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Joe Simitian: Why VTA should abandon El Camino Bus Rapid Transit project

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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 enough: 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 \$233 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 costing 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 carpoolers 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.