

## Board of Directors Meeting: May 21, 2025 – Public Comments

Date	Name	2. Approval of the April 16, 2025 Board Meeting Minutes
		None
Date	Name	3. Approval of the May 7, 2025 Budget Workshop Minutes
		None
		6. Public Comment on Non-Agenda Items
05/20/2025	Mike Arnold	Attached
		<b>Consent Calendar</b> <b>7a. Accept Monthly Ridership Report – April 2025</b> <b>7b. Approve Monthly Financial Status Report – March 2025</b> <b>7c. Adopt the Resolutions Authorizing the Annual Filing of Grant Applications for Various State and Federal Fund Programs for a Total of \$17,369,609 in Fiscal Year 2024-2025 Budget Operations Grant Support</b> <b>7d. Adopt a Resolution authorizing the General Manager to execute Change Order 03 to Contract No. EV-BB-21-001 with Hanford Applied Restoration &amp; Conservation for replanting, irrigation and maintenance for the next two years in the amount of \$21,652.12 for a total not-to-exceed contract amount of \$266,657</b> <b>7e. Authorizing the General Manager to execute a 2-year renewal of the Lease Agreement No. FR-PS-22-003 with GATX Corporation for the lease of Freight Locomotive 1501</b>
		None
		<b>8. Adopt the Resolutions authorizing the General Manager to request allocation and accept \$44,937,000 in Regional Measure 3 (RM3) funds and agreeing to comply with Metropolitan Transportation Commission’s requirements – <i>Presented by Grants &amp; Legislative Affairs Manager, Joanne Parker</i></b>
		None
		<b>9. Fiscal Year 2025/2026 Draft Budget – <i>Presented by Chief Financial Officer, Heather McKillop</i></b>
		None
		<b>10. Adopt a Resolution authorizing the General Manager to execute Contract No. EV-BB-25-001 with Triangle Properties. Inc, dba Triangle Land Restoration. in the amount of \$493,198 for implementation and one year of maintenance for the Crane Creek</b>

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		<b>Poppy Drainage Riparian enhancement project in Santa Rosa – <i>Presented by Chief Engineer, Bill Gamlen</i></b>
		None
<b>Date</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>11. Adopt a Resolution authorizing the General Manager to execute a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the County of Sonoma for Maintenance, Monitoring and Reporting Riparian Enhancements at Crane Creek Regional Park in an amount of \$439,834 and term of 6 years – <i>Presented by Chief Engineer, Bill Gamlen</i></b>
		None
<b>Date</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b><u>Public Hearing</u> 12. Assembly Bill (AB) 2561: Status of Vacancies, Recruitment and Retention – <i>Presented by Human Resources Manager, Lisa Hansley</i></b>
		None

To: Chris Coursey, SMART Chair and SMART Boardmembers; Eddy Cumins;  
Heather McKillop

From: Mike Arnold

Subject: Comment on Non-Agenda Items – Item #6

Date: May 20, 2025

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Given the increasing attention to AI as an information source, I thought the Board and public might find interesting what ChatGPT’s response was to the question “why is SMART so unsuccessful?”

Here is its response, unedited.

The Sonoma–Marin Area Rail Transit (SMART) system has faced several challenges that have hindered its success since its inception in 2017. Here are the primary factors contributing to its struggles:

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### **1. Low Ridership and Limited Impact**

SMART's average weekday ridership has consistently fallen short of projections. For instance, in January 2020, it recorded just 2,847 weekday riders, a number that pales in comparison to other Bay Area transit systems. This limited usage means SMART has had minimal effect on reducing traffic congestion along Highway 101, with its annual passenger miles representing only a tiny fraction of the total vehicle miles traveled in the corridor.

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### **2. High Operating Costs and Low Fare Recovery**

Operating SMART is expensive. The farebox recovery ratio—the percentage of operating costs covered by passenger fares—is under 10%, significantly lower than systems like BART (73%) or Caltrain (66%) . This means that taxpayers subsidize the vast majority of the system's operating expenses. In the 2018-19 fiscal year, the taxpayer subsidy per boarding was about \$33, which increased to \$196 during the 2020-2021 period amidst the pandemic.

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### **3. Inconvenient Station Locations and Limited Connectivity**

Many SMART stations are situated away from major residential areas and employment centers, making them less accessible for potential riders. For example, in Santa Rosa, the average distance to a SMART station for the largest employers is 2 miles. Additionally, the system's integration with other transit options is limited. While there are some shuttle services and ride-share programs, full coordination with local transit agencies remains a challenge.

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#### **4. Infrastructure Limitations**

SMART operates primarily on a single-track system with limited passing tracks, which restricts the frequency and flexibility of train services. This setup can lead to significant delays and limits the number of trains that can run simultaneously.

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#### **5. Financial Sustainability Concerns**

The system relies heavily on a quarter-cent sales tax for funding, which is set to expire in 2029. A proposal to extend this tax for an additional 30 years was rejected by voters in 2020, reflecting public skepticism about the system's value and effectiveness.

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#### **6. Demographic and Regional Challenges**

Sonoma and Marin counties have relatively low population densities compared to other regions served by commuter rail, limiting the potential ridership base. Moreover, population growth in these counties has been stagnant or declining, further constraining future ridership growth.

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#### **7. Delayed Implementation and Operational Hurdles**

SMART's launch was delayed multiple times due to various issues, including equipment failures and infrastructure damage from natural events like floods. These delays not only increased costs but also eroded public confidence in the project.

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In summary, SMART's challenges stem from a combination of low ridership, high operating costs, infrastructure limitations, and regional demographic factors. Addressing these issues would require significant investments and strategic planning to enhance the system's appeal and effectiveness.