend making more resources for bicycle and pedestrian and Caltrain grade separation improvements available in the early years of Measure B in order to make significant progress towards mobility and sustainability goals. Many cities and the county have goals of improving mobility and reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the near future in order to avoid the worst of climate change (often by 2020, in-line with state-mandated targets). To that end, it may be worthwhile to make more resources available in the next few years rather than to divide the program evenly over thirty years in two-year increments.

Agenda Item #7.1 (2018-19 Budget)

Caltrain

We understand that VTA anticipates serious budget shortfalls over the next several years. We appreciate that VTA is planning to increase its contribution to Caltrain from \$8.4 million in 2017 to \$9 million in 2018, despite its severe fiscal challenges. However, the overall declining trend for member contributions since 2013 is alarming.²

Caltrain is one of Silicon Valley's best and yet most under-appreciated assets. It carries thousands of riders every day and is the backbone to the innovation economy, but it is increasingly at risk. We all have a responsibility to make it work well.

Caltrain is VTA's most cost-effective transit expenditure. Caltrain requires only \$1.09 of daily subsidy per daily rider, compared with \$9.15 per rider for bus and light rail, and \$7.80 per rider for ACE. We have supported VTA's other efforts to improve the efficiency and attractiveness of transit lines, such as the recently adopted bus service redesign plan. Expanding VTA's investment in Caltrain is another smart transit investment.

- 1. We strongly encourage VTA and other members of the Peninsula Joint Powers Board to work together to find a sustainable solution to Caltrain's structural budget problem. The first step is for Caltrain to create a business plan.** Finishing the \$2.25 billion modernization project will mark the beginning of a completely new era for the Caltrain Corridor. The railroad is transitioning from a diesel railroad to a faster,

² In 2013, the Member contributions were: \$13.7M (SC), \$14M (SM), \$5.8M (SF). In 2014 these dropped to \$7.3M (SC), \$5.4M (SM) and \$4.5M (SF). In 2018, the proposed contributions are \$9M (SC), \$6.2M (SM) and \$5.3M (SF)—only slightly higher than the 2014 contributions.

electrified system. There will be another pivot point once high-speed rail starts running on the Caltrain corridor, estimated around 2026. If we do things right, we will be able to transition Caltrain from a commute-hour service to a reliable all day transit system unlike anything else in the United States. Together with the SVLG, SAMCEDA and Stanford, we describe this bright future in the *Caltrain Corridor Vision Plan*.³ Completing a Business Plan was key recommendation in SPUR's Vision Plan.

- 2. Until this is adopted and a more sustainable solution is set, we recommend that VTA and its member agencies increase their annual contributions to cover the operating shortfall.**

Diridon Station

SPUR has been vocal about the remaking of Diridon Station and Station Area. We have provided research on best practices and cautionary tales from around the world, convened decision-makers and world-renowned experts on governance and station design, developed a list of principles to guide key planning and implementation decisions, and more.

We can imagine Diridon becoming a great urban station and the gateway to Silicon Valley and the Bay Area. It can be a place where all transportation modes act as one intuitive and attractive system that gets them where they need to go in San Jose and beyond. The station can be a public space that connects seamlessly to the neighborhoods around it and new places that people can walk to meet their daily needs without thinking twice about it. None of this is possible without a clear vision, a governance system that is setup for success, and significant public investments.

- 1. We strongly recommend that VTA think comprehensively about the public investments that may be needed in order to make Diridon Station and Station Area the best they can be and begin integrating them into its project and budget pipeline.** We encourage VTA to work with its partners locally and at the state to identify funding solutions for key projects that will make Diridon the best it can be, such as:

- **Significant operational changes to the light rail system to increase service and make it a more effective feeder network into Diridon Station.** This will help minimize the need for parking in the station area and open up more space for jobs and housing near the station, which will improve ridership.
- **Fully undergrounding/ depressing light rail underneath Diridon Station.** This project is necessary in order for Caltrain and high-speed rail to be able to operate at-grade, and will significantly minimize the possibility for rail infrastructure to become a barrier between neighborhoods.

³ The Caltrain Corridor Vision Plan can be found here: <http://www.spur.org/publications/spur-report/2017-02-23/caltrain-corridor-vision-plan>

- **Street and curb-management improvements that would improve the bus operations and passenger experience while opening up development capacity.** The current bus terminal takes up valuable space that could be used for housing and jobs, and also diminishes the pedestrian environment. More cities are moving towards a pulse bus system, in which buses wait at a depot away from the central station and are dispatched for “just in time” service in order to use space efficiently.

Agenda Item #7.2 (Fare Policy)

1. We recommend significantly simplifying VTA’s fare policies and reducing the number of fare types. The staff proposal includes more than thirty different fare options, which is confusing for people to use. For comparison, New York City’s MTA offers only eight fare types across multiple modes (subway, rail, buses and ferries). We recommend reducing the fare types. A few places to start include are those that have low usage or are confusing, including:

- **Eliminate the Light Rail Excursion Pass**, which is the same price as “single ride cash” fare and not nearly as well used (13,770 compared to 6,065,499).
- **Eliminate the Express Day Pass**, which has only 583 riders according to Table 12. This could be replaced with Express Cash and/or Express Clipper.
- **Consider rethinking all fares that mimic e-cash, such as the Express Cash**, because these are confusing and do not actually provide e-cash to use the any system and we want people to move from system to system with ease.

2. We recommend that VTA offer free transfers between non- VTA modes within a 90-minute interval. We are building BART, which will connect to light rail, Caltrain, ACE, Amtrak and eventually high-speed rail at Diridon. Diridon will become a major regional transportation hub and a node within the statewide rail network. It would be a major missed opportunity for the region and the state if these do not operate like one reliable, easy-to-use system, especially in an era in which public transit faces more competition.

3. We ask that VTA make its fare policies much more transparent. The current structure and communication strategy creates unnecessary confusion. There is very little information about the fare options on VTA’s website. It also appears that there are different naming conventions for fare types (e.g., the table on page 383 has express cash only; the appendix has cash and Clipper. Also in the appendix is the "Joint Caltrain Day Pass" but it's also not in the table on 383 and is not on the VTA website).

4. We recommend that VTA evaluate how the EcoPass program is used before changing it. Staff acknowledged that the EcoPass program has not been reviewed since it started; we do not how well it is meeting people's needs and if it is really the right type of pass for VTA. Over 1/3 of Bay Area employees cross a county line to get to work, so a pass that is only valid in Santa Clara County (and in which people are still required to pay again in order to transfer to another operator) may not encourage very many people to use transit. This also suggests that the proposed EcoPass fare structure--which is broken down

both by size of company *and* by geography (e.g., downtown San Jose, Areas served by bus only) may not fit many people's needs. We would encourage studying the EcoPass program and figuring out what type of pass will more successfully serve people (and employers). This may end up being something more like a regional fare pass.

However, if VTA must make changes to EcoPass this year, we recommend:

- **Eliminate the geographic components of the proposed new EcoPass structure.** Most people do not travel only within downtown San Jose, or a very defined geography, to get to work.
- **Make the fares more equitable by increasing the Corporate EcoPass rate.** It is not clear why larger companies would pay less for a Corporate Eco Pass than smaller companies with lower headcounts. We recommend adjusting the pricing structure to be more equitable.
- **Explore combining the EcoPass and Caltrain GoPass programs.** This will help eliminate transfer penalties between Caltrain and VTA's buses and light rail system, and eventually BART. Additionally, we have heard that many employers do not participate in EcoPass because they are already paying for GoPass. Merging these two would provide more benefit to employers and workers.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the 2016 Measure B Program Area Guidelines, fare policy updates and budget. Please let us know if you have any questions at 408-638-0083 or ltolkoff@spur.org.



Laura Tolkoff
San Jose Policy Director