

Passenger Rail Forum: Art Lloyd & Brian Schmidt

A series of forums have featured transportation and planning experts to address various parts of the rail and trail project. In September, 2006, two speakers visited from nearby rail corridors-- Art Lloyd from the Caltrain organization that serves cities between San Francisco and Gilroy, and Brian Schmidt from the Altamont Commuter Express that runs between Stockton and San Jose. Art Lloyd hit the SMART critics hard for implying that a single-track commuter service is in any way unusual. He said the Northwestern Pacific ran more than 20 trains a day on the system early in the last century; the passing tracks allowed it all to work fine, and passengers arrived on schedule. He pointed out that many commuter rail services around the country are single-track lines with passing tracks. The busy Coaster service between Oceanside and downtown San Diego is largely single-track, and has on-time arrivals over 90% of the time.

Brian Schmidt said the single-track Altamont Commuter Express (ACE) maintains up to 97% on-time arrivals when Union Pacific freight operations are normal. ACE is disadvantaged because UP controls the train signals from a dispatching center at Omaha NB. The contract requires dispatchers to provide 90% on-time passenger service, but UP has a very large system, and a major storm in Southern California can cause so much freight to be routed onto the Altamont Pass that passenger schedules suffer. Brian said that SMART's ownership of the right of way should assure its passengers priority.

Both speakers also pointed out the importance of integrating bus and shuttle services with the rail schedules and fares. And they furnished examples of bus services that were enhanced and expanded as a result of their connections with the train. Art pointed out that an individual bus route may lose riders when new rail service picks up a particular market segment, but SamTrans then adjusts routes to be more effective, and overall ridership improves. He also praised the many shuttle services that connect with CalTrain. These are funded 50% by the State, 25% by employers, and 25% by CalTrain; the Stanford shuttle has been particularly important in building ridership at Palo Alto, which is the second only to San Francisco in boardings.

Brian Schmidt says the ACE Train is served by a surprising number of independent, locally sponsored shuttles--15 at Great America Station alone. The rail agency helps fund some of these, but many are self-funded by employers or other groups. Brian spends a lot of his time at the transportation fairs run by business parks and large employers, where businesses encourage formation of carpools, and private bus operators are invited to showcase their services along with the ACE rail service. Employees have often been successful in getting existing services extended, and even in promoting new shuttle services through these events. ACE surveyed its ridership and found that 80% had been single occupant drivers before switching to the train. According to Brian, the train has not had any adverse effect on commuter bus ridership in the corridor

Bicycle commuters are welcomed on both corridors. On-board bike racks are provided,

and there are bike lockers at stations. Brian estimated that ACE carries about 80 bicycles per day, and that there are as many as 100 bike lockers.

Brian said that the original ridership predictions by Carl Schiermeyer for the route were accurate at 700 morning and 700 evening riders at startup in 1998, and 1,000 morning, 1,000 evening riders after six months of operation. After that, ridership kept rising, until the Dot Comm Bubble ended, and ridership fell sharply; it is now back to about 3,000 per day. Destinations have shifted, with more passengers going to Livermore, rather than riding all the way to San Jose. The addition of a fourth train, with mid-day service is expected to draw riders who value the flexibility of returning home before the end of the work day.

ACE has begun to consider providing commuter service between Sacramento, Stockton, and Modesto, as traffic in that corridor is now congested.

We inquired about the relationships between the governing board and the contractors that are responsible for day-to-day operations. Brian pointed out that contract operators have a broad range of skill sets that they bring to the agency, including crew selection, training, equipment acquisition, funding, inspection, maintenance, customer relations, promotion, and ticketing. Herzog has the contract for the ACE service. Art said AMTRAK has the contract to operate CalTrain; and SamTrans houses the Peninsula Joint Powers Authority that oversees CalTrain.

Art said that CalTrain took the unusual step of increasing express service when fuel costs went up, and the increased ridership, along with a fare increase helped prevent large budget shortfalls. It was cost-effective to run at higher frequencies by making more intense use of crews and equipment. The CalTrain cost recovery ratio is high--about 60%, compared with 38% for SamTrans, and 12% for Valley Transit Authority. He said AMTRAK has an 80% cost recovery ratio! ACE uses online ticketing, including printing of tickets at home or business, which is unique to commuter rail and eliminates the need for onboard ticket collecting. The line is supported by San Joaquin, Alameda, and Santa Clara counties, in proportion to the passengers, and capital investments are similarly allocated.

About 35-40 people were in attendance. ARTHUR LLOYD

Arthur Lloyd, a member of the San Mateo County Transit District Board since 1987 and the Caltrain policy board since 1992, retired in 1991 as Amtrak's Director of Public Affairs – West. He has been honored with the national passenger railroad's prestigious President's Safety and Service Award. Known throughout the West as "Mr. Amtrak," Lloyd was singled out as a "champion of the rails" for his work promoting passenger rail service.

Lloyd's long list of involvement includes serving as a director of the National Association of Railroad Passengers, a facilitator of the San Joaquin Valley Rail Committee, and as a board member of the California State Railroad Foundation. He is

also board chair of the rail safety organization, California Operation Lifesaver. Lloyd is also a railroad historian, and played a key role in assembling the outstanding collection of railroad locomotives, cars and artifacts that became a foundation for the rail museum in Sacramento.

BRIAN SCHMIDT

Administrative and Operations Director for the Altamont Commuter Express (ACE), runs California's only conventional rail system operated completely outside of the Amtrak structure. He is exploring possibilities for ACE service including Modesto, Sacramento, a connection to BART, and service over a restored Dumbarton rail bridge. ACE was the first commuter rail service in the country to provide free Wi-Fi Internet. They have partnered with the University of Phoenix, which supplies the wireless technology in exchange for a specialty "study car" for the students. He is instrumental in a "Buddy Referral Program" attracting 30 new ACE riders per month, by giving commuters 50% off a monthly ticket when they refer a friend.