

Questions remain over scale of eBART in East County

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EAST COUNTY - Although local government leaders have agreed to do what they can to bring eBART to East County, they still have more questions than answers about the proposed alternative to Bay Area Rapid Transit's full-size trains.

eBART's smaller, diesel-powered models would run on 23 miles of track between BART's Pittsburg/Bay Point station and Byron, stopping in Pittsburg, Antioch, Oakley and Brentwood along the way.

And, even with an estimated price tag of \$390 million, the system would be far less costly -- and thus much faster -- to build than BART trains and stations.

But city and county officials debate whether their communities can produce the riders BART says it needs to justify extending its reach beyond the Pittsburg/Bay Point station, and they worry about the consequences of falling short.

"There's a big 'what-if?' " said Oakley Mayor Pat Anderson.

They also wonder about the effect that building more stations would have on surrounding neighborhoods.

"We all know that people move to Brentwood because they love the open space," said Brentwood City Councilwoman Annette Beckstrand, who wonders how residents within earshot of the trains would react.

They fret about the possibility of even more gridlock as well as accidents with a light-rail system whose trains -- traveling at 75 mph or faster -- would share the road with motorists at points along its route.

And they contemplate the possibility that endorsing eBART will cost East County residents the chance of ever getting the traditional BART service they have been paying for in sales and property taxes since 1958.

According to the most recent calculations available, that contribution amounted to an estimated \$259 million among Antioch, Brentwood and Pittsburg alone as of 1999.

"I'm not crazy about (eBART) in the least," said Beckstrand, who sits on the eight-person committee that's advising BART decision-makers as they study eBART's viability over the next two years.

"My biggest concern is that it will end with this. (The BART board might say) 'East County got their rail -- it's good enough, leave it alone.' "

Nonetheless, Beckstrand and other local politicians have agreed to continue pursuing this option to the gridlock on Highway 4, reasoning that their constituents are better off getting something as soon as possible than continuing to wait for a train service so prohibitively expensive that it might never materialize.

"(People) are anxious to ride but there's nothing to ride on," said Pittsburg City Councilman Bill Glynn, who is less concerned about generating sufficient ridership numbers for eBART than how long it might take for help to arrive.

He points to the crush of early morning commuters who must fight to get a seat on BART trains and encounter a quagmire on Highway 4 in the afternoons.

"The need for transportation is immediate, right now," said Glynn, who wants eBART trains to start running as soon as each station is built.

Antioch Mayor Don Freitas agrees that weary commuters would welcome another way of traveling to and from East County.

"A lot of people would love to get off Highway 4 -- I hear that all the time," he said.

In the interest of sustaining the momentum behind eBART, East County's four cities along with the county and several transportation agencies recently approved a memorandum of understanding.

They agreed to cooperate as each tries to develop its open space in a way that will generate the number of passengers BART wants in order to justify investing tens of millions more dollars in East County.

The idea is to attract a critical mass of potential riders to spots within easy reach of the proposed station sites by building high-density housing and commercial centers.

eBART is the first project that BART will evaluate according to the expansion policy it adopted in 1999.

The litmus test requires communities along the eBART corridor collectively to generate enough passengers by 2030 to account for at least 14,055 entrances and exits -- the way BART tabulates trips -- on an average weekday.

Although the eBART timeline has train service starting in 2010, BART will allow communities two decades to build ridership.

Still, the mandatory quota is a condition that doesn't sit well with some local officials.

"The rub is that we have these thresholds ... that no other BART station has had to meet," Freitas said.

Although he doesn't fault BART for wanting to spend its money wisely, Freitas questions whether the minimum ridership levels are reasonable or attainable.

"We've already made a compromise to consider eBART and now we have to deal with a (ridership) policy," Freitas said.

Oakley's mayor echoes his concerns about the fairness of the mandate.

Even if the city rezones the area just north of Empire and Neroly roads where it has proposed building an eBART station, Anderson said there's no guarantee the owner would sell the property.

"To now change the rules of the game ... we're having to be the ones that have to meet a different set of criteria," she said.

Although there is no financial penalty if East County fails to demonstrate that it can meet minimum ridership levels, BART might decide to shelve the project once it has completed its environmental impact report in 2007, said eBART Project Manager Ellen Smith.

And there is another hurdle East County must clear before residents can get expanded mass transit.

A regional agency that controls most federal funding for transportation projects last month upped the ante by adopting a minimum housing density that East County also must show it can meet.

The Metropolitan Transportation Commission on July 27 approved a policy requiring communities in the nine-county Bay Area to develop an average of at least 2,200 apartments or single-family homes within a half-mile radius of each proposed station before the agency will give them federal funds.

"It's very frustrating for us because transit should have been here 20, 30 years ago," Freitas said.