

## **North Bay commuter train gets former U.S. transit chief's blessing**

By Peter Fimrite, staff writer

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The latest push for voter approval of a long-sought commuter train system through Marin and Sonoma counties got under way Tuesday in San Rafael with a helping hand from former U.S. Transportation Secretary Norm Mineta, but not everybody at the rally was on board.

The proposed Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit district, known by the acronym SMART, would carry passengers on a 70-mile corridor along Highway 101 between Cloverdale, in Sonoma County, and Larkspur in Marin.

Voters in both counties would have to pass Measure R, a quarter-cent tax measure, by a two-thirds vote in November for the district to become a reality.

"This is a very, very good answer to traffic along the Highway 101 corridor," said Mineta, standing next to the long-abandoned Northwestern Pacific Railroad tracks in downtown San Rafael. "There is not going to be any single silver bullet that is going to solve transportation problems, but the SMART train is a good way of relieving congestion."

Passenger rail service has long been touted as a way of getting around the daily gridlock on Highway 101, the only direct route between the two counties. More than 20,000 people commute daily between the two counties.

But the issue has been the source of bitter fighting since 1990, when voters rejected a similar proposal. Several tax measures have failed since then in both counties despite polls that have consistently shown public support for commuter rail running at about 70 percent.

In 2004, voters in both counties approved sales tax measures to pay for highway, road and transit projects, but those measures did not include funding for a two-county passenger train system. The current sales tax rate in Sonoma and Marin counties is 7.75 percent, except in Santa Rosa, where it is 8 percent, and San Rafael, where it is 8.25 percent. But the historic reluctance of environmentalists in

Marin to support the rail project is seen by many as the major reason for the continued failures.

That may again be a problem in this campaign because the Marin chapter of the Sierra Club remains divided on whether to support the plan. The Sierra Club and most other environmental groups in Sonoma County support the SMART plan.

Although Mineta, who stepped down voluntarily this summer from his job as the nation's transportation secretary, spoke to a mostly supportive audience, several protesters waved signs denouncing the proposed train system.

"I don't think it is going to change things on Highway 101 or reduce pollution and there won't be many riders," said Peggy Takeyama, 75, who came to protest with several other residents of the Los Robles Mobile Home Park in Novato. "One of the plans is to put a station right outside our gate. It will create too much traffic. What we need instead is a better bus system."

The North Bay has a railroad right-of-way already in place thanks to the old Northwestern Pacific Railroad, which served the two counties for much of the 20th century before passenger trains were driven out by the automobile.

The measure on the November ballot would pay to refurbish the tracks, build 14 stations along the route and eventually operate 14 diesel-powered commute cars carrying as many as 90 passengers each. The project would also include a bicycle and pedestrian pathway parallel to the

tracks along the entire distance, and shuttle service to the local communities would be provided free at most of the stations.

A 2-inch-thick environmental report on the project estimates 5,050 people would ride the trains each weekday. The system, which would cost \$387 million for the rail portion and \$80.4 million for the bicycle and pedestrian path, would be up and running by 2009. Annual operating costs for the system, including shuttle service, would be nearly \$16 million.

Most of those at Tuesday's rally were optimistic about Measure R's chances.

"I think more and more people are coming to realize that being an environmentalist is not just about stopping anything and everything," said Wendi Kallins, a member of the Marin County Bicycle Coalition and director of the local Safe Routes to Schools program. "Being an environmentalist is about clean air, addressing global warming and using our resources wisely. You want something that is fast, efficient and will attract people out of their cars, like a train."

Mineta, a former San Jose mayor and congressman, said most communities along the route have urban growth boundaries limiting development outside the city limits. He said the SMART plan will help cities create transit villages that would accommodate population increases over time while boosting ridership and creating more revenue for the rail system.

"When you have concentrated transit-oriented development you don't have sprawl," he said.

[Commentary in the Madera Tribune, Saturday, August 19, 2006](#)

### **Corn gives me gas**

By Cal Tatum - Tribune Writer / Photographer

This morning I stopped to fill up 'Ol Spot at the corner gas station. I stuck the hose in, squeezed the handle, locked it down and walked away. I washed the windows, checked the oil, and then I checked the pump. 'Ol Spot took nearly \$60 in gas and I think she was still thirsty.

"We have to do something about this \*#@#!," I said.

Pacific Ethanol should complete its Madera plant soon and begin pumping out corn squeezins' to use as a fuel supplement. But, I must admit, I still think corn should be eaten and garbage should be burned.

I recently read about a company that plans to make biodiesel from garbage. Through some kind of mystical mumbo-jumbo they will convert rotting banana peels and Madera Tribune newspapers found in landfills into fuel for trucks.

If you like that idea, try this.

In Australia, a company called EnviroMission is building a 200 megawatt power plant that uses the sun to create wind, thereby providing a constant source of wind energy to keep turbines spinning wildly. This plant will generate enough electricity for 200,000 homes.

It's an interesting concept. They are building a 2,500-acre hothouse and since hot air rises, they know where the heated air will go ... up! They force all the rising air into a tall tower where they claim it will reach speeds of 35 mph. That air will turn a series of wind generators. It's really a very simple concept and one I'm certain will draw criticism. Why? Well, it releases a lot of hot air, much like the Assembly floor in Sacramento. All that hot air will likely contribute to global warming, much like the Assembly floor in Sacramento. Next thing you know the human race is nonexistent and only cockroaches and certain members of the Rolling Stones have survived.

Ethanol, biodiesel, hothouse wind generators, these are all great ideas, and used in combination

could greatly reduce our dependency on oil, which hasn't worked out well for our environment, but has been great for oil companies and Halliburton. The oil companies have backed off oil exploration, they haven't invested in refineries, and obviously BP hasn't even invested in maintaining its pipelines.

What a great business model, constantly increase prices, affect every aspect of life in a negative manner, from the economy to the environment, and make more money than Bill Gates without much investing. Where do I sign up!

Utility companies have been enjoying a similar business model for years. They will gladly come to your home and teach you how to conserve energy to save you money. Right ... and I used to buy Playboy for the articles.

We take their advice and production demands are reduced. They don't have to build as many power plants, they don't have to hire as many people, yet they can still run to the Public Utility Commission and cry that they are losing money and need to charge more for electricity.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for reducing the use of power. I agree that we are harming our environment by burning fossil fuels. But, why should we be punished for conserving?

I'll be the first to admit that we haven't been great conservationists when it comes to cars. We believe it's our right to drive a seven-passenger vehicle with only one person in the car.

Even the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, is guilty of wasteful driving. Just a few months ago I went to the Madera fairgrounds to cover an event. I turned around and saw seven District cars following each other through the lot. Each had one person in the car. That seemed odd to me. Then again, have you ever noticed that a plumber's toilet rarely works properly.

I'm interested in seeing new, small companies become fuel providers. Maybe we can make our own fuel in the backyard.

Of course, a few decades ago, some people did make "fuel" in their backyards and were arrested. It seems the same corn that gives you gas can, if cooked properly, turn a family picnic into one heck of a party.

I wonder if Bill Jones, founder of Pacific Ethanol, will let me drop by and fill up a couple of quart jars for my next barbecue?

*Note: The following clip in Spanish discusses how researchers at UC Irvine have created the first scientific method for predicting the impact of small-scale generators on air quality. For more information, contact Maricela at 559-230- 5849.*

### **Científicos encuentran método para generar energía con menos contaminación**

#### **La Universidad propone un plan para el 2010 en esta región, considerada la más contaminada en Estados Unidos**

Noticiero Latino, Aire Libre, Radio Bilingüe, California  
Tuesday, August 22, 2006

Científicos de la Universidad de California en Irvine descubrieron mediante una supercomputadora que el sur de California podría tener menos contaminación si sustituye termoeléctricas y otras formas de generación energética por múltiples generadores pequeños de diversos tipos.

De acuerdo con la investigación aunque una multiplicidad de generadores pequeños también afectaría la capa de ozono, lo haría menos que los métodos convencionales que se usan hoy.

La Universidad propone un plan para el 2010 en esta región, considerada la más contaminada en Estados Unidos.