

No perfect location for eBART transit stop

By Rowena Coetsee

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

EAST COUNTY - A transportation proposal that could lead to the building of a train station on prime agricultural land in far East County is drawing some opposition.

"Once you build on it, you can't get it back," said Amber McClean, whose family is one of four who live along a stretch of Marsh Creek Road being considered as an eBART depot.

That general location is one of three that Bay Area Rapid Transit officials are eyeing as a sixth stop in a proposed light-rail system that would extend from the Pittsburg/Bay Point BART station to far East County.

Another possible site is downtown Byron.

A third location -- although one that has taken a back seat in recent discussions -- is near the Byron Airport.

The parking lot of the eBART station on Marsh Creek Road would abut the end of McClean's driveway, which she calls a "way inconvenient" arrangement.

Putting a transit hub there could set a precedent making it easier for others to build in an area that's supposed to be permanently off-limits to development because it's part of the county's so-called ag core, she added. The ag core is land that's considered the best for agricultural use.

McClean would rather see eBART trains stop in Byron, which she says is logical because it's more easily accessible for commuters coming from Tracy, Stockton and the Mountain House housing development.

A station that's on the route drivers are taking anyway is more likely to attract riders than one on Marsh Creek Road, she said.

On Monday, an advisory group to the county Board of Supervisors that represents East County's unincorporated areas also voted to locate the station in Byron.

But elsewhere in far East County, others aren't as adamant about where an eBART station should go.

"None of the locations are perfect," said Mary Piepho, 3rd District county supervisor.

Build on Marsh Creek Road and you negate the purpose of including that area in the ag core, she said.

And if construction is on the south side of Marsh Creek Road, the station also could disrupt traffic on the Highway 4 bypass, Piepho said.

On the other hand, bringing eBART to Byron could overwhelm the tiny town's already limited space for parking, she said.

And that could be particularly problematic because Discovery Bay residents are more apt to use the station than Byron residents because Discovery Bay's population is significantly larger, Piepho said.

None of the sites has the sewer and water pipes a train station would need, Piepho added.

"There's no clear winner," she said.

Although Byron's municipal advisory council earlier this month decided on the in-town location as its first choice, Byron MAC member Kathy Leighton isn't endorsing the site unreservedly.

The additional drivers it would draw from Discovery Bay and the Tracy area would exacerbate congestion on the J-4 Highway, which is already a popular route for Vasco Road commuters as well as sand and gravel haulers, she said.

Conversely, Leighton disagrees with those who argue that an eBART station would turn Byron into one big parking lot.

She also thinks the influx of train passengers could pave the way for more growth, possibly qualifying Byron for redevelopment money that could be used to spruce up Main Street.

Bob Doran, president of Discovery Bay's town council, thinks discussions of eBART stations are largely irrelevant, saying progress is so slow he doubts the system will materialize.

"I don't really care where it goes because I don't really think they're going to build it," he said.

Meanwhile, BART officials continue studying the feasibility of introducing smaller and less costly eBART trains to East County, operating them on Union Pacific's existing railroad tracks.

Engineers are drawing up preliminary designs of the structure on Highway 4 that would direct eBART trains or buses to Union Pacific's rail corridor.

Other BART employees are helping the cities hire the consultants they need to come up with ways of generating enough riders to justify eBART.

The next milestone on the project's timeline likely will be in March, when ePAC -- a group of eight East County elected officials weighing the overall effect of eBART on East County -- is expected to decide whether it prefers light rail, express buses or standard BART trains.

eBART officials then will evaluate that recommendation in greater detail, focusing on how it might affect the environment.

They already are working on a state- and federally mandated environmental analysis, which began in July and is expected to be complete by summer 2007.

At that point BART's board of directors will decide whether to fund and build one of the mass transit options or nix all of them.