



SMART Travel in the 21st Century

White Paper No. 1

To Americans of a certain age, commuting by train conjures images of Gregory Peck as “The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit” or Rob Petrie in “The Dick Van Dyke Show” – suburban dads who cinched up their neckties, snapped closed their briefcases and took the train each day into the Big City.

But today’s commuters, today’s trains and today’s commuting patterns all look a lot different than they did in the days of black-and-white TV.

Like former “bedroom communities” throughout the U.S., the suburbs of the North Bay have become job centers in their own right over the past three decades. From manufacturing to high tech, service industries to professional office work, job growth has outstripped population growth in both Marin and Sonoma counties since 1990, and projections show that trend will continue in the future. The Association of Bay Area Governments predicts Sonoma County will add 98,480 jobs between 2000 and 2025, and Marin County will add 35,280 jobs over the same period.

That’s more than 130,000 new jobs along the Highway 101 corridor, and not one of them will require a North Bay commuter to cross the Golden Gate Bridge.

The SMART project provides an important link to the Bay Area’s transit network at SMART’s southern terminus in Larkspur, just across Sir Francis Drake Boulevard at the Larkspur Ferry Terminal. But ridership studies project that only a few dozen SMART passengers each day will continue into San Francisco via the ferry. The vast majority of an estimated 5,300 daily train passengers will be travelling between the 14 stations on the 70-mile SMART line.

Critics use the inaccurate sobriquet “The Train to Nowhere” to dismiss SMART, because the train doesn’t go to San Francisco. But the highly praised Caltrain along the Peninsula isn’t a success simply because it operates between San Francisco and San Jose. Nearly two-thirds of its riders are destined for suburban stops outside of those two downtowns. Caltrain works well because it serves the needs of 21st Century commuters, most of whom no longer wear gray flannel suits, and most of whom no longer go to work in the Big City.

SMART will serve the same kind of commuters. Even without a Bay crossing, SMART ridership forecasts predict the train will serve more passengers on a daily basis than used the Larkspur-San Francisco Ferry in 2006 – about 5,300 a day for SMART compared to the ferry’s daily average of 4,900 in 2006.

Who will ride SMART? Students headed to Dominican University or Santa Rosa Junior College, tech workers at Autodesk in San Rafael, insurance adjusters at Fireman’s Fund in Novato, clerks and probation officers working at county offices in Santa Rosa, planners and bailiffs heading for the Civic Center in Marin, lawyers and dishwashers headed to jobs up and down the line. (And those are just the commuters. With the potential addition of weekend service, add the grandparents who want to take their grandkids on their first train ride, the couple headed for a car-free weekend in San Francisco, the baseball fans going to a Giants game and the tourists visiting the Wine Country.)

According to projections by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, 82% of the employed residents in the two-county SMART District will be travelling to jobs in Marin and Sonoma counties by 2025. Meanwhile, the percentage SMART District commuters going to jobs in San Francisco will drop to about 9% (compared to about 14 % of the total in 2000).

That combination of job growth and a continuing concentration of employment centers along the Highway 101 corridor in both counties is expected to exacerbate congestion along that highway. Again according to the MTC, there were 544,000 daily “home-based work trips” (trips back and forth between home and work) in the SMART District in 2000. By 2025, that figure is projected to grow by almost 30 %, to about 705,000 daily trips.

While construction will add some capacity to Highway 101 over that time, the addition of one carpool lane won’t make a substantial difference to the vast majority of commuters who drive to work alone (the U.S. Census found just 12 percent of Marin and Sonoma commuters are carpoolers). Even when the widening of the Novato Narrows section of the freeway is completed (now expected around 2018), parts of 101 in both Marin and Sonoma still are forecast to be choked with traffic at times (Level of Service “E” or “F” in traffic planners’ terms).

SMART will provide an alternative to 101 for commuters who now have no choice. Whether they are travelling from Windsor to Santa Rosa or Novato to San Rafael or the length of the line from Cloverdale to Larkspur, the train will give them a faster, less polluting, more relaxing and – should they choose to use their commute time for work – more productive commute than they could have in a car.

Commuting patterns have changed. The SMART project is designed to address those changes.

For more information about the SMART rail and trail project, go to www.sonomamarintrain.org or call SMART’s information lines in Marin, 415-419-3510, or Sonoma, 707-583-2323.