



FRIENDS OF SMART

Metropolitan Transportation Commission
Attn: Plan Bay Area 2050 Comments
375 Beale Street, Suite 800 San Francisco, CA 94105

September 5, 2024

Dear Colleagues at MTC:

The local cities of Petaluma and Novato each attract day-trippers from Marin and Sonoma Counties as well as from the rest of the Bay Area. But the wine country that extends northward from Santa Rosa into Mendocino County provides an international tourist draw as well as a favored destination for residents from all over the greater Bay Area. The tourism and visitor revenue potential for SMART can offset much or all of the public cost of extending the tracks to Healdsburg. “Show me the numbers”, you may reply. I remind you of something we already know--if we are honest and open about it—that *all* forecasting is fraught with uncertainty because it depends critically upon assumptions, and its’ ally, judgement. I have thirty years’ experience forecasting the lifetimes of engineering materials and structures, and twenty years’ experience pondering SMART’s long-term future. In terms of process thinking and the overweening influence of assumptions, forecasting is very similar across most applications.

A few years ago—just before the Covid Pandemic—my wife and I rode a SMART train from Santa Rosa to “The City” for an outing. For us the train and ferry rides were part of the fun. We ate a tasty lunch in the Ferry Building and then strolled through the building looking at the variety of shops and restaurants. We noticed a cluster of people gathered around a “sign board” and chatting. My curiosity was stimulated by theirs, so I strolled over to see what the attraction was. Turns out it was an invitation to the Napa Valley Wine Train, and judging by the spoken languages, the group was comprised of Asians and Europeans.

The ad was inviting, and my thoughts turned to the SMART Train. Why couldn’t SMART offer such a service in Sonoma and Marin counties? We have a smoother and equally scenic train ride, plenty of boutique wineries, many equipped with food and covered patios. Wineries not within walking distance of a station doubtless will seize the opportunity by operating private shuttles.

The Napa Wine Train has all these attributes. What can SMART bring to the table as a new enticement? There is the issue of affordability as the SMART train is a public conveyance, family affordable and kid friendly. And then there is the Golden Gate (Larkspur) Ferry experience, of course! What could be better than a scenic ferry boat ride followed by a train ride to the wineries--or even an overnighter to historic Santa Rosa, Windsor, Healdsburg or further north?

A scientist and engineer such as me must write very carefully if he dares to venture far from quantitate arguments. But after reading the pro or con reasons put forward to date about SMART’s Healdsburg extension, I was compelled to write the foregoing “platform.” And to remain consistent and to retain my readers’ interest I shall briefly summarize the host of ancillary issues that could be included at the cost of major increase in word count. Much of it is well-known to sustainable transportation and land use advocates.

1. The platform or foundational principle for this commentary is that highway-based transportation is not sustainable from most major perspectives: energy consumption,



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- pollution, land use, economics, and social costs. Every single trip or shipment made by rail instead of highway brings a reduction in energy use and pollution.
2. Rail has long been the agent of efficient land use—in contrast to highways, which are the agent of sprawl. Los Angeles Basin, of course, is the poster child for this truth.
 3. Population growth: Global warming will make coastal California increasingly attractive as a place to live.
 4. Personal recreation--as exemplified by the Great Redwood Trail--must not impair efficient and environmentally superior transportation of goods and services.
 5. SMART Rail to Healdsburg is a steppingstone to restoring rail to Mendocino County—including at minimum a truck-to-train transfer facility at Willits.
 6. I have emphasized the economic development side of tourism. But the revenue gained from tourism also will make SMART more financially sustainable, perhaps reducing its need for future transit subsidies (i.e., funding from MTC).
 7. For all these reasons it is more important to get SMART to Healdsburg than to build or refine freeway on-ramps and off-ramps.

Friends of SMART hope that you will factor these” out-of-the box” comments on the Amended Plan Bay Area 2050 draft.

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