

September 4, 2015

Local officials have little enthusiasm for El Camino bus plan

By Mark Noack

A proposal to create dedicated bus lanes along El Camino Real is facing a new round of skepticism. On Wednesday, representatives from cities along the corridor urged transit officials to give more thought to alternatives to its bus rapid transit plan.

Committee members repre-

senting five cities, as well as Santa Clara County, met for the first time in two months on Aug. 26 to discuss the proposal from the Valley Transportation Authority. Committee members expressed confusion over where the VTA plans were going and whether their input was being considered — even from cities like Mountain View, that nominally are in support of the plan.

County Supervisor Joe Simitjan was one of several committee members who expressed hesitation over the bus rapid transit plan at the start of the meeting, held at VTA's headquarters in Santa Clara. Support from cities impacted by the plan, he said, seemed "a long way shy of being a charge up the hill."

"I think you've got a clear message here that there's not support

for a change of this significance," Simitjan said in an interview following the meeting. "Look, I understand we've got models and projections, but I don't feel confident in relying on those to turn the world upside-down on El Camino Real."

To solve the daily jam of traffic on El Camino Real, VTA has promoted bus rapid transit (BRT), which would streamline

bus service from Palo Alto to San Jose — likely at the expense of other motorists. The plan calls for taking away two of El Camino's six lanes and restricting them to buses only, and constructing bus stops in the median.

Since the plan was first proposed years ago, Mountain View

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leaders have generally been skeptical, and city staff have questioned VTA's claims that dedicated bus lanes wouldn't worsen congestion on El Camino Real or side streets, for the most part.

Nevertheless, Mountain View became one of the only cities to come out in support of the idea with a thin majority of the City Council voting in favor. The city of Santa Clara had taken a position to support the BRT concept, but that vote was way back in 2002, explained Mayor Jaime Matthews. At a council meeting last week, Santa Clara council members had planned to take a new vote, but the discussion was tabled at the request of VTA officials, Matthews said.

Meanwhile, the city councils of Palo Alto and Sunnyvale voted to oppose the BRT plan, and Los Altos leaders opted against taking any stance on the issue.

But even the city firmly in VTA's corner gave — at best — conditional support for the plan at the meeting last week. Representing Mountain View, Councilman Lenny Siegel told the group that time was running out to consider alternatives. Siegel himself had voted against the BRT plan.

"I'm skeptical of the whole project," Siegel said. "I've never seen any coordination of the buses on El Camino — that's what it'd take for me to get on the BRT plan."

Several municipal representatives urged VTA to continue analyzing alternatives or amending the BRT project to make it more palatable. Sunnyvale and Santa Clara representatives both preferred a mixed-flow configuration, which would modify El Camino Real's curbs to expedite bus loading and unloading.

Simitian urged transit officials to wait on any El Camino project until work is complete next year on bringing dedicated bus lanes

to Capitol Expressway and Alum Rock Avenue in San Jose.

"If you've got a similar project underway in Santa Clara County, why on earth wouldn't you wait to see if it works?" Simitian said. "This isn't something where you can say 'oops' and do an about-face. You make a decision here, and it's irreversible."

Transit officials came to the defense of the BRT project in a roundabout fashion. As part of the agenda, VTA engineers delivered a report on the five-year history of how the plan came about. A second presentation showed how development planned for the near future would add thousands more residents and commuters along El Camino Real. Following that, staff members reviewed four alternatives that were less ambitious than the BRT proposal. Going through the list item by item, Senior Planner Steve Fisher explained how each alternative

was fraught with its own set of challenges. There simply isn't space for a "have-it-all" option that added dedicated bus lanes without impacting regular traffic, he said.

Later this month, a third-party review of the BRT proposal should be complete and available for public review. VTA officials commissioned that review in response to complaints that they were downplaying the impact that dedicated bus lanes would have on regional traffic flow. The review team includes a mix of public and private experts in the transportation field.

For now, the BRT project is in a state of "suspended animation" but VTA would eventually look to get a recommendation on the project from the advisory group, said General Manager Nuria Fernandez. The project is scheduled to go before the VTA board of directors for a final decision by the end of the year.

"We're not kicking the can down the road. We need to get a sense from this group if we're going to move forward," she urged. "We need to know if this is a go, or a no-go."

San Jose Mercury News

January 12, 2016

Reject full Bus Rapid Transit on El Camino Real

By Joe Simitian

A wise man once told me: When you're riding a dead horse, dismount.

Supporters of a Dedicated Lane/Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) corridor along El Camino Real would do well to heed that advice.

At first glance the proposal seems sensible: Dedicate a lane to move more riders more quickly all along El Camino from Palo Alto to Santa Clara. What could possibly be wrong with that?

As it turns out, plenty. Let's start with the cost: close to a quarter of a billion dollars (the current estimate is \$283 million). That's the upfront cost of construction for 13.9 miles of dedicated lanes along the length of the corridor, a cost that's unrecoverable if the project fails to deliver as promised. Which

seems likely.

The goal, of course, is to encourage a significant number of people to get out of their cars and onto buses. But the Valley Transportation Authority (VTA)'s own independent third-party analysis says that, "Such high mode shifts are uncommon." And even project advocates acknowledge that the projected increase in riders may be decades away, if it occurs.

There's also the potential for traffic congestion along El Camino to get even worse, which seems probable if you eliminate one of three lanes running in each direction. Indeed, the draft environmental impact report (DEIR) indicates that a Dedicated Lane BRT would result in "significant and unavoidable impacts" on traffic.

So, we're being asked by

dedicated lane BRT advocates to sink a quarter of a billion dollars into a project that is likely to clog traffic along El Camino Real, and on adjacent streets, in pursuit of uncertain increases in bus ridership decades into the future.

Meanwhile, VTA's current BRT efforts along the Alum Rock/Santa Clara corridor in San Jose are significantly delayed, disrupting local traffic and cost-area merchants a small fortune. Absent a completed project along Alum Rock/Santa Clara, we have no local evidence that the Dedicated Lane BRT will perform as hoped; yet suggestions to wait and see have been rebuffed.

And along the corridor, the affected communities are clearly skeptical. In the cities to the north of Santa Clara relying on El Camino (Palo Alto, Los Altos,

Los Altos Hills, Mountain View and Sunnyvale), not a single city council has mustered an absolute majority vote in support.

The irony, of course, is that if VTA continues to push this unpopular project, it undermines support for a countywide transportation tax later this year. Such a measure has the potential to provide meaningful congestion relief on a countywide basis.

And, it's not as if there aren't other options. The VTA's draft environmental impact report, for example, identifies the Mixed Flow option (i.e., lane sharing by buses and cars) as the "environmentally superior option."

Alternatively, the VTA's Policy Advisory Board has recommended a Restricted Right Lane pilot project. While it does dedicate one lane of El Camino

in each direction, it does so for only a limited number of hours on a limited number of days and shares the lane with carpools and commuter shuttles (at a significantly lower cost).

In sum, Dedicated Lane BRT is a costly project, of dubious merit, without proof of concept, without broad public support, a history of delays on the current effort and the potential to scuttle a larger countywide effort to provide meaningful congestion relief — when there are better, less expensive options available.

Truly, it's time to dismount.

Joe Simitian is a member of the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, and serves on the VTA El Camino Real Rapid Transit Policy Advisory Board. He wrote this for this newspaper.