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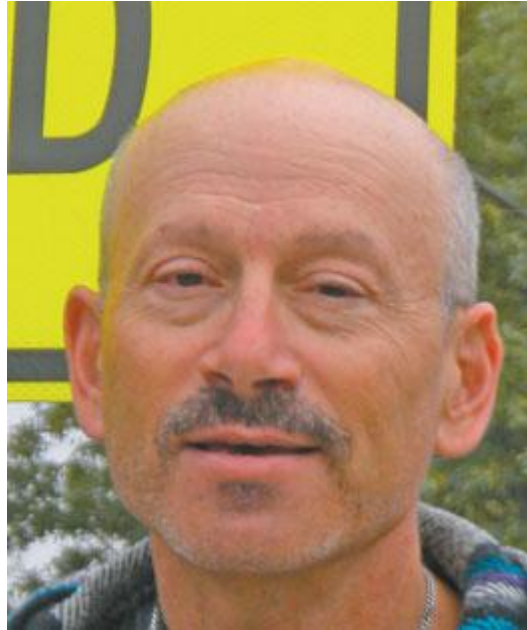
The Peninsula's homepage

OP-ED: Caltrain moving 'beyond oil'

December 22, 2012, 05:00 AM By Irvin Dawid

As a transportation activist, sometimes I get too close to the topic and forget to see the bigger picture. So when I received the email from Michael Brune, executive director of the Sierra Club on Dec. 13 of his “Coming Clean” blog titled, “Coming Clean: Smarter Choices for Climate Solutions,” I thought it would be your basic blog in support of renewable energy, greater energy efficiency or driving an electric vehicle. Hardly.

If you read Bill Silverfarb’s article in the Dec. 13 Daily Journal, “Caltrain project deemed ‘best’ by Sierra Club” then you know what Brune wrote about, as both Brune and Silverfarb discussed the Sierra Club’s new report, “Smart Choices, Less Traffic: 50 Best and Worst Transportation Projects in the United States.”



Brune’s climate blog was specifically tackling transportation — the source of 27 percent of the country’s transportation greenhouse emissions, and in California, because we have virtually no coal power plants, 40 percent, mostly from passenger vehicles.

While Silverfarb wrote why Caltrain was singled out as the one “best project” for the entire state included in this landmark report by the Sierra Club, the bigger picture that Brune tackles is that we, the United States, have to spend our limited transportation dollars wisely on projects that reduce our carbon footprint, in part by making transit more attractive to car commuters as well as for other trips where the train can be used in lieu of a car. Of course, converting the train from one that gulps diesel fuel and

spews soot to one that runs on electricity and leaves no plume of smoke also helped enormously.

Electrification, the reason why the local Loma Prieta chapter of the Sierra Club nominated the project, has been a long-standing goal of Caltrain, and it probably would not have received its funding had it not been for developments not tied to Caltrain but to high-speed rail that will pay for about half of the \$1.5 billion cost.

- The vote by Californians to support high speed rail in 2008;
- The proposal by the three legislators, former state senator Joe Simitian, Assemblyman Rich Gordon and U.S. Rep. Anna Eshoo for a “blended” system with the California High-Speed Rail Authority along the Caltrain right-of-way that enabled most of the corridor cities to agree to go forward with high-speed rail on the corridor;
- State Sen. Jerry Hill, who was instrumental in writing the legislation that funded improvements for the southern and northern ends of the Los Angeles to San Francisco train;
- Local and regional transit agencies working through the Metropolitan Transportation Commission to provide the local matching funds; and
- Tireless work by Caltrain staff and the board of directors to align all the funding pieces.

Contrast Caltrain electrification with the one other California project described in the report, the Interstate 5 widening in San Diego to 12 lanes.

One project makes public transit more attractive, cleaner, quieter and more efficient. According to Mark Simon, Caltrain’s executive officer for Public Affairs, electrifying the train they will “reduce Caltrain’s fiscal shortfall by about half through a combination of (substantial) fuel savings and other operational efficiencies, increased frequency and stops, which in turn should increase ridership and revenues.”

The other project, the widening of a freeway, only ensures that more of us will stay in or cars, consuming more oil and increasing our carbon footprint, as opposed to seeking alternatives that emit less greenhouse gas

emissions and get us “beyond oil.” In fact, the asphalt itself laid for the additional lanes is a product of petroleum.

And finally, the costs. Reducing greenhouse gas emissions for Peninsula commuters and other travelers will cost about \$1.5 billion while transforming Caltrain into a modern commuter railroad.

The I-5 widening project will greatly increase greenhouse gas emissions at three times the cost of the Caltrain project while making it more difficult for those commuters to shed their cars for environmentally friendly alternatives.

The “best and worst” projects for California, not only located on opposite ends of the state, could not be more contrasting in almost every measurement.

Do look over the Smart Choices report available at:

<http://content.sierraclub.org/beyondoil/content/smart-choices-less-traffic> or accessible in Michael Brune’s “Coming Clean” blog found on the Sierra Club homepage, www.sierraclub.org. Loma Prieta chapter’s transportation committee’s webpage: <http://lomaprieta.sierraclub.org/transportation/index> (click on ‘Caltrain’).

Irvin Dawid, a Burlingame resident, is a transportation activist in the Sierra Club and a news contributor to Planetizen.com.

http://www.smdailyjournal.com/article_preview.php?id=1760273&title=OP-ED:%20Caltrain%20moving%20'beyond%20oil