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eBART two-year review to begin

By Mike Adamick

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With curving lines and an aggressive nose, eBART resembles a bullet -- a sleek, silver-tipped projectile that promises to relieve some congestion on Highway 4 by offering motorists an alternative to the traffic-choked artery that courses through East County.

With a two-year environmental review expected to begin next month, the future of eBART is slowly coming into focus -- from the look of the trains to the path of the tracks and the station development plans that could alter the face of East County's bedroom communities.

"We've got a tremendous opportunity here," said James Corless, a planner with the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, which wants to see more housing clustered around future stations.

The proposed eBART would connect with existing BART trains at the Pittsburg-Bay Point station, where riders would switch to the new light-rail system for a ride as far as Byron.

Still, major hurdles remain before eBART opens by 2010, and some East County leaders say proposed housing plans could end up sinking the entire system.

For starters, the \$400 million eBART plan is still about \$80 million short -- though voters last year approved a total of \$246 million in taxes and tolls to jump-start the work.

Then there's the issue of growth.

East County officials are butting heads with the MTC and BART over the look of future stations and the number of new homes and jobs around each of the seven stops.

The regional transportation commission wants more homes and jobs nestled close to the stations, as a way to encourage more people to use eBART.

East County leaders fear too many homes bunched together will mean eight-story highrises in towns accustomed to single-family homes.

"That's never going to be acceptable here in East County -- that's why people move to the suburbs, to get away from the density," said Don Freitas, mayor of Antioch.

The two sides nearly declared war on each other last month over development plans, but the key players appear to have called at least a halting cease fire.

The transportation commission held off on approving a new Bay Area-wide transit station plan to accommodate eBART changes. East County leaders say they support so-called transit villages, just not with as many homes.

"We've already come a long way from what was a lot of distrust, and I think it's very doable," said Mark DeSaulnier, a Contra Costa County supervisor who also serves on the regional commission.

Under the MTC plan, a total of 35,000 homes and jobs would be embedded throughout the seven-station corridor that stretches from Pittsburg to Byron. If one town wants to build fewer homes, another town can

pick up the slack.

DeSaulnier said the homes would be built over a 25-year period, not simply overnight.

He also asserted that the housing plans would not result in out-of-character highrises. Rather, each city would have control over its own pace of development, although the commission could deny transit money if density goals aren't met, he said.

East County leaders, meanwhile, said they wanted to focus on meeting BART's goals for future ridership, not MTC's plans for station development - two potentially dueling plans.

"This debate is not going to stop eBART," DeSaulnier said. "I'm not going to do anything that endangers eBART from happening."

East County officials want to see MTC's transit plan mesh better with BART's ridership plan, which outlines how many new riders must eventually use the system. "For us folks out here in East County, we're very concerned to have these conflicting, dueling policies, and that spells doom for the eBART extension," Freitas said.

The transportation commission will vote next month on a blueprint for creating transit villages throughout the Bay Area, as the two sides continue to hammer out their differences leading up to the vote. Corless said the housing and job demands could change during negotiations.

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TIMELINE:

In a presentation to the Board of Supervisors last week, BART officials laid out a roadmap for creating the eBART extension through East Contra Costa County.

July 2005-July 2007: Environmental review looks at four kinds of trains: regular BART trains, diesel-powered light rail, longer express buses or regular buses. Planners say diesel trains are the front-runner because they are cheaper than regular BART but could allow for future BART service.

July 2007: Out to bid on construction contract

Spring 2008: Begin construction

Winter 2010: Begin operations: The extension will join up with regular BART at the existing Pittsburg-Bay Point station and will cruise along the Highway 4 median to Antioch, where it will then connect with the former Union Pacific railroad line. From there, the track is designed to run through Oakley, Brentwood and Byron. A trip from Byron to Walnut Creek is expected to take 54 minutes, according to initial estimates.