

STAFF REPORT

SUBJECT: South Coast Passenger\Commuter Rail

MEETING DATE: July 8, 2009 **AGENDA ITEM:** 5

STAFF CONTACT: Scott Spaulding, Steve VanDenburgh

RECOMMENDATION:

Receive a report from staff on activities related to implementing improved passenger\commuter rail service on the South Coast.

SUMMARY:

With the adoption of *101 in Motion* by the SBCAG board in July 2006, SBCAG began planning for how to improve passenger rail service in the Highway 101 corridor to provide an alternative to driving. The passage of Measure A in November 2008, which included \$25 million for passenger\commuter rail improvements, is an important step forward in expanding the options available to commuters between Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. Although the Union Pacific Railroad owns the rail corridor and must approve any track construction projects or service improvements, SBCAG staff continues to work with UP, Caltrans Division of Rail and local agencies to plan for and fund improvements to the regional passenger rail system. The activities undertaken so far include submitting earmark requests to federal legislators, applying for rail capital infrastructure grants under the \$8 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act high speed and intercity passenger rail program, pursuing a rescheduling of Pacific Surfliner service to a commute-friendly operating schedule, deciding how to strategically apply the \$25 million in Measure A funding through drafting the Measure A Strategic Plan, and creating a staff-level South Coast rail working group.

DISCUSSION:

Background

With the adoption of *101 in Motion* by the SBCAG board in July 2006, it became the policy of SBCAG to improve passenger rail service in the Highway 101 corridor to reduce congestion and provide an alternative to driving. The focus of SBCAG's rail effort for the next two years was to secure a dedicated funding source for rail improvements. This is necessary because the existing state and federal sources that could be used for rail operating costs are allocated to operating South Coast bus service (MTD). Capital sources were allocated to street, road and highway improvements around the county, including adding an HOV lane on Highway 101. Without a new funding source, adding rail service would require reducing local bus services, road maintenance and priority congestion-relieving roadway improvements. The passage of Measure A, which included a \$25 million passenger\commuter rail program, is an important step forward in expanding the modal options available in the 101 corridor.

Member Agencies

Buellton ■ Carpinteria ■ Goleta ■ Guadalupe ■ Lompoc ■ Santa Barbara ■ Santa Maria ■ Solvang ■ Santa Barbara County

For many years, SBCAG has also been an active participant in the LOSSAN Rail Corridor Agency, comprised of regional government agencies served by the state-supported Amtrak Pacific Surfliner rail service. LOSSAN includes the 351 mile coastal intercity passenger rail corridor from San Diego to San Luis Obispo. It was with LOSSAN's support, and SBCAG's urging, that the Caltrans Division of Rail was able to secure California Transportation Commission approval of approximately \$19 million in STIP interregional rail funding for environmental studies, engineering, and construction of track siding projects in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties. This is nearly as significant a step forward for rail service improvements to and from the county as the passage of Measure A because the Union Pacific owned track in the region is single track but carries both northbound and southbound freight and Amtrak trains. In order for rail services to operate efficiently, sidings are required to allow trains to pass and they must be of sufficient length to accommodate long freight trains. The STIP rail funding will be available to construct siding improvements at strategic locations that will be determined through additional planning work to be conducted by UPRR and Caltrans Division of Rail. However, the STIP funding has been delayed for a variety of reasons, including the on-going uncertainties of the state budget. The earliest that funding for project environmental studies at to-be-determined locations would be available is FY 2010/11. SBCAG is pursuing opportunities to initiate this work sooner using alternative funding sources.

With the successful passage of Measure A, there has been a high level of interest in what SBCAG's next steps will be to move rail service planning and implementation forward. This staff report is intended to illuminate the strategy that SBCAG staff is developing on this issue

SBCAG has reorganized internally to assign a planner to focus on rail service implementation and project delivery to support the strategy. The Executive Director and both Deputy Directors also now spend at least part of their time on rail-related activities. The activities undertaken so far include submitting earmark requests to federal legislators to advance the STIP funded track improvements, applying for rail capital infrastructure grants under the \$8 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (stimulus) high speed and intercity passenger rail program, pursuing a rescheduling of Pacific Surfliner service to a commute-friendly operating schedule, deciding how to strategically apply the \$25 million in Measure A funding through drafting the Measure A Strategic Plan, and creating a staff-level South Coast Rail Working Group to advise SBCAG staff on all of the above activities.

Rail Setting

Before we begin to discuss our next steps, there are a number of key players that will affect our day-to-day efforts to implement enhanced passenger rail services.

UPRR: Improving rail service is different than improving Highway 101. Unlike the Caltrans-owned highway, rail tracks in Santa Barbara County are owned by the Union Pacific Railroad, a publicly-held national freight rail company headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska with 32,000 miles of track throughout the country. Improvements to company-owned track, the addition or modification of passenger or commuter rail service, even the acceptance of rail infrastructure projects financed entirely by local, state, or federal funds, must all be approved by UPRR management.

Caltrans Division of Rail: In California, the Caltrans Division of Rail (DOR) is responsible for funding intercity passenger service operating in three corridors in California—the LOSSAN/Pacific Surfliner (San Luis Obispo to San Diego), the Capital Corridor (San Jose to Sacramento), and the San Joaquin (Bakersfield to Sacramento/Oakland). Amtrak operates passenger rail service under contract to Caltrans in the Pacific Surfliner and San Joaquin

corridors. The Capital Corridor is a joint powers agency of local jurisdictions, and also contracts with Amtrak to provide service.

The Tracks: In Santa Barbara County, the UPRR-owned corridor is a single track, with only one siding between Santa Barbara and Ventura, at Seacliff. In many locations, the tracks pass over aging wood bridges. For UPRR, the tracks along the coast are an alternate route to tracks that go from the Los Angeles basin over the Tehachapi Mountains and up the central valley.

Ventura County: Many of the commuters in the congested 101 corridor live in Ventura County. The Ventura County Transportation Commission has expressed support for rescheduling Pacific Surfliner service in the corridor to make it commuter friendly. They have expressed concern about longer term goals of instituting a commuter service which could conflict with scheduling of their Metrolink service to L.A. and could compete for funding with Metrolink, bus, and local road maintenance services.

SBCAG Rail Activities

SBCAG Rail Staff

In February the board approved the creation of an additional Planner position in the SBCAG Programming and Project Delivery division. Scott Spaulding was moved to this new position from his previous position as the regional transit coordinator in the Traffic Solutions division. Scott's responsibilities include managing the Coastal Express regional transit service in conjunction with the Ventura County Transportation Commission, helping develop the passenger rail element of the Measure A Strategic Plan, coordinating grant applications for corridor rail infrastructure improvements, interfacing with Caltrans Division of Rail, LOSSAN and CRCC staff, and other duties.

Rail Corridor Improvements

Vital to enhancing passenger or commuter rail service are improvements to the rail corridor infrastructure between Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. The 50 mile stretch of track between Oxnard and Goleta is all single track, with just one siding in the entire corridor that is too short to accommodate a freight train. A number of rail plans and programs, including 101 In Motion, the LOSSAN North Strategic Plan, the California State Rail Plan, the Amtrak Pacific Surfliner business plan, and the SCAG Ventura-Santa Barbara Rail Study have all determined that new and expanded rail sidings are needed between Santa Barbara and Ventura. More effective sidings reduce schedule conflicts between opposing trains, improve on-time performance of both freight and passenger rail service, and enable the addition of new intercity rail trips without degradation of service to existing freight and passenger rail service.

The California Transportation Commission has programmed approximately \$19 million in State Transportation Improvement Program interregional rail funds for two siding projects, one in Santa Barbara County and one in Ventura County. Although uncertainties with the state budget make it difficult to predict when these two projects will begin, programming these funds indicates the state is aware of the importance of rail capacity improvements in our region. Funds to initiate environmental studies and design are currently programmed in FY 2010/11. In addition to these future projects, earmark requests for rail siding improvements have been submitted to Senators Feinstein and Boxer and to Representative Capps. The funds from the earmarks would be used to fund environmental and design work, accelerating the delivery of the projects.

The most recent rail infrastructure improvement funding opportunity is a result of the Federal Railroad Administration's High Speed and Intercity Passenger Rail Program (HSIPR), which was infused with \$8 billion in funding as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

States are the eligible applicants and Caltrans—with support from SBCAG staff—will be submitting two HSIPR grant applications for rail siding projects in our region, most importantly for an extension of the existing Seacliff siding. Extending the Seacliff siding to allow running train meets has been identified in several rail plans and studies as necessary to enable more frequent passenger rail service between Santa Barbara and Ventura counties. The second project is for signal upgrades to several sidings in Santa Barbara County that will increase average train speeds and reduce trip times. It is anticipated that Union Pacific, the owner of the rail corridor, will support these grant applications, and SBCAG will be receiving letters of support from UP, government agencies, environmental organizations, educational institutions, and large private employers to include with the final grant application when it is submitted later this summer. SBCAG staff will be conducting a site visit at the Seacliff siding with UP and Caltrans Division of Rail representatives in late July.

Pacific Surfliner Schedule revision

One near term alternative to improve regional passenger rail service is to adjust the Amtrak Pacific Surfliner schedule to better serve commuters traveling from Ventura County to Goleta and Santa Barbara. Currently a northbound Surfliner train arrives in Santa Barbara at 10:11AM (Train No. 799) and a southbound train and departs at 4:30PM (Train No. 798). The current schedule does not serve a standard workday, but if the schedule were modified slightly to better serve the commuter market, there is little doubt train boardings would increase in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. Caltrans Division of Rail has been reluctant to adjust the schedule earlier because the morning train originates in Los Angeles, and moving the northbound departure time at LA Union Station to an earlier time would likely reduce ridership significantly. To address this concern, SBCAG staff is pursuing discussions with Division of Rail to explore the possibility of operating the #799 train from Los Angeles to Oxnard in the evening and from Oxnard to Goleta the following morning. This solution would hopefully bolster ridership on #799, which has the lowest ridership of all Pacific Surfliner trains. Although a monthly Amtrak pass is available between Ventura and Santa Barbara counties for \$143-\$187, this does not compare favorably with the Coastal Express regional bus service, which currently offers a monthly pass for \$75 and a single fare for \$2.00 (\$1.80 with a SmartCard) and which offers 47 one-way weekdays trips. Although SBCAG and the Ventura County Transportation Commission share equally in the cost of the Coastal Express, VCTC has sole authority to determine and set fares, and for several years SBCAG staff has been encouraging VCTC to bring their fares in line with other regional transit services, include the Pacific Surfliner.

Measure A Strategic Plan

SBCAG staff is working with a team of consultants led by Parsons Brinkerhoff to create a strategic plan for Measure A, which will include a description of the Measure A funded project to enhance passenger/commuter rail service as an alternative to driving on the 101 corridor. Although the \$25 million available under Measure A is not sufficient to develop an independent commuter rail service such as the Coaster in San Diego County, it is a significant amount dedicated to rail service improvements and is a highly flexible source of funding that can be used in a variety of ways to support enhanced rail service. Staff will be providing updates on the development of the strategic plan to the South Coast Subregional Planning Committee over the next several months. The Measure A strategic plan is expected to be completed and adopted by the SBCAG board by the end of 2009.

South Coast Rail Working Group

SBCAG staff is forming a South Coast rail working group, comprised of staff from the cities of Carpinteria, Goleta and Santa Barbara, the County of Santa Barbara, MTD, Caltrans District 5,

and SBCAG. Staff from cities in Ventura County, the County of Ventura, the Ventura County Transportation Commission, and the Caltrans Division of Rail will participate in the working group on selected issues. The purpose of the working group is to coordinate passenger rail planning, programs, and projects in Santa Barbara County and to act as a discussion forum for rail issues for SBCAG and local agency staff. The rail working group is a staff-level group modeled after the Clean Air Express working group, which was instrumental in helping determine how the successful Clean Air Express regional transit service would be managed, funded, and operated. The rail working group will be holding its first meeting in mid-July.

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