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Update: Board of Directors Workshop, September 21, 2012

The VTA Board of Directors met for a public workshop on September 21, 2012. The board directed staff to proceed with the revised project option for the El Camino Real BRT Project and to:

- Include the optimal project in the environmental analysis
- Have VTA staff check in with MTC to encourage regional support of the project
- Return to the six cities to share analysis throughout the environmental study process
- Return to the VTA Board with status reports and the results of the analysis

In next steps the board will authorize VTA to enter into the federal funding process, initiate the Caltrans design review process and begin environmental analysis.

Transit Planning Manager Kevin Connolly gave a presentation covering the policy context of the BRT Program, all three BRT projects as well as four project options for El Camino Real. Nearly all Board members spoke about the project options.

Notable points include:

- Board member Margaret Abe-Koga, of Mountain View, who introduced the idea of studying the optimal project, said that there were many questions about the project that the Mountain View Council felt were not sufficiently addressed—due to the lack of a complete environmental analysis—to give them confidence to support dedicated lanes. Her hope is that an environmental analysis of both street configurations in Mountain View would help the council make a more informed decision about which street configuration is best for the city. Other Board members echoed the idea of studying both street configurations—understanding that it would lead to a higher project cost, but one that would be worthwhile in the larger sense of the project.
- Board member Jamie Matthews, of Santa Clara, encouraged VTA to avoid “paralysis by analysis” and move ahead with the revised project, predicting that dedicated lanes in Santa Clara will be the envy of other cities and would provide the tangible example that would encourage other cities to pursue dedicated lanes.
- Board members Sam Liccardo and Rose Herrera, both of San Jose, drew attention to the operating cost savings of the revised and optimal projects. Liccardo noted that there was a nearly \$5 million difference in annual operating cost between the revised project and the optimal project and that Sunnyvale and Mountain View had not supported the project. This tied into another theme of Board member Liccardo’s comments of a vision of the future and making land use decisions that go hand-in-hand with transportation investments.

Members of the public spoke at the workshop, including Transform, Silicon Valley Leadership Group, Greenbelt Alliance, Working Partnerships USA, Silicon Valley Bicycle Coalition, Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County and the Silicon Valley Independent Living Center. Several Board members cited the input they’ve received from advocacy groups as a factor in their decision

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After months of analysis over two years of meetings with city staff, VTA proposed in 2011 a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project for El Camino Real. The most optimal dedicated-lanes project balanced transit benefit against cost, project impacts and the availability of federal funding. The optimal project would have installed BRT infrastructure between Palo Alto and Downtown San Jose—including the conversion of 10.3 miles of the two median travel lanes into dedicated BRT lanes between Showers Drive in Mountain View and Lafayette Street in Santa Clara. The portions of the corridor west of Showers Drive and east of Lafayette Street would not have dedicated lanes and BRT vehicles would operate in the travel lane with cars.

In the spring of 2012, VTA asked city councils to assert a formal position on the project proposal. While San Jose and Santa Clara endorsed the project, Sunnyvale rejected the dedicated lanes option. Mountain View and Los Altos voiced a preference for mixed flow; a street configuration where the BRT vehicles operate in the right lane with cars.

With no dedicated lanes in Sunnyvale and unlikely in Mountain View or Los Altos, it became clear that the optimal project was not politically feasible and that VTA should pursue other BRT options on El Camino Real that are compatible with the cities' visions for the corridor.

After analysis, the BRT Project Team supports a revised project to install dedicated BRT lanes in Santa Clara between Halford Avenue and Lafayette Street and mixed-flow infrastructure between Palo Alto and Sunnyvale as well as in San Jose. While the transit improvement will not be as impactful as the original recommendation, the revised project would have many merits, including:

- Improvement along VTA's highest ridership route
- Could be in operation as early as 2017
- Construction of the longest segment of dedicated BRT lanes in Santa Clara County
- Bring the western portion of the route 522 corridor up to BRT status (the portion east of Downtown San Jose will be operational in August of 2014)
- Santa Clara and San Jose developed plans for transit-oriented corridors and acted upon those plans by endorsing the optimal dedicated-lanes project. Community advocacy recognizes such progressive measures.
- Projected to travel faster, increase ridership and cost less to operate
- Fewer dedicated lanes means a lower project cost. The recommended project was projected to cost \$240 million. The revised project could be about half that
- Recent changes in federal funding structures separate majority dedicated lane BRT projects from other BRT projects, potentially making the revised project more competitive
- Mountain View, Los Altos and Sunnyvale may reconsider dedicated lanes once benefits are realized following implementation in Santa Clara; dedicated lanes could be augmented incrementally

The revised project described above is a staff recommendation. The ultimate decision about which BRT project—if any—that VTA will pursue through environmental study and the Caltrans review process will be made by VTA's Board of Directors in coming months.

Bus rapid transit (BRT) is a high-quality, high-speed form of transit that can equal or exceed the performance of most rail systems at a fraction of the cost. BRT include exclusive bus lanes, high-capacity hybrid vehicles, more frequent service, traffic signal priority, rail-like stations, WIFI, real-time passenger information, level boarding and off-vehicle fare collection. Once implemented BRT has the potential to increase ridership, reduce travel times, ease congestion and attract people out of their cars.

Benefits of BRT

- BRT offers an improved transit experience: faster travel speeds, more frequent service and enhanced amenities
- BRT meet the demands of projected regional growth
- BRT projects that maximize efficiency using dedicated lanes is the best way to reduce travel times and compete with the vehicle

VTA is planning BRT for three high-ridership routes: Santa Clara Alum Rock, now nearing construction with an expected first day of service in late 2014; El Camino Real, now in an exploration phase; and Stevens Creek, currently in the earliest stage of planning.

El Camino Real BRT Video

Posted on November 18, 2011 by VTA

Bikes inside buses?

Posted on August 10, 2011 by VTA

In coming months, VTA will purchase a new fleet of vehicles for the BRT service that will begin in 2014. Among the issues currently being discussed by VTA staff is how to best accommodate bicycle storage. VTA's current bus fleet features external bicycle racks on the front of the bus that can hold two bicycles, the maximum allowed for front racks by state law. New BRT vehicles would also be equipped with these racks, but is that enough bicycle storage to meet demand?

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Northern Cities Council Presentations

Posted on July 6, 2011 by VTA

VTA recently gave presentations on the El Camino Real Rapid Transit Project to the City Councils of Los Altos, Palo Alto and Mountain View. The presentations covered transit ridership and travel times, traffic, parking and possible physical changes to El Camino Real. In the coming months, VTA will be asking each City Council for their preferred street configuration which VTA will study through an environmental review process.

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Santa Clara-Alum Rock Project Update Meetings

Posted on June 14, 2011 by VTA