

TITLE---Is SMART still smart...?

"Neighborhood Speak"-----by Steve Patterson—Federation of SR Neighborhoods

In November of 2008, after numerous prior tries, voters approved a quarter percent sales tax increase in both Marin and Sonoma Counties for the construction of a train line from Cloverdale to Larkspur Landing. It was anticipated that \$890 million would get generated over the next 20 years. Now that the most profound recession since the 30's depression has struck, sales tax revenue has fallen off the cliff and the monies anticipated have now been revised to \$750 million over a similar 20 year window. Along with that the costs for the SMART project have risen from \$540 million to \$700 million.

The planned 70 mile train line has now been reduced to 34 miles from Santa Rosa to San Rafael. And whether or not it ends at the Civic Center or downtown has yet to be decided. It also appears that construction of parallel bike lanes may also be delayed as the 70 mile line gets built in stages.

So the question that now begs an answer is: Is SMART still a smart idea?

It depends on which group of stakeholders you speak with. Proponents still see the train line as a viable outcome even if built in stages. They see a demand from Santa Rosa to San Rafael. But are voters being shown the true picture or have the numbers of both financial cost and potential ridership been overly massaged? To date nearly \$60 million dollars has already been spent on planning, engineering and construction.

Opponents see a bad idea just getting worse~a complete financial boondoggle. They propose paving over the train tracks and running sustainable fuel efficient buses over these lines. Run the buses south in the mornings and run them north at night. Whatever the ridership might be could be expanded and contracted based on the demand and the capital investment could be tailored to the actual demand. The capital investment required to get this system off the ground would be substantially less than the original train line. And it could be easily modified based on the demand for a bus oriented transit system.

Recently, the Board of Supervisors requested a financial study by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC—the regional and financial organization overseeing this project). A status report is due shortly and will provide an assessment of whether even the scaled back plan is financially doable. It will also quickly shed light on whether this is the "train to nowhere" and if voters have been misled to garner their support. It is estimated that there is already a budget shortfall of nearly \$200 million dollars exists. Stay tuned...

And are Smart meters a smart thing by PG&E?

PG&E has such an image problem now with the general public. Little believable information has been generated by this utility about Smart meters among other things. We know little regarding their true reasons for being jammed down the public's throat. Do Smart meters exist to save PG&E money by eliminating meter readers? What radiation risks exist? Are Smart meters accurate in their measurement of energy consumed? Several towns and cities have banned the spread of these meters, but PG&E has largely ignored these bans, since only the Public Utility Commission has any jurisdiction over PG&E and the PUC is pretty wimpy. Recently the County of Marin banned any further installations of the meters, but Sheriff Robert Doyle said he would not enforce it. Many towns and cities have abdicated any involvement in taking a position on Smart meters.

So while we are over governed and under protected from a huge utility, who is right on this issue? PG&E owes the public a huge apology for how they have shown a complete disdain and aversion to any social responsibility on this meter issue. Lack of any forthcoming public information has been a PG&E pattern. Don't give the public anything revealing or insightful until after the fact. Obviously we have a utility that thinks the public is stupid. And yet the only stupidity that may truly exist is with the public agencies and municipalities that are charged with protecting the public and providing a full vetting of the facts.

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