

On-TRAC: A Plan of Transit/Rail Action for Commuters

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Introduction

The Council Rail Subcommittee of the City of Santa Barbara (Councilmembers Horton, Schneider and House) has been working to support the implementation of commuter rail between Santa Barbara and Ventura County since the final approval of the Santa Barbara County Association of Government's (SBCAG) 101 In Motion report in July of 2006. The result of this effort is On-TRAC: A Plan of Transit/Rail Action for Commuters. This Plan was adopted unanimously by the Santa Barbara City Council on August 12, 2007.

Since that time the City of Santa Barbara has been working with other agencies and stakeholders to make On-TRAC a regional plan of action for commuters. To this end, the following agencies and stakeholders have endorsed On-TRAC:

- City of Santa Barbara
- Metropolitan Transit District (MTD)
- Ventura County Transportation Commission
- 1st District Supervisor, Santa Barbara County, Salud Carbajal
- Assemblymember, Pedro Nava
- City of Goleta
- Santa Barbara Regional Chamber of Commerce
- San Diego - Los Angeles - San Luis Obispo Rail Corridor Agency (LOSSAN)
- Coast Rail Coordinating Council (CRCC)
- Santa Barbara County Association of Governments
- City of Ventura
- Community Environmental Council

Summary Action Plan

Establishing commuter rail and increasing transit service between Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties have been identified as key elements for congestion management and future travel within the Highway 101 corridor. When complete, at least three heavy rail commuter trains operating in the morning and three evening trains will serve to reduce peak demand on Highway 101 and surface streets. They will complement five other Surfliner trains that currently run in each direction throughout the day. Combined with currently existing and increased low-cost express bus service, commuters who choose not to use an automobile will have a system with multiple options for mobility.

In 2002, 86% of commute trips through the corridor were in Single Occupant Vehicles (SOV). To reduce impacts associated with this trend and to meet strategic policy goals addressing economics, traffic, parking, street maintenance and capacity, as well as air quality, the City of Santa Barbara continues to support the full implementation of an integrated system of commuter rail and transit through the corridor.

Though many challenges exist to its implementation and operation, commuter rail can be realized through broad community support and political will. As a first action step, the supporting agencies and stakeholders believe that the impetus for such support will come by initiating commuter rail service with

existing and re-timed Amtrak trains and limited upgrades to the Union Pacific rail lines between Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties. Additionally, many private and government interests desire to upgrade and modernize Union Pacific rail facilities throughout the region. A successful commuter rail service will mean coordinating these interests to maximize and leverage the potential for action. A coalition of common interests must be formed between the appropriate government leadership of both Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties.

Community Consensus – 101 In Motion – “Lane and a Train”

101 In Motion was a two-year community consensus process that concluded with a final report and approval by SBCAG in July of 2006. The report acknowledges that additional freeway lane and commuter train services on the 101 corridor are both needed to address congestion within the corridor. The report also includes expansion of the existing Coastal Express bus service. This consensus was the basis for a November 2006 ballot measure to renew and increase Measure D, an existing half-cent sales tax, by a ¼ cent. The measure failed to achieve the necessary 66.6% favor countywide and is being reworked without the sales tax increase for the November 2008 ballot.

Because the proposed Measure D will now be a renewal instead of a tax increase, the money available for transportation projects will be a third less and require a revised project expenditure plan. The original concept of “a lane and a train” therefore will need to be revisited as the funding available will not easily accommodate both. Some stakeholders point to the controversy over the effectiveness of commuter rail as a factor in the failure of the first ballot measure (especially in the North County), while others attribute the South County’s strong support for Measure D to the community’s appreciation of the value an integrated system with commuter train service provides. The current proposal for a new Measure D expenditure plan has a countywide set-aside for freeway construction. The proposal will have two schedules for allocation of funds – one for the North County, another for the South County. The proposed South County allocation schedule includes \$25 million flexible funds for commuter rail over the 30 year life of the measure.

A fundamental step in this action plan will be to gain overwhelming support for commuter rail through a demonstration of its success. Existing Amtrak trains can be used to expeditiously create a successful example of commuter rail through which the community can experience its benefits.

Current Highway Projects

Four major Highway 101 projects will be under construction over the next two decades, including the Highway Operational Improvements project between the Milpas and Cabrillo Interchanges, the reconstruction of Carpinteria interchanges and a related freeway section, the widening of Highway 101 to six lanes between the County Line and Mussel Shoals, and adding lanes between Carpinteria and Montecito. Construction of these projects will result in a significant time cost to those commuting through the corridor.

A commuter train in operation during the construction of the project would provide an opportunity to bypass the construction and allow the public to experience such a service. Through the use and strategic adjustment of existing intercity Amtrak train service, commuters will be able to experience and enjoy the benefits of commuter rail when they are most needed. This type of commuter rail service may also provide a required mitigation of the impacts of freeway construction.

State of the Rail Corridor

Rail platforms already exist in Carpinteria and Goleta. These platforms and Santa Barbara's historic train station are adequate to handle future commuter rail service. Additional platforms may be added in the future to serve employment centers at locations such as Milpas Street, Oak Park, La Cumbre Road, Downtown Goleta, Los Carneros Road and Storke Road.

Other than the platforms and Santa Barbara station, the rail corridor infrastructure between Santa Barbara and Ventura still exhibits a 1920s standard and has had little improvement since. The corridor from San Jose to Los Angeles is single track. Where trains meet one must pull onto a siding to allow for passing. Sidings along the corridor are few and commonly too short for freight trains, requiring passenger trains to yield and be delayed. Some siding track switches are manually operated, also resulting in significant delay for passenger travel.

The corridor is owned and operated by Union Pacific Railroad (UP). While this is not the main north/south UP freight route, it provides an alternative route to the main northeast route originating at the Port of Los Angeles. Union Pacific has predicted that the coastal route will become more important as freight travel increases. Recent UP efforts to upgrade track by welding rails is a step in the right direction, and the State Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP) just allocated over \$18 million for added sidings between Moorpark and San Luis Obispo. (Please refer to the section entitled "Funding.")

Union Pacific representatives have expressed less than favorable support for expanded passenger rail service within its corridors. The company's goal is to profit from freight operation, and passenger rail service can be viewed as an impediment to this corporate objective. Consequently, On-TRAC includes efforts to increase the efficiency of freight rail transportation concurrent with the implementation of commuter rail service. Improved freight rail service also can benefit freeway traffic by reducing the number of trucks on the corridor. Senior representatives from Union Pacific attended a recent Rail Subcommittee meeting, and agreed to participate in ongoing discussions about increased passenger and commuter rail service in the area.

Existing Amtrak Intercity Train Service

Performance

Amtrak currently operates 12 intercity trains daily through Santa Barbara: the Pacific Surfliner (10 trains per day, five round trips) and the Coast Starlight (two trains per day, one round trip). The Pacific Surfliner serves cities between San Luis Obispo and San Diego, while the Coast Starlight travels between Los Angeles and Seattle, Washington. Both trains are slow in comparison to auto travel and are commonly delayed through Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties because of freight operations. On-time performance is poor to very poor.

Commuter rail will not be successful unless it is on time and reliable; therefore, the action plan must support improvements to the Union Pacific rail line that will provide for on-time performance. The 101 In Motion report indicates that an additional rail siding is needed between Summerland and the City of Ventura to provide sufficient capacity for freight and rail operations as well as on-time performance. The LOSSAN Rail Corridor Agency (LOSSAN) North Strategic Plan (Strategic Plan) identifies four capital improvements at an estimated cost of \$39 million (2006 dollars) that would be required for successful commuter rail operation. (Note that it is not clear if this amount is needed for the use of existing and re-timed Amtrak trains).

Train Schedules

The current Amtrak Service does not provide a conveniently timed northbound train from Ventura County. There are three trains returning in the afternoon, two Pacific Surfliner trains (4:29 PM and 6:28 PM) and the Coast Starlight service (6:17 PM). Although any of these trains could serve as additional return times, none of the trains currently operate between a standard return commute time (5:00 to 6:00 PM), and the Coast Starlight is seldom on time.

On-TRAC therefore must include service or adjust the times of existing Amtrak trains to accommodate commuter service. If the train times are adjusted, Pacific Surfliner #799 northbound and #798 southbound could be modified to correspond with commute times. Appendix B of the Strategic Plan recommends that an extra train be added corresponding to commute times in addition to adjusting the #799 and #798 trains.

Another option for the morning would be to re-time Surfliner #799 to be a late night run from LA to Oxnard, storing the train overnight in Oxnard. Then, in the morning the train would start from Oxnard northbound at the appropriate commute time. This option would increase northbound on-time performance by eliminating common delays between Los Angeles and Moorpark.

Regardless of which option is pursued and established, on-time performance of Amtrak passenger service must improve dramatically to be successful. In other words, changing Amtrak schedule as the initial step is not enough. The minimum track improvements to achieve on-time performance must be in place prior to advertising the new service.

Existing and Increased Bus Service

Coastal Express

The "Coastal Express" is a bus service provided by the Ventura County Transportation Commission (VCTC) and jointly funded by VCTC and the Santa Barbara County Association of Governments (SBCAG). Established in 2001, this service operates all day long, seven days a week and provides a commute alternative for those traveling between Ventura, Santa Barbara, and Goleta. This bus service has steadily increased in ridership and at peak times operates at capacity.

The initiation of commuter rail must be coordinated with the Coastal Express for the mutual benefit of both services and to provide the commuter with the greatest amount of scheduling flexibility. As we have seen with other commuter transit, success is dependent upon a range of available commute times between destinations. This is particularly true for the afternoon or return trip. When given multiple options for commute times, transit can serve a wider market and offer assurance of an early return trip when desired. The attractiveness of commuter rail will increase if patrons have the option of using the Coastal Express with the same ticket or pass when convenient.

Metropolitan Transit District (MTD)

Successful commuter service will also require efficient transit connectivity between the destination train stations and the workplace. The walking portion of the commute trip must be minimized to make the commute experience time-valued. Buses must be awaiting commute train arrival and have strategic routes that create the appropriate level of marketability. This will need to occur at Santa Barbara and Goleta stations at a minimum. To implement this, South Coast cities and the County will need to partner with MTD to provide the needed service and connections. On-TRAC was warmly received by the MTD board August 28, 2007.

A transit/rail single pass will streamline the riders' movement to their destinations. For example, monthly COASTER Plus passes allow users to use the COASTER, Amtrak passenger service, all North County Transit District bus routes, San Diego Transit buses, and the San Diego Trolley.

Private Sector Distribution Service

Major employers associated with the Coastal Housing Coalition have indicated their willingness to provide vans for employee distribution service from and to the nearest rail station. The University of California currently provides this service on request for staff and students. Additionally, many employers provide free bus passes and allow employees to use a company car to return home in case of emergency during the day or if work requires a late departure. These amenities will facilitate the shift to commuter rail once it becomes available.

Concurrent Rail Efforts

LOSSAN

LOSSAN is composed of elected officials representing rail owners, operators, and planning agencies along Amtrak's *Pacific Surfliner* corridor between San Diego and San Luis Obispo. The objective of the agency is to coordinate planning and programs that increase ridership, revenue, reliability, and safety on the coastal rail line from San Luis Obispo to Los Angeles to San Diego.

LOSSAN has been effective in increasing rail service in the southern and eastern segments of the corridor. Double digit increases in passenger rail service continue throughout the entire LOSSAN rail corridor. The most significant increase in ridership happened in response to a Rail 2 Rail program that allowed riders to use one pass to ride on Amtrak, Metrolink and Coaster trains. A similar single pass system would be advisable for Ventura County/Santa Barbara County service.

LOSSAN has developed the Strategic Plan for the section of the rail corridor between Los Angeles and San Luis Obispo. The Strategic Plan focuses on commuter rail between Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties in Appendix B. The Strategic Plan includes rail traffic modeling computed by Union Pacific and is considered more accurate than the rail study conducted for 101 In Motion.

SBCAG currently has representation on the LOSSAN Board with 1st District Supervisor Salud Carbajal and Santa Barbara's Mayor Blum as the alternate. On-TRAC representatives will attend LOSSAN meetings and support mutual efforts to bring about capital investment on the rail line and to coordinate with Union Pacific for use of the line for increased passenger trains. To address the growing demand for an alternative to freeway travel during peak periods between Ventura County and Santa Barbara County, On-TRAC was presented to the LOSSAN Board for consideration in the planning and implementation of daily am/pm commuter rail service in the corridor. On-TRAC received unanimous approval from the LOSSAN Board December 12, 2007.

CRCC

The Coastal Rail Coordinating Council (CRCC) is an organization of government interests from Los Angeles to San Francisco who are promoting rail travel between the cities along this route. The group is currently focused on adding additional train service in the form of a Coastal Daylight to pair with the Coast Starlight train now operating. The committee is coordinating efforts in three areas: equipment, operating dollars, and permission to use the track. Although the CRCC is not proposing commuter rail, the Coastal Daylight service will require many of the same improvements that will be needed for

commuter rail. Also, the introduction of Coastal Daylight service will likely require Pacific Surfliner #799 northbound train out of Los Angeles to move to a different time slot, benefiting the On-TRAC proposal. Therefore, On-TRAC representatives will attend and support CRCC efforts, working to get the much needed capital investment in the rail line. The CRCC unanimously approved support of On-TRAC at its meeting on January 18, 2008.

Funding

Small Starts and Very Small Starts (Federal)

Through the New Starts program, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) identifies and recommends new fixed-guideway transit projects for funding, including commuter rail projects. The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) authorized the New Starts program through Fiscal Year 2009 and made a number of changes to the program, including creating a separate program commonly called Small Starts. This program is intended to offer an expedited and streamlined evaluation and rating process for smaller-scale transit projects. The FTA subsequently introduced a separate eligibility category within the Small Starts program for "Very Small Starts" projects. Very Small Starts projects are simple, low-risk projects that the FTA has determined qualify for a simplified evaluation and rating process.

Both the Small Starts and Very Small Starts programs could help fund commuter rail in some way. The Federal guidelines for these types of funds require that the receiving agency's project have a certain level of progress in order to qualify. Among other items, this includes an established local funding source and that the environmental process to be complete. As a result, use of these funds may be some time off in the future.

It is unknown at this time if the money from these programs could be used to fund Amtrak trains. The funds might be able to be used for supporting services such as MTD bus service at the destination sights. Sources of funds like these will be essential to implement full service commuter rail with multiple trains running during peak periods daily.

Proposition 1B: (State)

The California Transportation Commission (CTC) recently adopted two rail improvement projects recommended by Caltrans for the Pacific Surfliner corridor. Both improvement proposals came as a result of the recent Strategic Plan recommendations. The first is to create new sections of double track based on modeling results, engineering feasibility and environmental constraints along the Pacific Surfliner Route in Santa Barbara County (\$11.45 Million). The second project will conduct feasibility and environmental studies for sidings within Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties (\$6.87 Million). The specific locations are intentionally vague because a number of locations for double track and sidings that can provide the needed benefits to freight and passenger train service exist. Caltrans will be working with LOSSAN, Union Pacific, and regional and local jurisdictions to determine the location that will provide the most success.

Additionally, \$25 million of Proposition 1B money has been set aside for capital improvements to the rail corridor for the new Coastal Daylight train between Los Angeles and San Francisco. No locations for the money have been specified yet. The location will depend upon the proposed Coastal Daylight train schedules and negotiations with Union Pacific.

Measure D

As previously stated, Measure D is currently undergoing a reauthorization process as Measure A. Twenty-five million dollars is proposed for seed money for commuter rail efforts with additional funding for Coastal Express. The re-timed Amtrak intercity passenger service might be achieved without the need for Measure A funding; however, a local mechanism will be needed to provide matching funds to initiate and sustain long-term commuter train service. While Measure A is an important funding element of the On-TRAC plan, it is only a start and must be leveraged with other funding opportunities.

Because commuter rail can be an integral part of Santa Barbara's County's future transportation system, On-TRAC supports sufficient Measure A funding for long-term commuter rail to be included in the allocation. Measure A funds are flexible and may be used for operations while other sources may be limited to capital aspects of the commuter rail/transit package. Such funding would occur in a variety of ways, including but not limited to: A) a complete commuter rail pilot program (as described in the funding allocation in the 2006 Measure D renewal); B) a smaller amount of funding to support the minimal matching grant requirements for a commuter rail pilot program; or C) seed funds to create a new commuter rail jurisdictional authority (e.g., a JPA) that covers South Santa Barbara County and Western Ventura County. At a minimum this local funding source would be used to leverage other State and Federal dollars. Inclusion of commuter rail may be determinative for South County support of Measure A renewal.

Lois Capps Allocation (Federal earmark)

SBCAG received a Federal earmark from Congresswoman Lois Capps for rail in 2005. The project is titled "Santa Barbara Coast Rail Track Improvement Project." The \$992,000 earmark was categorized as a capital investment grant within the New Start program. The SBCAG objective for this project is to facilitate siding improvements on the corridor, which are identified in the 101 In Motion Study and the Strategic Plan.

Because the earmark is within the "New Starts Program," the money must be spent according to Federal guidelines (as described above). Consequently, SBCAG is having difficulty accessing/spending the money. Additionally, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) has stated in the past that it does not fund projects that benefit Amtrak or intercity rail service. New Federal policy changes may allow for an Amtrak supported improvement. If alternative arrangements cannot be agreed to, SBCAG will work with Congresswoman Capps' office to locate the earmark in a more accessible Federal funding program.

Regional Governance

Ventura County Transportation Commission (VCTC)

The County of Ventura's transportation planning agency is the Ventura County Transportation Commission (VCTC). The VCTC is similar to our own SBCAG. Ventura currently funds commuter rail toward Los Angeles through Metrolink. Although many residents of Ventura County commute to Santa Barbara County, the VCTC has placed a lower priority on improving commuter rail to the north. However, VCTC enthusiastically endorsed On-TRAC on September 14, 2007, laying a foundation of commuter rail and transit coordination between Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties. City of Ventura officials also have been supportive of commuter rail efforts. A key action of this plan will be coordination with other stakeholder agencies if the region is to come together with a common goal to implement commuter rail.

Santa Barbara County Association of Governments (SBCAG)

With the failure of Measure D-2006, SBCAG has had to all but eliminate commuter rail from the next renewal proposal. As many people in the County of Santa Barbara support commuter rail, elimination of it altogether likely will jeopardize the 2008 renewal effort. Accordingly, efforts to use Amtrak for commuter service are being viewed positively by commuter rail supporters. As such, SBCAG is a strategic supporter of On-TRAC efforts in the hopes that, at the time of the vote, commuter rail is running or nearly running and will gain support for the next Measure A.

Santa Barbara County and South Coast Cities

The future of commuter rail will, in many ways, depend on the support of Santa Barbara County and the Cities of Goleta and Carpinteria. 1st District Supervisor Salud Carbajal has endorsed the plan. The City of Goleta unanimously endorsed On-TRAC on October 15, 2007. Goleta appointed Councilmembers Wallis and Bennett as On-TRAC liaisons. Steps are being taken to include other Supervisors and the City of Carpinteria.

On-TRAC Summary Steps

The following action steps are proposed to guide On-TRAC representative involvement regarding increasing transit service and establishing commuter rail between Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties:

- Strengthen Commuter Rail language in the agency Legislative Platforms
- Include MTD and employers early on as a key element of success
- Develop VCTC support with regional cooperation and coordination
- Consider consultant services to advise and advocate On-TRAC activities
- Attend the meetings of other agencies interested in expanded passenger rail services
- Support any capital investment to the rail line that will improve on-time performance of passenger rail service
- Support Union Pacific investment in better freight movement in the region and in other locations if it translates into improved service on the 101 rail corridor
- Focus current efforts on establishing new or rescheduled Amtrak Service
- Foster the coordination of regional interests in establishing Amtrak as a reasonable early start commuter service
- Encourage the use of passenger rail service timed to meet the needs of regional commuters as a way to mitigate freeway construction
- Ensure on-time performance of any start-up commuter rail efforts
- Develop a single transit pass for Coastal Express, Amtrak, and long-term commuter rail service
- Pursue opportunities to plan, fund, and implement long-term commuter rail service between Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties
- Support a commuter rail and bus transit funding mechanism in the Measure D renewal effort.