

VTA Daily News Coverage for Tuesday, July 16, 2019

1. [VTA searches for new transit tech \(Mountain View Voice\)](#)
2. [VTA working on San Jose subway tunnel tweaks that might alter stations, raise construction costs \(Business Journal\)](#)
3. [San Jose: Tiny homes delayed amid site negotiations \(Mercury News\)](#)
4. ['Radical' road improvements get a thumbs down: Roadshow \(Mercury News\)](#)

[VTA searches for new transit tech \(Mountain View Voice\)](#)

With light rail expansion off the table for Highway 85, new ideas are needed

After abandoning plans for a new light rail line on Highway 85, the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority is hunting for new transit ideas for the northern parts of the county.

A request put out by VTA this month calls for new transit technologies that could connect San Jose International Airport and the cities of Cupertino and Santa Clara. Unlike building light rail, which costs up to \$500 million per mile, VTA officials are emphasizing that they want a new transit system that could be built above the road and on the cheap.

The search for an innovative transit system might seem familiar to Mountain View residents. For about three years, city officials have been trying to find a transportation line connecting downtown Mountain View and North Bayshore. For that project, city staff is looking at a grade-separated project that avoids the costly land acquisition needed for a surface-level railway.

In a similar vein, VTA has also demurred on expanding light rail in Mountain View. In a report last year that was supposed to study bringing light rail to North Bayshore, VTA officials instead endorsed autonomous vehicles as a potential game-changer for mass transit systems.

Last month, VTA was lambasted in a Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury report that found that it is among the most inefficient transit agencies in the U.S. The report said that the lightly used light rail system is the main factor in the agency's cost overruns.

[Back to top](#)

[VTA working on San Jose subway tunnel tweaks that might alter stations, raise construction costs \(Business Journal\)](#)

The general engineering contractor for San Jose's BART subway is working on refining a concept for what could end up being a much larger and potentially more expensive tunnel beneath Santa Clara Street.

[Bernice Alaniz](#), spokeswoman for the Valley Transportation Authority, which will build this BART extension, said that beyond a [few details already](#)

[available on the project website](#), “anything else would be speculative at this point.”

But she said more details are due to be presented Aug. 16 at a joint meeting of the VTA and BART boards.

The tunnel design being considered has a diameter of 55 feet, 10 inches, compared to the 45 feet discussed earlier. It would allow the underground stations in San Jose to have both tracks on the same level separated by a single platform for passengers between the two, which resembles BART subway stations elsewhere. In the smaller tunnel, the tracks are stacked with separate platforms for each.

Although the nearly 11-foot diameter difference doesn’t seem so large, it would result in a tunnel with nearly half-again as much interior volume and thus about 50 percent more underground material being mined. It’s not clear yet, according to Alaniz, how much that approach could affect costs.

[It took a year and a half of negotiations between the two transit agencies to bridge the original subway design gap between them.](#)

The tweaks to the single-bore design the agencies finally agreed to were proposed by BART and are being worked on by a joint venture between San Francisco-based PGH Wong Engineering and British firm Mott McDonald, which were [awarded the project’s general engineering contract in January worth up to \\$125 million.](#)

Originally, VTA wanted to go with a new design — pioneered on a new line of the subway in Barcelona, Spain — which contained two tracks and even the subterranean stations within one 45-foot diameter tunnel. It was radically different from the twin-tube subways used elsewhere on the BART system and other systems around the world, and would require different operations and safety procedures from those to which BART’s personnel were accustomed.

But VTA and BART ultimately agreed in April 2018 on the new single-bore concept, in part because it promised substantial cost savings and faster construction.

Last month, the Federal Transit Administration, which has become more tight-fisted with its grantmaking for local and regional transit projects under the Trump administration, [agreed to make the San Jose subway the first project in a pilot program to expedite funding for projects that try innovative approaches.](#) If approved, the federal grant would contribute \$1.5 billion to the \$6.5 billion project.

Most of the project funding comes from funds provided by two voter-approved sales tax increases in Santa Clara County plus additional state funds.

The project would extend the current line that terminates at the Berryessa station, which is not yet open, for six miles to a new terminus adjacent to the Santa Clara Caltrain station. Five miles of the line would be underground

with two of San Jose's three stations, including Diridon Station, beneath Santa Clara Street.

The schedule, which is based on expedited federal approval, calls for construction to be finished in about three years.

[Back to top](#)

[San Jose: Tiny homes delayed amid site negotiations](#) (Mercury News)

Complications with a Caltrans site mean homeless residents hoping to move into tiny homes soon will have to wait

This summer, around 80 formerly homeless people were expected to move into new tiny homes in San Jose. But amid challenges with leasing land and legal questions, those plans have stalled, leaving dozens of residents who had been hoping for a place to live still out on the streets.

As part of an attempt to put a small dent in a [ballooning homeless crisis](#) — San Jose has more than 6,000 homeless residents, up 42 percent in just two years — the city decided to put 40 tiny homes at a Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) site on Mabury Road near Coyote Creek and another 40 tiny homes at a Caltrans site near Felipe Avenue where Highways 680 and 101 intersect.

With a building cost of around \$6,500 each, advocates view the cabins, officially known as bridge housing, as a relatively low-cost way to offer stability to people while they land more permanent housing. The VTA location had been [anticipated](#) to open in June, with the Caltrans location following in August.

But sticking points in the negotiations and other challenges now mean that the earliest the VTA site will open is sometime this fall. And the city and Caltrans have yet to finalize a lease for that site, although both parties say an agreement is coming, with tiny homes possibly opening by the end of the year.

The delay has frustrated Mayor Sam Liccardo and housing advocates.

“I’ve made my dissatisfaction with the pace of construction clear both here at City Hall and with other agencies,” Liccardo said. “We’re going to get this done. I’m committed to it.”

New [state legislation](#) from Sen. Jim Beall, who represents Silicon Valley, allows San Jose to lease unused Caltrans parcels to house homeless people for \$1 a month. According to Ragan Henninger, deputy director of the city’s housing department, debates have swirled about who is liable if something happens on the site. The Caltrans site is also a federal highway right of way, which means the Federal Highway Administration has become involved. Concerns over conflicts between state and federal law — like the use of marijuana on these sites — need to be resolved.

“Certainly negotiating from one public entity with another is always complicated,” Henninger said, but these negotiations have “really been a new reality.”

Henninger said she hopes a lease agreement can be executed by August. “We want to make this happen as quickly as possible,” said Tony Tavares, Caltrans’ Bay Area director. “With San Jose we are very, very close.”

While Caltrans has worked with San Francisco and Oakland on projects geared toward serving homeless people, each city is different and “we learn from these lease agreements,” Tavares said.

Both sites will have homes and amenities like showers, as well as supportive services like career counseling. In other cities, Tavares said, he has pledged vacant Caltrans jobs and will do the same in San Jose — offering 10 positions to residents.

“We are all committed — at the city and at the state — to making this happen,” he said.

At the VTA site, predevelopment work — laying sewage infrastructure, water and electrical power — is well underway and Habitat for Humanity is building the actual homes offsite. Henninger said some of the same issues that arose with Caltrans — over liability and insurance — surfaced, but didn’t cause any major delays.

Neither Caltrans or VTA, she added, have regularly focused on housing as part of their business model. But as the need for affordable housing has skyrocketed, cities have sought innovative ways to address shortage, looking at transportation agencies with vacant land in densely packed areas as part of the solution.

“Once we work this out, hopefully it’ll be a breeze for other cities to follow,” Henninger said. “We’re really looking forward to opening up the first site and it’ll fall just in time for the weather to turn, so we can start bringing people inside.”

Councilman Johnny Khamis would like to see the state become more nimble at addressing issues like homelessness.

“We’ve become overly bureaucratic, I have to say,” Khamis said. “I think we have to concentrate on making things less bureaucratic.”

Housing advocate Shaunn Cartwright thinks the city could do more to move quickly, even if it means giving up some of the amenities that will be included in the homes. Oakland, she pointed out, built villages out of Tuff Sheds to get people off the streets quickly and other cities allow sanctioned encampments.

“Delays equal death,” Cartwright said, pointing out that hundreds of homeless people who [have died](#) on the streets of Santa Clara County since San Jose began debating tiny homes.

The homeless people she works with, Cartwright said, “don’t care about amenities, it’s what can they have now.”

But Janice Jensen, the president and CEO of Habitat for Humanity East Bay/Silicon Valley, which is building the homes, praised San Jose for striving to give residents a dignified, respectful form of transitional housing.

“What they are doing is quite avant-garde,” Jensen said.

Her team, she said, is already building and storing the homes off-site, and as far as developments go, the tiny homes are “relatively straightforward,” meaning once the organization gets access to the site, progress should be fast.

Every housing development — whether a tiny home or a single-family home — requires infrastructure, land and legal processes, Liccardo said, which means the real possibility of delays.

“The obstacles that every pioneering effort faces have to be overcome so we can clear the way for more rapid development of these communities in the months ahead,” the mayor said. “The nature of innovation is at times that we have to go slow so we can go fast.”

Tavares agreed, saying he hopes that as more lease agreements are worked out in the future with other cities, there is some consistency.

“Homelessness is a societal issue,” Tavares said, “and it really requires the state, the cities, legislation — it requires everybody to get involved and do their part.”

[Back to top](#)

[‘Radical’ road improvements get a thumbs down: Roadshow](#)

(Mercury News)

Double-decking Steven’s Creek Boulevard is the dumbest thing I have ever heard. For goodness sake, stop this crazy practice of widening roads in the hope that one more lane will fix everything. It has never worked and is never going to work.

Eamonn Gormely, Campbell

Like Mr. Roadshow’s [Facebook page](#) for more questions and answers about Bay Area roads, freeways and commuting.

A: And a lesson from the past.

Q: People who think double-decking a major street like Stevens Creek need a history lesson. That was the plan in San Francisco for the Embarcadero Freeway. After the 1989 earthquake, the city thankfully tore it down.

Mary Slater, Oakland

A: That they did and most folks seemed pleased it’s gone. Two radical ideas to ease our traffic woes — a possible aerial bridge along Stevens Creek and a tunnel from the Diridon train depot to the Mineta airport — are the focus today.

Q: A tunnel to carry riders in driverless cars the 3 miles from the Diridon train station to Mineta San Jose International Airport. What? Why would I add an hour to my trip when Uber can get me there much faster and without the need to endure riding on a train with the aromatically challenged?

B.D.

A: You would not be the target of this plan. It would be to carry train users to the airport.

Q: We need to identify and eliminate pinch points. There are many where four lanes drop to three for a short distance.

Bob Katopolis

A: Here are a couple.

Q: Fix the mess at Interstate 280 south at Magdalena Avenue. Extending one lane has been talked about for a decade but never addressed. And on Highway 101 south to Highway 87, there is room for two exit lanes.

Mondo M.

A: A decade? Try three decades for 280 at Magdalena. But a second exit lane from 101 to 87 will be coming in a couple of years.

Q: Another lane on Highway 101 from Morgan Hill to Gilroy would help with congestion but nobody actually asks commuters.

Francisco Rodriguez

A: The extra lane on 101 will be coming, thanks to the Measure B sales tax approved a few years ago.

Q: This valley does not suffer due to a lack of "radical thinking." We suffer because of too many dumb decision like running light rail down the sidewalks of downtown San Jose at a slow crawl. Look at the recent Hitachi/iStar projects in South San Jose, mostly all housing and no jobs, dumping more traffic on to gridlocked Highway 85. Look at the decisions to run light rail to Almaden and Vasona. The list is long.

Steve Williams

A: And a biggie decades away.

Q: Any radical thinking should include spending big bucks and fix the 101/880 interchange. The cost would be worth it.

Doug Swalen

A: The cost might be \$1 billion.

[Back to top](#)