

## SMART didn't just stop being a good idea



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The SMART rail and trail project is a key step to a better future for residents of the North Bay.

We have learned that it is not possible to pave our way out of congestion. We envision that walkable communities supported by trains and pathways will be essential elements of our mobility as energy becomes more costly in the 21st century. Some of us are even optimistic that SMART's ribbon-cutting ceremony in 2014 will be for a project that is larger, perhaps much larger, than the plan being proposed due to the financial constraints that SMART faces today.

SMART recently estimated that it had only enough firm funding to open an initial stage of rail service between downtown Santa Rosa and the Marin Civic Center in San Rafael. This news disappointed many and was seized upon by critics as a reason to delay and even to halt the project. Some went so far as to suggest that SMART should suspend its plan to issue bonds pending yet another financial review of the project.

At the same time, some are suggesting that SMART has ways to stretch its available funding farther. SMART has already considered numerous cost-saving options such as railcar leasing, using second-hand equipment initially, repairing instead of replacing bridges and culverts, postponing some stations and delaying certain parts of the maintenance facility. And there are additional possibilities, including postponing the seismic upgrade at Puerto Suello tunnel and deferring some track upgrades.

More significantly, the recession has enabled many highway projects to be built at prices 30 percent below engineering estimates. Once SMART knows whether rail projects can benefit from similar savings, the initial operating segment might be extended. Due to the differences between highway and railroad projects, the only way to find this out is to solicit bids. SMART plans to get construction bids next spring, after issuing the bonds needed to support capital expenditures.

Meanwhile, SMART is seeking the support of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission to pursue additional sources of funding, and the commission staff is closely reviewing the financials. Experience tells us that fully developed plans for key segments of major transportation systems, along with strong partnerships with local jurisdictions, are important factors for raising necessary funds for any transportation project.

We hope that Marin County policymakers will throw their muscle into pursuing additional funds and finding other ways to support SMART instead of encumbering the project with additional demands.

Calls to delay or de-fund of the entire project, charging SMART with failure to anticipate decreases in sales tax revenue, seem rather presumptuous. Even former Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan said, "I didn't see (the recession) coming."

SMART has been a good idea for 25 years, and it doesn't become a bad idea just because it can't be done in one fell swoop.

The only way to get the entire project done is to get started, and the only time better than now is yesterday.

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