

Date: December 11, 2007

Committee Meeting Date: December 20, 2007

Board Meeting Date: January 3, 2008

**BOARD MEMORANDUM**

**ACTION ITEM**

**TO:** Transit Planning and Operations Committee  
Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority  
Board of Directors

**THROUGH:** Michael T. Burns  
General Manager

**FROM:** John H. Ristow  
Chief CMA Officer

**SUBJECT:** Palo Alto Community Transit Study Final Recommendation

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**Policy-Related Action: Yes**

**Government Code Section 84308 Applies: No**

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Approve the modification to the existing Community Bus Line 88 starting in July 2008 to serve both Midtown and South Palo Alto, provide additional peak period frequency and expand service to Gunn High School, as presented in Attachment A; further, approve the deletion of Community Bus Line 89 and reinvest the service hours into the modified Community Bus Line 88.

**BACKGROUND:**

In August 2007, as a product of the Comprehensive Operations Analysis (COA), the VTA Board adopted a new Bus Service Operating Plan set to go into effect January 14, 2008. The Board further directed staff to work with the City of Palo Alto to address bus service issues and return to the Transit Planning and Operations Committee with a recommendation encompassing a more comprehensive assessment of all transit services in the City by December 2007.

VTA and City of Palo Alto staff partnered with counterparts at SamTrans, Caltrain and the Stanford Marguerite shuttle to begin the Palo Alto Community Transit Study in early September, 2007. A consultant team consisting of Nelson Nygaard Associates and Cambridge Systematics developed an in-depth market analysis, generated service alternatives and led public workshops. The study approach was centered around three public workshops held in Palo Alto along with presentations to the City Planning and Transportation Commission, City Council and VTA's Transit Planning and Operations (TP&O) Committee. A Project Team made up of staff, consultants and community representatives met at Palo Alto City Hall throughout the study to

share draft products and discuss study progress. The table below details the meetings that occurred or have been scheduled throughout the course of the study.

No.	Meeting	Date
1	City-VTA Project Planning Meeting	September 4, 2007
2	Team Meeting, Kick-off	September 25, 2007
3	Team Meeting	October 18, 2007
4	Public Workshop 1	October 23, 2007
5	Team Meeting	November 6, 2007
6	Public Workshop 2	November 13, 2007
7	TP&O Status Report	November 14, 2007
8	Team Meeting	November 20, 2007
9	Mayor's Briefing	November 29, 2007
10	Joint Public Workshop 3 & Planning Commission Meeting	December 12, 2007
11	City Council Recommendation	December 17, 2007
12	TP&O Recommendation	December 20, 2007
13	VTA Board Action	January 3, 2008

The goal of the study was to evaluate all transit services in Palo Alto to determine whether a better coordinated arrangement among the many providers could be found. The TP&O Committee asked that VTA staff return with results of the study and recommendations for modified or additional service provided a valid transportation need and improvement is identified.

## **DISCUSSION:**

The Community Transit Study consisted of two focus areas: a detailed market analysis and a service analysis. These study topics were tied together by public input during workshops.

### **Market Analysis**

A market analysis building on the work recently completed as part of the COA was developed for Palo Alto to determine the market for transit services in the city. The analysis found that there are several locations and corridors that would qualify as "transit competitive" because of the level of congestion, density of development and quantity of transit amenable travelers. However, the analysis found that the most competitive locations are well served by existing services.

Areas to the west of the Caltrain tracks experience a rich level of service mainly by the Stanford Marguerite Shuttle but also on El Camino via VTA Line 22 and 522 Rapid services. In addition, SamTrans services from San Mateo County go to both the Palo Alto Transit Center and the Stanford Research Park. There are strong origin and destination markets on the El Camino Real corridor, especially south of Downtown Palo Alto. Close to 40 percent of work trips destined for Palo Alto are originating south of the City, with San Jose the largest portion at 14 percent.

East of the Caltrain line, Downtown Palo Alto is a highly competitive transit market. While Downtown has a substantial level of service nearby at the Transit Center and Caltrain Station, the difficult pedestrian connection to Downtown may be perceived as an inconvenient barrier by

many choice travelers. In addition, while VTA and SamTrans services connect well to each other at the transit center, connections to the Stanford Marguerite shuttles is poor due to a lack of capacity.

A surprising finding from the market analysis was that the Stanford Research Park, which has close to 20,000 jobs, is not a competitive transit destination. The reasons for this are similar to why other high tech areas such as the Golden Triangle, First Street or Moffett Park are not competitive transit markets: the abundance of free parking, a low-density development pattern and the prevalence of Santa Clara County's most difficult market segments. These choice travelers prefer a high level of comfort and convenience, schedule flexibility and travel times competitive with the automobile. Nevertheless, a significant level of transit serves the Research Park including Marguerite shuttles, VTA Express Buses 101, 102 103 and 104, SamTrans KX Line and the Dumbarton Express Bus.

South and east of Downtown there is a modest transit market centered around community facilities such libraries, senior centers and schools in Midtown and South Palo Alto. This area is currently served by the City's Crosstown and Embarcadero shuttles, along with VTA Line 88. Because it was determined by the project team that the markets in the other parts of the city were already well served by existing or proposed new services, the Midtown and South Palo Alto area became the focus of the Community Transit Study.

### **Public Workshops**

Using the market analysis findings and the input of the project team, the consultants led the first of three community workshops aimed at brainstorming ideas for an ideal routing in the study area. Several issues and challenges arose at the first workshop. These challenges became integral to future discussions at team meetings and subsequent workshops.

- Geography is a barrier in any routing scheme because there are limited crossings of the Caltrain tracks and some streets are not sufficiently sized to allow buses to operate.
- Productivity of any new route will be important because of VTA's new *Transit Sustainability Policy*, which evaluates routes on their performance every year. There is real concern from both city residents and VTA staff that any new VTA route put in place will attract riders and not be subject to elimination 1-2 years after implementation.
- School service, especially to Gunn High School, is extremely important to residents because it can provide a safe and reliable alternative for students and will help reduce localized congestion during peak periods.
- There is a strong desire for evening peak period service to Gunn High School to accommodate students involved in extracurricular activities.
- The existing City Crosstown Shuttle service to Gunn does not have sufficient capacity to meet demand, especially at bell times. Overcrowding and safety are a concern.
- Connecting residential areas and community activity centers to downtown and the Downtown Caltrain station are very important. Of lesser importance are connections to San Antonio Transit Center, the California Avenue retail district and train station and the Midtown retail district.

- Any service that integrates VTA and City shuttles needs to have a uniform fare. Overlapping service needs to be seamless in terms of cost and identity to the rider for a reasonable chance of success. This point led to other challenges:
  - City shuttles cannot charge a fare. The vehicles are not equipped with fare boxes and funding sources prevent the imposition of a fare.
  - VTA service can only be free if a third party (the City or other entity) would be willing to cover 25 percent of the line's operating costs, per the *Transit Service Design Guidelines*.
- Service between the Stanford Research Park and Downtown Palo Alto oriented around the Caltrain Baby Bullet schedule will be improved in the coming months as the Stanford Marguerite shuttle expands its service to major employers such as VMWare.
  - VTA's proposed Community Bus 89 will likely suffer ridership losses as Stanford introduces a free alternative that connects to the more desirable train station.

The project team produced an initial five route concept alternatives for review and input by the public at the second workshop. After the public provided input, these alternatives expanded to include subsets and derivatives. In all, 12 separate service alternatives have been considered and analyzed.

### **Service Alternatives**

The alternatives can broadly be defined as fitting into two categories: 1) routes that preserved the City Crosstown Shuttle and introduced a revised version of VTA Community Bus Line 88, and 2) routes that attempted to integrate the operations of the City Crosstown Shuttle with a new VTA route connecting South Palo Alto to downtown. In both sets of alternatives, the team assumed that Community Bus Line 89, connecting the Stanford Research Park to either Caltrain Station would be replaced by a new service being planned by the Stanford Marguerite Shuttle.

The public input received in the discussion of route alternatives indicated that the most important function of any transit service in the South Palo Alto area is to adequately serve the school commute. To do this, larger capacity buses would be needed to handle peak loads. In addition, parents expressed a strong desire to have regular service connecting to Gunn High School in the afternoon when after school activities keep students until 5-6 PM. The public and the project team both struggled with the concept of a service that integrated City and VTA operations. While most people recognized that the advantage of the service is a connection to downtown and other community facilities, the barriers to creating a uniform fare were significant. All recognized that a VTA service charging a fare competing with a free City Shuttle in the same market territory would not be competitive. Finally, if a service that will stand independent of the City shuttles, oriented towards South Palo Alto and Midtown but not connecting to Downtown is to succeed, it will need an anchor or connecting point to the larger transit network.

As a result of these influences, the study focused on the alternatives that preserved the independence of VTA and City services. The challenge was to ensure that the school commute was adequately covered and that a connection to the larger transit network or route anchor could be identified. It was agreed that the City shuttles, while they are small enough to navigate tight turns, also suffer from a lack of capacity, which hampers their ability to meet demand. It was also agreed that for larger VTA vehicles to serve the market, they could not be competing with an equivalent free service. As a result, the project team and public attending the workshops

recognized the advantage of VTA replacing the City Shuttle in the Gunn High School commute market.

Regarding an anchor for an independent service, all participants agreed that the San Antonio Transit Center lacked sufficient demand from Palo Alto residents to function as an anchor. The discussion then centered on the merits of the midtown commercial area or the California Avenue retail district and Caltrain Station. The tradeoff between the two hinges on operational advantages. Because of the difficulty of crossing the Caltrain tracks, a California Avenue alignment requires more bus service resources resulting in less frequent bus service. A Midtown alignment can be accomplished more efficiently and has the added advantage of serving Jordan Middle School, reinforcing the desires of the public to place school commute considerations first.

### **Recommendation**

Given the analysis developed by the consultant and the input of both the project team and public, staff is recommending a new route for Community Bus Line 88 for implementation in July 2008. A component of this recommendation is to delete Community Bus 89, with savings from deletion of Line 89 reinvested in the modified Line 88. According to the City of Palo Alto, Stanford University is intending to introduce a new shuttle service serving the same service area as the proposed new Line 89. The proposed new service is scheduled to begin operation in June 2008. Attachment A presents an overview of the modified Line 88 along with a turn-by-turn description and map.

In addition, because the scope of the study was to evaluate all transit in Palo Alto, a list of issues for future consideration has been developed and presented in Attachment B. These issues were identified during the course of the study and will serve as the basis for future cooperative efforts among Palo Alto's transit operators.

Finally, a significant item for future discussions is the possibility of an alternative transit concept that integrates VTA service into a market that links Gunn School service, South Palo Alto and Midtown community facilities and Downtown, as presented in Attachment C. This concept envisions VTA providing expanded services that replaces the City Crosstown shuttle and providing larger capacity vehicles for the school commute. One version of the concept would also require the City to contribute to VTA's operating expense to make the service financially feasible and allow the free fare service provided by the Crosstown shuttle to be continued. Due to the level of complexity of the implementation issues still yet to be resolved, staff recommends that this level of service consolidation be considered at a later date following additional discussion with City of Palo Alto staff.

### **ALTERNATIVES:**

The Committee can elect to reject the staff recommendation and maintain the level of VTA service as proposed for the January 2008 service change implementation. The Committee can also request modifications or changes and direct staff to return at a later date with a modified recommendation.

**FISCAL IMPACT:**

Modifying Community Bus service in Palo Alto according to the recommendation will result in a net increase of 500 annual service operating hours and an annual net increase \$86,000 in the transit operating expenditures in Palo Alto compared to the Bus Service Operating Plan approved by the Board of Directors in August, 2007, as part of the Comprehensive Operations Analysis. The additional operating expense will be absorbed in the existing Fiscal Year 2008/09 VTA Operating Budget.

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