

Opinion: SMART Bay Area train, dumb Bay Area transit

By Joe Mathews

The northern terminus of SMART, the new passenger-rail system in the North Bay, is the Sonoma County Airport Station in Santa Rosa. But after my 8-year-old son and I landed there, we learned the growing airport is more than a mile from the train.

There is as yet no dedicated shuttle from plane to train. My son wasn't up for a long walk. A public bus that would get us to the train wouldn't show up for hours. Uber wasn't picking up at the airport. My Lyft app kept crashing. And the four cabbies outside the airport refused to take us, saying they didn't want to give up their place in line for such a short, cheap trip.



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The Bay Area is our richest large metropolitan region because its people and technologies skillfully connect the world. But if you need to make transit connections in the Bay Area, good luck.

Inspired by the soft launch of SMART—the Sonoma and Marin County light rail has offered preview rides for months—I recently spent three days navigating the Bay Area sans car. I enjoyed rides on trains, ferries, and buses. But I was

bewildered by the failure of a place famous for integrating culture and technology to integrate its own infrastructure across its nine counties.

After 40 minutes at the airport, we called our own cab, which took us to the train station. The first 43-mile segment of what promises to be a 70-mile train runs from Santa Rosa to San Rafael, and has bathrooms and a café that sells wine. The ride took 90 minutes and offered a grittier view of Sonoma and Marin Counties—mobile home parks, old industrial properties—and glimpses of Mt. Tamalpais and Mt. Diablo.

The SMART train is eventually supposed to reach the Larkspur Ferry Terminal; a 35-minute boat ride from San Francisco. But the first segment ends two miles short of the ferry. There's a bike path to the terminal, and a bus station in San Rafael that can get you to the ferry, but that bus ride would take 26 minutes. We opted for an Uber and got there in eight minutes.

We shouldn't have hurried: The ferry left 10 minutes late. But on a clear day, we enjoyed views of the Golden Gate Bridge. At the Ferry Building, I bought my son ice cream at Gott's.

After meetings in San Francisco, we went to BART's Embarcadero Station, heading for Oakland Airport and a flight home. But the first six trains were too full to board. BART is a system built for 60,000 riders that moves more than 400,000 daily. The system badly needs more cars, better maintenance, governance that isn't dominated by unions, and a second tunnel under the bay.

When the seventh train arrived, we pushed our way in. "That's rude," said one rider.

"We're from L.A.," I replied.

We made the flight, but the day produced sticker shock. The four-station ride from San Francisco to Oakland's Coliseum Station, from which a tram takes you into the airport, cost

\$10.20 each. Add that to my \$11.50 ferry ticket (my son's was \$5.75), the \$9 Uber ride to the ferry, the \$11.50 one-way fare on SMART, and \$10 for the airport cab ride, our journey was pushing \$70. In L.A., a Metro ride is just \$1.75, with free transfers.

A few days later, I was back in San Francisco, contending with delays on Muni, when I needed to get to San Jose, a city BART doesn't quite reach yet. So I needed to use Caltrain; BART and Caltrain share a station in Millbrae, but the schedules aren't synchronized, meaning I could wait for 45 minutes. So I walked 25 minutes from BART's Powell station to the Caltrain at 4th and King.

In San Jose, I disembarked at Diridon Station, which may have a bright future as the northern terminus of high-speed rail. But for now, it is just another setting for connection frustration, as I waited a half-hour for a light rail train on Santa Clara County's VTA system.

The next day, I needed to get to San Jose Airport, and took Caltrain to the Santa Clara Station, which offers a VTA bus shuttle. But the bus driver refused to open the bus door for 15 minutes, even during a brief rain. And the shuttle took a meandering route with a stop at a soccer stadium.

No wonder less than one-third of Bay Area residents commute by transit. If the region is ever going to be the design-savvy ecotopia of its dreams, it must combine these systems and put the rider's needs first.

Right now, using Bay Area transit makes you feel powerless. And that should be unacceptable in California's most powerful region.

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